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Ringgaard, Dan; Kjerkegaard, Stefan

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# DIALOGUES ON POETRY

Mediatization  
and  
New

Sensibilities

Edited by  
Stefan Kjerkegaard  
Dan Ringgaard

AALBORG UNIVERSITY PRESS





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*DIALOGUES ON POETRY*

*Mediatization and New Sensibilities*

Redaktører Stefan Kjerkegaard og Dan Ringgaard

OA-udgave

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Serieredaktører:

Professor dr.phil. Peter Stein Larsen, Aalborg Universitet

Lektor ph.d. Louise Mønster, Aalborg Universitet

Professor dr. phil. Dan Ringgaard, Aarhus Universitet

1. amanuensis ph.d. Hans Kristian Rustad, Universitetet i Oslo

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# DIALOGUES ON POETRY

## Mediatization and New Sensibilities

DAN RINGGAARD AND STEFAN KJERKEGAARD

### **Introduction**

Literature in a strictly modern sense can be seen as the product of a meeting between writing, the printed book and European modernity. Particular modes of reading and writing have developed from this triangulation, along with the modern genres we today identify with literature, including the genre of lyric poetry. After the Gutenberg revolution the medium and materiality of literature to some extent became invisible because it became self-evident. In the past, literary scholars continually asked what literary works contained, but rarely asked what it was that contained literary works. This is no longer so. The two media revolutions that followed the invention of the printed press, the emergence of first analogue media like the gramophone, film and typewriter, and then the network-based digital media, have put this marriage of literature with books and writing into question. It is no longer self-evident that literature is something written or published in books. Or to put it in another way: a process of mediatization has made literature acutely conscious of its relation to its own media. In fact, the modernist emphasis on language, on writing and finally on the book itself that we have witnessed in the wake of the analogue and the digital revolution can be interpreted as a rising awareness of literature's relation to different kinds of media and matter.

This development not only points to a range of opportunities that contemporary literature now investigates, exploits and criticizes, but also makes it clear that literature and the idea of the literary work has always been shaped by its medium, adding a new dimension to literary theory, analysis and history. This is one point worth making within the framework of this book: that the investigation of the literary present, of what happens to the words of literature in general and those of poetry in particular as they leave the book and venture off into a digital informed reality, must be accompanied by a renewed interest in the media history of literature.

Another general point that could be mentioned is the relation between the new sensibilities that is played out in a digitally informed reality and the impact that these sensibilities have on literature in books. Studying the relation of literature and media in a contemporary perspective is not just a question of studying electronic literature (for instance), but requires a study of the influence that new media and new technologies have on the huge majority of literature that is still written and published in books.

Once we frame our perspective like this, it becomes obvious that the term new sensibilities cannot be reduced to those created by media, let alone those played out within electronic or digital literature. Rather the reading environment that new media produce plays a crucial role in our understanding of contemporary literary culture, and in the development of new sensibilities. It is a *hybrid* or multi-modal environment in which written and spoken words interact with sounds and images, it is one of *social events* as opposed to the private, intimate and hallucinatory world of literature as we knew it, and it is somewhat *importunate* given that the boundaries between what is private and what is public are being eroded. It often also turns out to be a *conceptual* environment since the challenge seems to involve extricating and elevating ideas from the overwhelming stream of information to frame chaos rather than creating something new. The things, words and concepts invented in such environments are *difficult to define* since the institutions that ruled the field of literature, and art in general, have been weakened. This of course includes the institutional ideas of what constitutes the literary work. It is a world of *process* where links, speed and remediations constantly rearrange or reinvent not just the literary, but also other kinds of art that the book, literally speaking, closed. And because of this these works will be increasingly *ownerless*. Finally it is a world of *Babel*, as the national tongues that were born with literature to some extent seem to partake in new alchemistic and global relations. Hence, we believe that it is no coincidence that the Berlin-based Cia Rinne, with roots and relations in Denmark, Sweden and Finland, and Caroline Bergvall, who was born in Germany to French-Norwegian parents, but has lived and worked in England for many years, are among the most widely discussed artists in this book. Both of them place their work between languages, between nationalities and not least between the arts.

So far we have been talking about literature and not poetry for the obvious reason that the broad outlines that we have tried to sketch out frame the

whole field of literature. Once we turn towards poetry we must, following these lines, ask questions in at least two directions. First, how the perspective or consciousness of media can renew our understanding of poetry; and second, what kind of new sensibilities are produced by and within contemporary poetry and how can they contribute to the study of poetry. The first direction takes us to the study of digital poetry as a more or less multi-modal, multi-lingual and conceptual process-oriented art practice, but also to contemporary poetry as performative event culture, for example in the form of public readings and different kinds of poetical acts on social media. It also leads us towards book history, casting new light on the history of poetry, and it poses questions of genre such as the apparent demise of lyric poetry and perhaps the re-articulation of the romantic and avant-garde idea of poetry not as a genre, but as a media of significant life. The second direction might lead us to theories of affect and emotion, atmosphere and Stimmung, to materiality studies or towards the contextual fields of feminism, minority studies, digital and environmental humanities or cosmopolitanism.

The inquiry in this book is whether this match of mediatization and new sensibilities is developing into a new major breakthrough in the study of poetry. Or, to put it less ambitiously, in what ways can the coupling of our title prove fruitful to our reading and understanding of poetry old and new, in and outside of books? Regardless, we have chosen the title *Dialogues on Poetry* since it must be an ongoing process to define, discuss and describe how poetry responds to the radical changes mentioned above. In addition, we have arranged the articles in small clusters and in such a way that they are in dialogue with each other on different subjects that all relate to our overall theme of mediatization and new sensibilities.

The first two articles revolve around the topics of WORD, PICTURE AND SOUND, and here we find Andrew Michael Roberts, who in “The Effaced Poetic Text in Intermedial Art Works” explores the interaction of text and image in a number of intermedial poetic-visual art works, which were commissioned as part of the *Poetry Beyond Text* project in the UK 2008 and 2009. Claudia Benthien then examines poetry and performances by Nora Gomringer and Thomas Kling in “‘Audio-Poetry’: Lyrical Speech in the Digital Age”. In the cluster named ARCHEOLOGIES OF POETRY, Rebecca Beasley writes about “Migration, circulation, drift: translation and visuality in modernist and contemporary poetry”. Beasley draws some inte-

resting lines from the poetry of Ezra Pound to the above-mentioned Caroline Bergvall in the light of theories of globalization. Next Peter Dayan (with one foot in classical modernist poetry) writes “On the danger of pushing poetry towards music: the successes and failures of Hugo Ball, René Ghil, and Stéphane Mallarmé.” In DIGITAL TECHNOLOGY Hans Kristian Rustad addresses the idea of “technogenesis” when examining a work that has been something of a landmark within recent Scandinavian digital poetry, namely Johannes Heldén’s *Evolution* from 2013. Rustad’s article asks: “What also could poetry be? Technogenesis in Johannes Heldén’s *Evolution*”. In the same cluster Matti Kangaskoski humorously relates Cia Rinne’s work *archives zaroum* (2008) with philosophical ideas about the function of button in “From Pressing the Button to Clicking the Mouse – The Shift from Static to Dynamic Media”. In the cluster called AMBIENT SENSITIVITIES Anne Karhio, in her article “From Page to Screen: The Poetry Project and the poetics of landscape”, writes about *The Poetry Project*, a collaborative venture that brought together Irish poetry and video art in 2013. She focuses on the representation of landscape in these works. Michael Karlsson Pedersen’s essay does not focus on landscape, but has a more theoretical perspective on nature and poetry in: “Firm grips and light touches. An essay on things and halfthings in postwar German nature poetry”. In CULTURAL CRITIQUE we have set up a dialogue between Caspar Eric Christensen and Mikkel Krause Frantzen’s article about the American author and artist Tao Lin called “i am a little bit more depressed than you are – Tao Lin as an example of a contemporary poetry of depression and other negative feelings” and Mette-Marie Zacher Sørensen’s: “#.Pls. .Select. .ur. .CHar[r(i)ed.H] Ac(k)tor.#. Agency, interpellation and address in digital poetry”. As one can see, the first part of Sørensen’s title is a line that can hardly be read, particularly out loud, but she nevertheless close reads a poem that contains other lines like this created by the Australian code poet called mez. Both articles try to relate their readings to a general cultural critique. In the first article a critical perspective on the cult of happiness, and in the latter a relation between agency in reading code poetry and agency in Judith Butler’s ideas of the formation of the subject. The cluster GENRE AND FORM contains stimulating contributions from three knowledgeable Scandinavian scholars on poetry. Louise Mønster problematizes the question of genre in relation to contemporary Danish poetry in her article

“Contemporary Poetry and the Question of Genre”, and Ole Karlsen gives us an overview of recent Norwegian poetry in the article: “‘Bare lerkene kan lese morgenen / den blå bokstaven / i en altfor stor resept’. Norwegian poetry 2000–2012 from a form perspective”. In “Why Can Poetry Matter? Or: Poetry as an Ideal – or an Expanding Genre” Peter Stein Larsen then puts the question of genre in perspective. Stein Larsen argues that in spite of several recent attacks on the genre, it is still very vital and as such there is no need to be worried on behalf of the future of poetry. In *BEYOND LITERATURE* James Day and Dan Ringgaard both examine poetry from a viewpoint, so to speak, beyond literature. In his article “Art writing hung out to dry”, Day discusses what radical practices of critical writing might look like through works of poetry and art called Art Writing. For instance, Day addresses the work of Caroline Bergvall. Dan Ringgaard then examines the broader idea of poetry and its relation to life in his article: “Poetry is the Significant Flow of Life. Poetry as a Trans-medial Concept in the Work of Filmmaker and Poet Jørgen Leth”. Last but not least, our book includes contributions from two authors who have had a huge influence on contemporary Scandinavian poetry, from the inside and the outside. The section *FROM A POET’S POINT OF VIEW* contains the Danish poet Morten Søndergaard’s considerations on his own work *Ordapoteket* (“Wordpharmacy”) under the title “A Wordpharmacist’s Confessions” and Juliana Spahr’s “Contemporary US Poetry and Its Nationalisms”, in which she addresses what she calls the “George W Bush administration’s peculiar interest in literature”. This turns out to be a story told through and with poetry, not least the resistance of contemporary poetry.

All in all, our book clearly has a huge diversity in terms of themes and subjects, but this diversity seems to be sign of a very vigorous genre. Indeed, poetry may be the most flexible of the traditional literary genres during a period which hastily and continually updates itself into new versions, new apps and new media. Contemporary poetry seems to be less bound up with conventions and fixed established, institutional restrictions than other genres, the novel for instance. The freedom of the genre displays itself in its flexibility, its freedom from the forces of the market, from nationalities, the traditional book-design, the technical and practical difficulties of being a writer, even sometimes freedom from publishers. Behind all this one of course notices several customary poetical ambitions, after all it was

the archmodernist Stéphane Mallarmé who talked about a pure language and leaving the initiative to the words. The poetical freedom that is covered in this book might therefore have turned out slightly differently than Mallarmé ever imagined, but the ambitions are nevertheless comparable, even if the freedom is being expressed differently and with new means: pure language might be multi-modal and the initiative might be taken by much more than just words.

Contemporary poetry is thriving because literature today seems to take place in many places – not “just” in books – and in new ways within books. This development, therefore, does not have to mean a dilution of either literature or poetry’s impact and influence in Western societies; rather it could be a sign of a more radical, democratized understanding of what literature *also* does, besides being a very fortunate object of reading, teaching and studying. It creates discourses, interchanges, discussions and exchanges of ideas, or in short dialogues, not just dialogues on poetry, but also dialogues of poetry.

# THE EFFACED POETIC TEXT IN INTERMEDIAL ART WORKS

ANDREW MICHAEL ROBERTS

## Introduction

This article explores the interaction of text and image in a number of intermedial poetic-visual art works which were commissioned as part of the *Poetry Beyond Text* project (2009-11).<sup>1</sup> Here ‘intermedial’ is understood to refer to works “in which the materials of various more established art forms are “conceptually fused” rather than merely juxtaposed”.<sup>2</sup> More specifically, the article will explore the significance of strategies in which the textual elements of such work are seemingly effaced, self-effacing, defaced or hidden. It will ask what is at stake in such apparent effacement, in terms of aesthetic choices, the dynamics of inter-art collaboration, the phenomenology of the viewing / reading experience, and the history of relations between poetry and painting.

I will begin by quoting two comments on the status of writing within pictures. The Scottish artist Will Maclean, when asked why he had used a swan’s feather to hand-write poetic text in an artists’ book (making the text relatively hard to read), commented that ‘to an artist, writing is just marks on the page’.<sup>3</sup> The digital language artist John Cayley argues that “a representation of writing must be illegible, otherwise it *is* writing” (Cayley 2006, 15). These comments have to be understood in the context of the complex history of contention and interaction between verbal and visual arts, and an equally complex history of discourse around ideas of image, representation, text and writing. That discursive history has been most subtly explored by W.J.T. Mitchell, in a series of theoretical works which I will draw on at various points (Mitchell 1980, Mitchell 1986, Mitchell 1994, Mitchell 2005). This history will be familiar to many readers but, broadly, it has two strands relevant to the presence discussion. One, stretching from the classical doctrine of ‘ut pictura poesis’ to the ‘sister arts’ tradition and modernist/postmodernist inter-art innovation, stresses complementarity or integration of visual and textual arts. The other, from



Lessing's *Laocoön* to modernist 'medium-specificity' and beyond, stresses their distinctness, their differences, their unique qualities or genius, and sets them up in competition or opposition. The two strands often co-exist and interweave; one or other may seem temporarily dominant, but they also have a degree of mutual dependence, in both discourse and in practice. It is a set of relations charged with attraction and repulsion, varying between the belief that integration of the arts will offer richer aesthetic experiences, and the anxiety that it will dilute their crucial qualities. Often present in discussions, implicitly or explicitly, is the impulse to claim superior insight into truth or meaning for either words or images. Of course the problematic binary of text and image (problematic because writing is also visual and visual art is often understood in terms of language) is only one relation in a complex set of art relations involving also sculpture, music, dance, architecture, film, and other art forms. Another crucial context for this discussion is the history of creative works which foreground the materiality shared by writing with painting and sculpture. Joanna Drucker critical and creative work has explored this area extensively. She argues that, in many historical forms of writing,

significance inheres in the written form of the language as much on account of the properties of physical materials as through a text's linguistic content. Whether incidental or foregrounded, such specific properties of written language are what ensure its unique role within human culture. (Drucker 1998, 57)

Contexts for the works discussed here include ancient traditions such as visual poetry and inscriptions, as well as the rich traditions of poetry with foregrounded materiality of the last sixty years: concrete, visual, installed, inscribed on landscapes, or in visual-art poetic hybrids.

The *Poetry Beyond Text* project, based at the Universities of Dundee and Kent, and combined literary criticism, experimental psychology and practice-based research to study hybrid poetic-visual forms and practices. One element of the research was the commissioning of works involving collaborations between poets and artists, often working together for the first time. The commissions took a wide range of material and generic

forms: artists' books, sculptures, screen-based and virtual-reality digital works, films, photographs, concrete and visual poems. A notable feature of the work in the exhibition held at the Royal Scottish Academy in 2011 was the presence of what might be termed 'effaced poetic text': poetry which, in the process of becoming part of an integrated intermedial art work, is deliberately obscured, hidden, erased, rendered difficult or impossible to read, in whole or part. Why was this a feature of a significant number of these collaborative works? Did it reflect an anxiety on the part of the visual artists involved about the potential dominance of words in defining meaning (a problem often noted in relation to captions in exhibitions)? Or a sense of the potentially determining explicitness of text (despite the fact that these were *poetic* texts, notoriously not an explicit form)? Did it indicate some desire on the part of the poets to hold back or withdraw some element of their work? Or perhaps a wish to enforce slow and careful reading, given the tendency in a gallery context for reading to be quick? Or was it in some sense an inevitable result of the intermedial form, given that it is possible to insert text *into* a painting, or print or sculpture, but it is hardly possible to do the converse: a *book* of poems can contain images, and a concrete or visual poem can constitute an image, but a poem cannot *contain* images, other than in the mental or verbal sense of image (as opposed to the graphical sense).<sup>4</sup> Each partner in such a collaboration is faced with specific forms of subservience and dominance, if one wishes to put it in terms of power, although there is no reason to think that those involved experienced it in such a way - most seemed to find it a rewarding and convivial creative process. There is the denotative dominance of words. Whatever an artist may paint, if the poet includes the word 'tragedy' (for example) the work somehow *becomes* a work of, or about, tragedy (whether ironically or not). On the other hand, there is the incorporative and demonstrative or performative dominance of the visual artist: the poet is more or less obliged to hand over his or her words to the artist in material media, who must write them, paint them, print them, or whatever, in order to give them material form within the intermedial work.

To return to my opening quotations, I would observe that both comments to some degree seem to deny intermediality. Maclean seems to imply that writing integrated into a painting ceases to be text and becomes painting, while Cayley's comment suggests that writing is *either* writing

or *else* an (illegible) representation of writing.<sup>5</sup> Nevertheless, Maclean and Cayley both work in highly intermedial ways.

**Angus Martin and Will Maclean, *One Time in a Tale of Herring***

*One Time in a Tale of Herring* is a large-format artists' book, in which inkwash black and white drawings by the Scottish artist Will Maclean are paired with poems by poet Angus Martin. Its theme is a celebration of, and lament for, the practice and men of the Scottish west-coast ring-net herring fishing industry (which declined, and then disappeared with a ban on herring fishing in 1974). Poems appear next to the drawings, in photographed hand-written ink, with both drawing and poem placed against a background of faint grey to off-white images, which on close inspection turns out to be enlarged details from the drawings.

The text and images are not as fully integrated as they are in Blake's engravings, where poem and engraving are part of a single engraved plate: in *One Time* the text is on the left and the 'image' on the right, but both

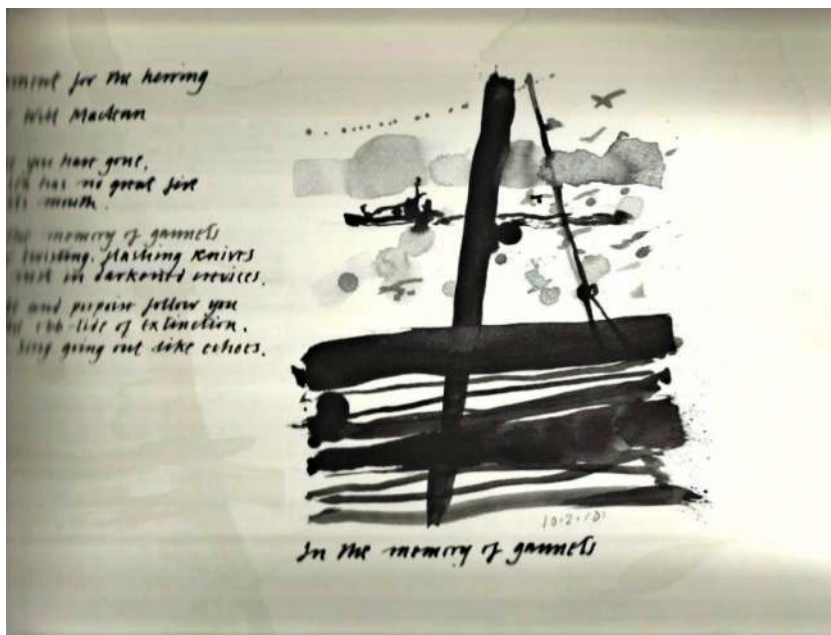


Fig 1: 'Lament for the Herring / In the memory of gannets', *One Time in a Tale of Herring*.

are embedded in a larger, though faint, image. Furthermore, the 'captions' of the drawings are written with the same hand as the text, and the text is, one might say, 'drawn' (i.e. handwritten), so that in that sense it fulfils Mitchell's dictum: these are not poems but paintings of poems. The verso of each page also has, faintly printed, the title / caption of the drawing opposite, rather as if it had taken the ink by mistake, the book having been shut while the ink was dry - though these are in fact, of course, photographs of both writing and image, and the faint printing does not match the position of the caption on the recto page. Elements of improvisation and spontaneity appear in the bold, ink-wash drawings, the variable blackness of the writing (which was done with a swan's feather dipped in ink), and the small inconsistencies of wording.<sup>6</sup> Mary Modeen, who designed the book, interprets the use of handwriting here as 'gestural', invoking the hand, and bodily knowledge, linking 'the body's importance in ways of knowing' with the work's theme: 'a lament for a way of life now past'.<sup>7</sup> Her suggestion of handwritten poems (which I believe was a new departure in Maclean's work) reflected also a sense of expressive equivalence between writing (by hand) and voice: a rather different perspective on the idea of 'voice' in poetry from either a Derridean priority of writing over voice, or the mainstream poetic tendency to equate voice with the semi-autobiographical poetic ego or consciousness. Overall, the integration of the poetry and drawings is achieved semantically (in terms of content), stylistically (in terms of technique and mood) and through design (involving a third collaborator). Maclean's inkwash drawings contain recognisable shapes, of boats, fish, birds, nets, baskets and (probably) the silhouettes of men in fisherman's gear. But at times they approach abstraction or pattern. The first drawing, 'Sea Stories / The company was fishermen', may have the outline of a hooded figure, and there are clearer suggestions of a basket full of fish, a ship's spar, sails, and sea with mountains beyond (suggesting the view from the Island of Skye over to the mainland):

Out of context, though, the drawing would be barely interpretable in such representational terms. So it may be that what the book deploys is a certain equality or parallel between words and image, in which each avoids being available for ready interpretation, by requiring the exercise of a gestalt-like process of perception. The processes and forms of representation are prominent in this work. The title of the book refers to storytelling ('A



Fig. 2: 'Sea Stories / The Company of Fishermen', *One Time in a Tale of Herring*.

Tale'), as does the first poem / drawing ('Sea Stories'); the second poem has the heading 'A Picture Postcard of Campbeltown Harbour', drawing the reader's attention to visual representation. Furthermore, the theme of memory runs through the work suggesting, as Modeen implies, that the images are in some sense a rendering of memory in 'the mind's eye'.<sup>8</sup> The use of a swan's feather to write the poems also embeds an element of materiality of subject matter (birds) into the process of creation (much of Maclean's art-work uses material objects and replicas of them in collage-like constructions), and accords with Drucker's sense of writing as "embodying the fundamental human urge of "mark making"" (Drucker 1994b, 57).

In terms of the traditions of poetry-painting intermediality, *One Time in a Tale of Herring* largely conforms to the model of 'ut pictura poesis' or the speaking picture. Handwriting considered as 'voice' and the work as the mark of the artist's hand and body both serve to tie together image and words as expressive modes in a reciprocal and complementary relationship. Lessing's distinction between the temporal processing of text and the in-



Fig. 3: Will Maclean, 'Natural Selection', 2013.

stant perception of image is undermined by the analogous processes of scrutiny and interpretation required by each: the drawings do not reveal themselves to a glance, but require and invite careful decoding; the poems also require visual (as much as semantic) attention. There is also a strong mimetic element in this work but, in accord with Melville and Readings' description of the *ut pictura poesis* doctrine, "this mimetic practice is a matter of making (*poiein*) according to the rules of rhetoric, rather than of

illusion. Mimesis does not seek to delude an individual into taking an imitation as real but rhetorically to persuade a public to an action, to making a real” (Melville and Readings 1995, 8). In *One Time in a Tale of Herring*, this action or making real takes the form of memorialisation, celebration and mourning.

**Marion Leven and Robin Robertson, *Pibroch***

The idea of the expressive gesture of the artist’s hand also seems to play a major role in another collaborative work, by the painter Marion Leven, and the poet Robin Robertson

A pibroch is a musical form for the Highland bagpipes: a slow and stately piece of music with an elaborate theme and variation form of increasing complexity; pibrochs are usually written for solemn events or occasions such as clan gatherings and laments.<sup>9</sup> To quote the catalogue description:

Materials and gesture are two converging aspects of this artwork. .... In this piece, the gesture is simultaneously the movement of the artist’s hand across the page, the mimetic sweep of



Fig. 4: Marion Leven and Robin Robertson, *Pibroch*.

the water lapping in continual movement, the long free-flowing lament (pibroch) and the energy she exerts in wielding her brush to convey the intensity of movement as a measurement of time. The water's waves, rolling and receding, are evoked in the poem and the long smooth curve of grey ... Robertson's poem is gestural as well; it moves by rhythm, by the kind of theme and variation of the extended lament invoked by its title, in cyclical, sweeping form. Image and text are intense and choreographic, reminding us once again of the body's role in perceiving and responding to the environment.<sup>10</sup>

The poem reads:

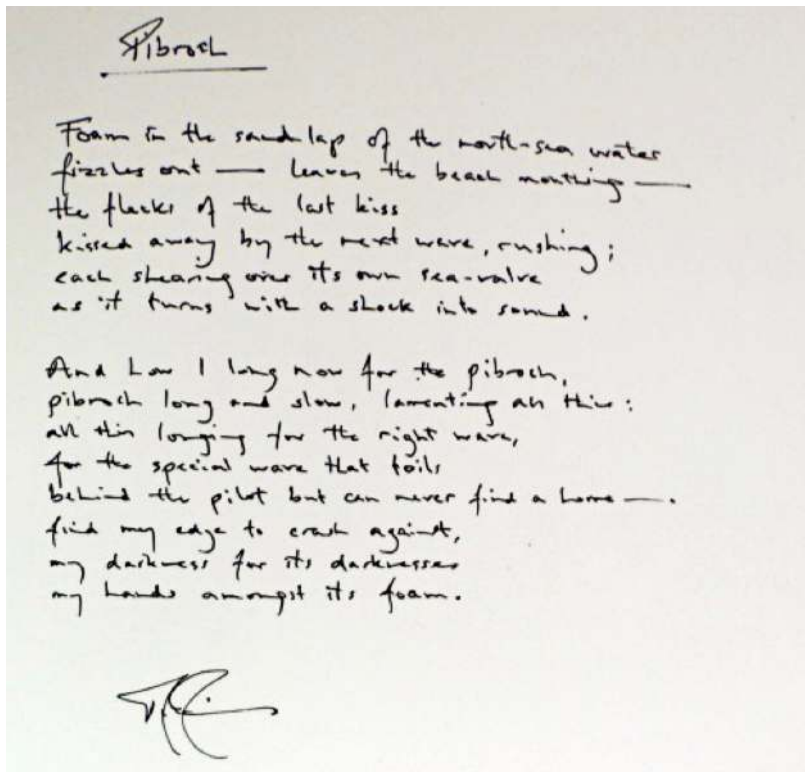


Fig. 5: Marion Leven and Robin Robertson, *Pibroch*.



Foam in the sand-lap of the north-sea water  
fizzles out – leaves the beach mouthing –  
The flecks of the last kiss  
kissed away by the next wave, rushing;  
each shearing over its own sea-valve  
as it turns with a shock into sound.

And how I long now for the pibroch,  
pibroch long and slow, lamenting all this:  
all this longing for the right wave,  
for the special wave that toils  
behind the pilot but can never find a home –  
find my edge to crash against,  
my darkness for its darknesses  
my hands amongst its foam. (Robertson 1997, 19)

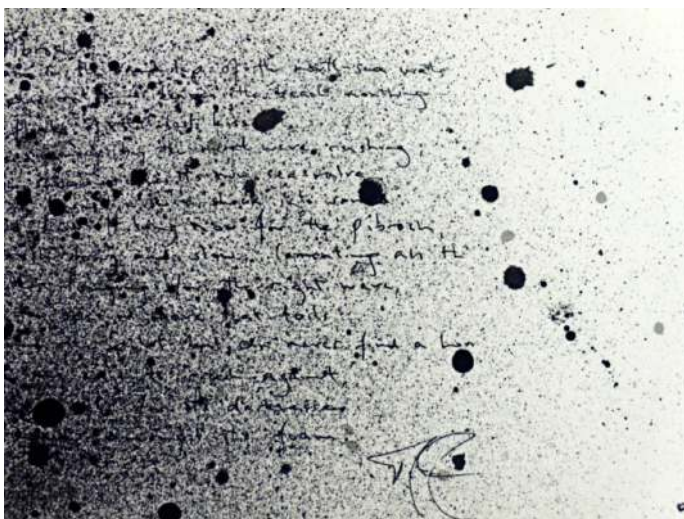
It was displayed with a 'clear' version of the handwritten text alongside it, the text again appearing in the handwriting of the artist:

However, the element of effacement is more obvious and even aggressive here, in the bold sweeps of the brush, and the extensive blotting over of the poem.

In the poem, the waves, and the patterns formed by the materials of the beach, seem to function as metaphors for image/painting and text/poem, sharing a surface of inscription (suggested by a pun on the verb 'leaves' and the 'leaves' of a book, recalling Shelley's 'Ode to the West Wind').<sup>11</sup> Writing and speech are also evoked by the pairing of 'leaves' and 'mouthing', suggesting the play of inscription and voice in poetry. The painter's gestures of erasure seem to allude to the erasure of marks on sand by waves: to the "flecks of the last kiss / kissed away by the next wave". The blotting and the bold brush strokes feel less loving than the metaphor of the kiss would suggest, but they create an effect reminiscent of patterns created by water and sand. The idea of erasure suggests the impermanence of writing, or of culture. The poem is partly about the sensuous qualities of the natural world; it interweaves human sensuality and desire with the movement of natural materials (water and sand) in the environment. It is also about the visual becoming the aural (the sound of the wave breaking), and natural sound



*Fig. 6: Marion Leven and Robin Robertson, Pibroch.*



*Fig. 7: Marion Leven and Robin Robertson, Pibroch.*

becoming music (the pibroch), again effecting a crossing-over between the non-human natural and human culture and feeling. Then the concluding six lines suggest the human return to nature via the immersion of self, ultimately figuring death, with a suggestion almost of the death drive in the quest for 'my darkness'. What do the bold strokes of the brush, and the blots of erasure, suggest in this context? Darkness and oblivion, in response to the ending of the poem, perhaps. But also an ambivalence about both meaning and representation; an ambivalence which runs deep in both visual art practice, and in our responses to natural beauty. As regards the latter, Kate Soper, drawing on Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory*, suggests that:

one talks [or writes] in order to register the beyond of nature to conceptualization; one represents it in order to capture its independence of representation. Natural beauty demands to be conceptualized, but to be conceptually determined as something that is not conceptual. (Soper 2011, 21)

In other words, our impulse to express or represent natural beauty is shadowed (and perhaps impelled) by our sense of it as somehow beyond our expression and representation.

There can be a double ambivalence in the response of the visual artist to the natural world as mediated by language. First, to poetry as a meaning-dense form, conceptual though also gesturing beyond the conceptual. Second, to art itself as a form of determination of the indeterminable:

The concept of natural beauty rubs on a wound, and little is needed to prompt one to associate this wound with the violence that the art work – a pure artefact – inflicts on nature. (Adorno 2004, 81)

It might not be too far-fetched to see the near-violence of gesture in *Pibroch*, not as intermedial challenge to writing itself, but as a registering of the violence of representation itself with respect to nature. The idea of a wound has a certain appropriateness to the feeling of the work. As Adorno's dialectical argument suggests, such a registering is not a rejection of art, but an acknowledgement of its intimate relationship to nature:

Wholly artifactual, the artwork seems to be the opposite of what is not made, nature. As pure antitheses, however, each refers to the other: nature to the experience of a mediated and objectified world, the artwork to nature as the mediated plenipotentiary of immediacy. (Adorno 2004, 81)

It might be said, therefore, that the dialectical relations between word and image (poem and print) serve in this work as an analogue for the relations between art and nature.

### **Jerome Fletcher and Geoffrey Olsen, *Pentimento***

In *Pentimento*, a digital work by performance writer Jerome Fletcher and painter Geoffrey Olsen (with Toby Holland as Java programmer), the artist's gesture of creation / erasure is transferred to the user.

*Pentimento* is a digital text/image work based on a 'scratching' technology. The performer uses the cursor to scratch away successive layers of text and image to reveal, as in a palimpsest, fragments of narrative. The narrative concerns an esteemed woman artist, a repressive state and an unspecified act of betrayal, either personal or political. 'Pentimento', from the Italian word for 'repentance', is a painting term which refers to a barely perceptible alteration in a painting indicating that the artist has changed their mind about the composition in the process of painting.<sup>12</sup>

*Pentimento* is clearly a work open to many forms of interpretation: thematic in terms of the text; conceptual in terms of the form; phenomenological in terms of the reader or user experience. I would like to pursue here the idea of it as a work which thematises and questions medium-specificity; as an allusion to, and deconstruction of, the concept of modernist medium-specificity. The title evokes a very specific effect (an underlying image in a painting, with an etymological link to 'repentance'), while the scratching process which the reader / viewer is invited to undertake, reveals within each specific medium the hidden traces of its other (words for painting / painting for words). In this way modernist medium-specificity is themat-



Fig. 8: 'North, from Jerome Fletcher and Geoffrey Olsen, *Pentimento*.

tised via a postmodern reflexivity, which effects a questioning of what that medium is, or what a medium in general can be. In particular, what is digital medium-specificity? The work almost seems to perform symbolically (or ask the viewer to perform symbolically) the history of collaboration and competition between text and image. Insofar as medium-specificity is the version of modernist aesthetics which seeks definitively to separate different art forms and media, it is something of a paradox to address it in an intermedial work. But is it intermedial? Or is the digital itself the medium of this work? Can there be such a thing as digital medium-specificity? John Cayley points out that we tend to see the appearance of painting in digital form as remediation, but to see the appearance of writing in digital contexts simply as its insertion into (new) media.

The existence of media that are able to represent other media or to represent artifacts that were made in a traditional medium as (new) media (remediation) is, in a sense, the phenomenon that allows us to see older conventional media as such; to see that painting, for example, is media, not just a medium. Subsequently, we struggle to distinguish, materially and critically, between conventional media(tion) and any corresponding new (re)media(tion): the painting and its digitiza-

tion, as a specific exemplary instance. In the case of literary art ... such struggles are, typically, futile. It is pointless to insist on a materially significant difference between these words as they might appear to you on paper and as they might appear to you on screen. Thus, whenever we do consider differences in writing and mediated writing to be critically or materially significant, we tend to speak of writing *in* new digital media, as if writing were not undergoing *remediation*, but as if it were being *newly* mediated by removal from an unmediated condition and translation *into* media. (Cayley 2010, 205)

Here Cayley seems to be distinguishing two related sense of medium / media, one of which stresses materiality, the other communication:

Any of the varieties of painting or drawing as determined by the material or technique used. Hence more widely: any raw material or mode of expression used in an artistic or creative activity. ('medium', OED)

An intermediate agency, instrument, or channel; a means; **esp.** a means or channel of communication or expression. ('medium', OED)

One of his points is that painting can be identified in terms of a *material* medium (paint) in a way that is not open to language; although the 'materiality of language' has been much discussed, it remains that case that language can be reproduced in different physical forms with a limited effect on its meaning (words carved in stone and words printed in a book are both using the 'medium' of language; an image in paint and an image carved are in *different* media, in the material sense). There is therefore an asymmetry between the two elements of *Pentimento*: the painting has been remediated, whereas the text has, in Cayley's terms, been written in or *into* new media; seemingly '*newly* mediated by removal from an unmediated condition and transl[ate]d *into* media'. To put it another way, the images appear as 'simulation' of painting, whereas the words do not seem to be a simulation of text; they just *are* text. One of the paradoxes of the Green-

berg conception of modernism in terms of medium-specificity (and there are several) is that the medium-specific conception and practice of (mostly abstract) art wished to depart from any idea of painting as expression of channel or communication; the paint is no longer playing an intermediated (representational) role between perceived and represented world, but is representing only itself and its own potential.<sup>13</sup> The ‘medium’ of painting in the material sense (paint) is thus no longer a ‘medium’ in the sense of being something intermediate (the etymological sense of the word), nor in the sense of being a channel of communication. Medium-specificity makes painting no longer a medium, but a material. As Cayley’s discussion implies, this possibility has never really been open to literature, although genres such as concrete poetry move in that direction. Literature, by using language, always retains some element of channel or medium by virtue of the referential function of language, however much that function is bracketed or effaced.

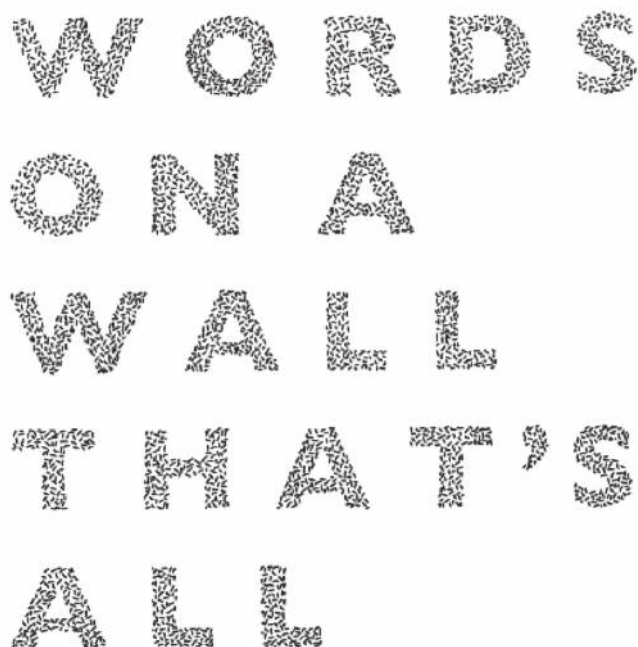
So, in *Pentimento*, the painting is clearly no longer painting, but a representation, or remediation, of painting. On the other hand, the text is (still) text, and there is no necessary reason to read it as an allusion to text in a book or other non-digital location. This hybrid form of mediality might be seen as digital medium-specificity; as Cayley writes, “*New digital media are not just to be considered as media; they are media*” (Cayley 2010, 205).

### **David Bellingham, Wall Drawings**

Finally, a series of works which seems to offer a counter-example to the ‘self-effacing’ poetic text – and which are not collaborative but the work of a single artist. David Bellingham’s series of three wall drawings presents short, aphoristic poetic lines in large text:

There is an echo of Magritte here, in the use of reflexive, gnomic statement; as with *La trahison de images*, though less explicitly, there is an address to intermediality itself. Are the ‘words on a wall’ just words on a wall? They are also marks on a wall, a form of drawing, executed in ink.<sup>14</sup> In interview, Bellingham seems to stress the priority of the image:

I think of all the work that I make as image-making, as picture-making. Some of the things may look a bit like poems,



*Fig. 9: David Bellingham, Words on A Wall That's All.*

some might look a bit like objects, a bit like photographs, but they are all images. Of course I do not mean image in the sense of a picture that records a likeness by way of imitation, I mean a conceptual construction, the bringing together of various elements into a unified whole; so not an image of something but an image as something, not a secondary illustration but a primary self-determining thing. (Otty 2009)

Another of Bellingham's wall drawings, *Big Upon Little* seems on one interpretation to express the dominance of text, at least in terms of size: the words are big, while the marks which form their background are small.





Fig. 10: David Bellingham, *Big Upon Little*.

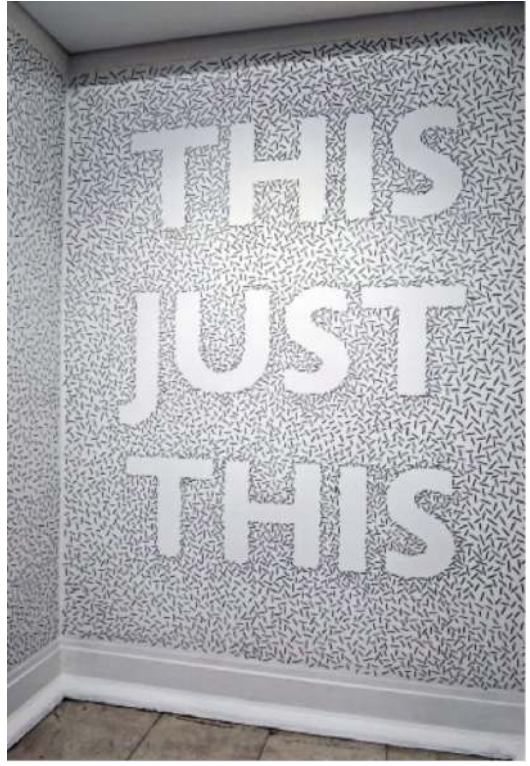


Fig. 11: David Bellingham, *This Just This*.

Yet the words are constituted by an absence (of the marks). There is a typical self-deprecating humour: the work announces itself as a big statement about a small matter.<sup>15</sup> Another work, 'This Just This', also implies modesty yet, like all three pieces, is simultaneously assertive, written large in a public space, presenting and repeating a strong deictic ('This') by which it points to itself.

John Cayley, in an article entitled 'The Gravity of the Leaf: Phenomenologies of Literary Inscription in Media-Constituted Diegetic Worlds', argues that 'language always comes to us from a world that is distinct from the *media-constituted diegetic world* within which it represented', since:

Phenomenologically, language, as graphic inscription, does not appear or dwell in our world of lived experience in the

mode of objects having position, volume, structure, and so on, except in a manner that is highly-constrained and fundamentally two-dimensional. (Cayley 2010, 202-203)

He contrasts ‘literary inscription’ in this respect with architecture, since

We live in architecture without departing from a world in which we live. We live in (aesthetic) language only in so far as we leave the world in which the language is embodied. (Cayley 2010, 200)

Bellingham’s wall drawings are neither literature nor architecture (in any straightforward sense): he sees himself primarily as an artist who uses text (though one who often uses text): “when I use words I use them as elements of a picture” (Otty 2009). Nevertheless, these works do involve, in Cayley’s terms, “language, as graphic inscription”, and they also appropriate elements of the architectural by inscribing poetic texts in a physical environment. The texts remain two-dimensional (in that sense, ‘constrained’ by ‘the gravity of the leaf’), but the phenomenology of our experience of these works is crucially affected by their location in three-dimensional space (they change as the viewer / reader changes distance and angle with respect to the work). Bellingham’s own comments on his work in general stress the element of material construction:

The words have always been used as unitary things. I use words a bit like bricks, the brick is a unit and the word is a unit. It is a constructive process. (Otty 2009)

The reflexive phrases which constitute the verbal content of the works both assert and problematize their existence in space (alongside their status as images and texts). Close up, the wall drawings appear as multiple, small marks with a suggestion of movement, like a swarm of insects. Close up, *Words on a Wall* appears as marks on a wall; only by retreating (which requires adequate space) can we ‘read’ it as a text or poem. In this sense, the poetic text of these wall drawings alternates between assertion and effacement.

## **Conclusion**

In each of these works there is an element of effacement, concealment, a demand to decipher, or, in the case of Bellingham's work, a demand for text to be contemplated as image; for the viewer / reader to consider different modes of response appropriate to text, image and their combination. These features have formal and thematic aspects. As regards the phenomenology of the reading / viewing experience, these various forms of effacement represent both lure and obstacle. The sense of concealment may create some uncertainty or hesitation in the way in which the reader or viewer interacts with the work, but this may serve to focus attention on intermedial processes, and ultimately may have the effect of generating a sense of disclosure. In terms of the creative and collaborative process, these works may disclose an anxiety or creative tension around the presence of text or writing within or alongside images, or the presence of images within or alongside text. Such anxiety or tension arguably arises from the way in which the other art form displaces or supersedes by its literal presence its more habitual metaphorical presence. A picture accompanied by language is less likely to seem a 'speaking picture', since the text may seem to 'speak' for it; a poem is less likely to call up autonomous imagined images if literal images are already present. An image which literally deploys language seems to call into question the 'language of images', and an image which shares the space of a text may seem to threaten the metaphorical claims of literary art to 'make us see'. Mitchell comments that:

Alongside [the] tradition of accommodating language to vision is a countertradition, equally powerful, that expresses a deep ambivalence about the lure of visibility. (Mitchell 1994, 114)

One could make a parallel statement about the 'lure of legibility' for visual art or the visual artist: and this indicates a source of ambivalence in intermedial works. Mitchell suggests that this 'countertradition' of 'ambivalence about the lure of visibility'

urges a respect for the generic boundaries between the arts  
... its theory of language is oriented towards an aesthetic of

invisibility, a conviction that ‘the deep truth is imageless’.  
(Mitchell 1994, 114)

Mitchell argues that ‘romantic antipictorialism’ dominated the ‘major, canonical romantic poets’, with the notable exception of Blake:

‘Imagination’, for the romantics, is regularly contrasted to rather than being equated with mental imaging ... for Wordsworth, Coleridge, Shelley, and Keats, ‘imagination’ is a power of consciousness that transcends mere visualization ... pictures and vision frequently play a negative role in romantic poetic theory. (Mitchell 1994, 114-115)

Other interpretations of Romanticism, however, have stressed Wordsworth’s ambivalence concerning the relationship between spoken word and written text, notably in relation to epitaphs and inscriptions of objects.<sup>16</sup> Samantha Matthews notes “a series of influential deconstructive accounts of Wordsworth’s “epitaphic mode” as a trope for the textuality of writing, connoting absence and loss” (Matthews 2015, 154). In this tradition of thought, emerging from Paul de Man’s writing on Wordsworth, materiality and textuality are as important to Wordsworth as orality, though the relations between these concepts are freighted with value and anxiety. Might there then be a certain paradox in relation to the seeming effacement of poetic texts in the intermedial works discussed here? Perhaps, while seeming to hide themselves or diminish their own power to define meaning – seeming to give priority to the material and representational power of the image – such effaced writing obliquely asserts its own superior ‘deep truth’, rather in the manner of a sacred text? Is the seeming modesty of such intermedial poetry a symptom of persistent ‘romantic antipictorialism’, or rather a sign of an engagement with a Wordsworthian problematic of absence and loss via the materiality of the sign? The effaced or problematized poetic text in these intermedial works can be interpreted in a range of ways, not necessarily mutually exclusive. These include a form of relation to Romantic anti-pictorialism; an engagement with the ambivalence of the human relation to natural beauty; allusion to, and critical investigation of, modernist medium-specificity; and a process of image-construction which

deploys words as constructive elements in an ‘image’. The contrary impulses within Romantic poetics – of ‘antipictorialism’ and materiality (or of orality and inscription) – feed through, modified by modernism’s rich and diverse engagements with intermediality and cross-media emulation, into contemporary poetry’s dialectic of ‘voice and ‘discourse’. In intermedial works such as those discussed here, that dialectic itself comes into relation with a set of negotiations between visual art/image/object and literature/poem/text. The achievement of the poets and artists who created these works is to use this complex inheritance and set of abstract relations to create new works which ‘speak’ so powerfully.

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## Notes

- 1 *Poetry Beyond Text* was funded by the UK Arts and Humanities Research Council as part of its programme, *Beyond Text: Performances, Sounds, Images, Objects* (2007-12), <http://www.beyondtext.ac.uk/>
- 2 Eric Voc, (summarising Dick Higgins' essay 'Intermedia'), quoted in Irina O. Rajewsky 2005, 51). The original phrase in Higgins' essay reads: "In intermedia [as opposed to mixed media] ... the visual element (painting) is fused conceptually with the words" (Higgins 2001, 51).
- 3 Will Maclean, personal conversation.
- 4 Mitchell distinguishes graphic, optical, perceptual, mental and verbal senses of the term 'image' (Mitchell 1986, 10).
- 5 The converse position to Cayley's holds that writing within an image (such as a painting or print) is not writing, but a *picture* of writing. To take a famous example,

the reflexive paradoxes of Magritte's *La trahison des images* rely in part on the fact that the words are not a caption, but part of the painting. And yet Cayley's idea is closely linked to Magritte's: a representation is not normally identical with the thing represented: a representation of a pipe is not a pipe, and writing is not a 'representation' of writing. See the discussions by Foucault (1982), Mitchell (1994, 65-77) and Cayley (2010, 205-207).

- 6 For example the Contents page lists: '1 SEA STORIES: The company *of* fishermen'; but the image is captioned 'The company *was* fishermen' (emphases added); 'whisky' looks like 'whiskey' in 'Sea Stories' .
- 7 *Poetry Beyond Text*, online gallery. <http://www.poetrybeyondtext.org/martin-mclean.html>
- 8 *Poetry Beyond Text*, online gallery.
- 9 'Pibroch or Ceòl Mór sounds quite slow and stately and a single piece of music can be several minutes long. It is an elaborate theme and variation form with very specific rules on the different variations, which progress in increasing complexity until the theme of the pibroch returns at the end. Pibroch is played on the Highland bagpipes only, by a solo piper, and is considered one of the most difficult genres of music in the piping repertoire. Pibrochs are usually written for solemn events or occasions. They include: Salutes - tunes addressed to someone of importance; Gatherings - tunes used to gather members of a clan; Laments - tunes expressing sadness at someone's death and tunes connected with historical events'. <http://www.educationscotland.gov.uk/scotlandssongs/about/songs/pibroch/index.asp>.
- 10 Text by Mary Modeen. *Poetry Beyond Text* online gallery. <http://www.poetrybeyondtext.org/leven-robertson.html>.
- 11 I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer of this chapter (on behalf of the Center for Research in Contemporary Poetry, Aalborg University), for suggesting this allusion and for other thoughtful comments and suggestions.
- 12 *Poetry Beyond Text*, online gallery, <http://www.poetrybeyondtext.org/fletcher.html>
- 13 Another paradox (or perhaps it is another version of the same paradox) is explicat-  
ed by Rancière (2007), when he points out that the theory of medium-specificity  
requires that the notion of 'medium' be 'discretely split in two. On the one hand,  
the *medium* is the set of material means available for a technical activity. "Conquer-  
ing" the medium then signifies: confining oneself to the use of the material means.  
On the other hand, the stress is placed on the very relationship between end and  
means. Conquering the medium then means to make it an end in itself, denying  
the relationship of means to an end that is the very essence of technique. The es-

sense of painting ... is to suspend the appropriation of means to an end that is the essence of technique' (Rancière 2007, 71-72).

- 14 Bellingham has commented that: "The wall drawings are made with black ink directly onto white walls. I classify them as "wall drawings" rather than "wall paintings". There is an implication that the wall is treated as a ground that is proximate to the page (albeit a large page). That writing is proximate to drawing. That words can be looked at and drawings can be read).' Private correspondence.
- 15 ompare Bellingham's biographical statement on the *Poetry Beyond Text* website, which begins 'David Bellingham is an artist of near total obscurity, who scratches a living making and mending. His work is occasionally to be found in the regions but it does not stay long and it is hard to spot. You will not have heard of him before and you may never hear of him again.' <http://www.poetrybeyondtext.org/bellingham.html>.
- 16 Samantha Matthews identifies "Wordsworth's ambivalence about the commemorative text's claim to define the dead", articulated in inscription poems, and in a poem such as 'The Brothers', which includes 'natural graves' (without names), which 'evidence not lack but a community bonded by oral memory', but also a character 'excluded from this community" (Matthews 2015, 152).





# **‘AUDIO-POETRY’**

## **Lyrical Speech in the Digital Age<sup>1</sup>**

CLAUDIA BENTHIEN

### **The Mediatization of Live Poetry**

Poetry that is presented orally, whether it is simply read aloud or embodied and performed vocally, has gained in popularity in past decades. Poems are generally read aloud by the authors themselves, who therefore fulfill the double role of “poet-performer” (Novak 2011, 62). Alongside poetry readings by the author, which exist in various formats – book tour readings in book stores, readings on theater stages, poetry festivals, radio presentations, audio books – it is poetry slam in particular that has become a mainstream event since the 1990s in many countries. This new genre has promoted a presentation mode of lyric poetry (as well as for other genres of literary and essayistic texts) that consciously differs from traditional poetry readings: There is no book to read from, there is no table with a reading lamp at which the author sits, there is no passive audience and no book-signing at the end. In exchange, there is an empty stage, sometimes a piece of paper (or a cellular phone) with the text, a standing microphone and an active audience that applauds, cheers, laughs, and makes loud noises of approval or disapproval, and afterwards, there is an evaluation by an amateur jury. At the core of it lies the live performance by the poet in front of an audience; the ‘poetic work’ is the singular and situational performance.

According to the literary scholar Paul Zumthor, the performance of literature receives its ‘originality’ not through the singularity of the poetic words spoken alone but also through the performer’s specific and partly contingent interaction with the audience (cf. Zumthor 1990, 117-164). In particular with regard to poetry slam, the subsequent release of video clips on media platforms such as *youtube.com*, *myslam.net* or the poets’ homepages, can be considered desituated and decontextualized excerpts of the event. In the vast majority of cases, there are no complete events with their competitive dramaturgy to be found on the Internet but rather single performances that have been extracted – ‘slam clips’, in the 5-minute for-

mat of an individual stage appearance. Therefore, the online presentation of video files fulfills both a documentary and a promotional function. Portrayed in a close-up or knee-shot by the camera, the focus is on the poet, which involves the conscious elimination of the audience and the specific stage situation from the frame. These camera angles are ‘translations’ of live performances into an audio-visual format that generates its own ‘aesthetics of presence’ – e.g. through a heightened proximity to the performer, his or her face, mimics and gestures. The same can be said, though to a lesser degree, about the mediatization of traditional poetry readings. Here, what is ‘lost’ in its medial translation (into a video or audio file) is less obvious, since the role of the audience as well as the ritual character of the event is not as distinct (although it is, of course, still present).

Zumthor defines the literary performance as “a creative social event, one irreducible to its components alone and during which particular properties are effectuated” (ibid., 118) and that takes place at a concrete time and in a concrete place. Through these singular and situational conditions, the performance “projects the poetic work into a *setting*” (ibid., 124). These cultural and medial framings conditioning the performance situation transform the poetic work into an aesthetic event and make it perceivable and interpretable through the activity of the audience (cf. ibid., 183). For this reason, the “performance and delivery features are [...] intrinsic to the poetic meaning, form and artistry” (Finnegan 2003, 387). The evanescent performance situation is constitutive of live performances: “After it ends the performance is irretrievably lost; it can never be repeated as the very same performance. The materiality of the presentation is brought forth performatively and appears only for a limited time span” (Fischer-Lichte 2004, 14).<sup>2</sup> It is this aesthetics of presence that even recordings of live performances make use of, which may explain the popularity of live oral formats in a culture of virtuality and online communication.

Contrary to theater scholars such as Erika Fischer-Lichte, however, one should consider not only stage events with the co-presence of poet-performers and audience as literary performances but rather any kind of presentation and appropriation – be it through participation at a live performance (poetry reading, recitals of poetry by actors, poetry slam), be it through the reception of sound recordings (audio books, audio files on the Internet) or audio-visual media products such as videos of poetry readings, poetry

slams, or 'poetry clips' (which work with specific settings, costumes, props and, in part, with co-actors). Even the silent reading of a book by a single person can be considered a specific situational setting. The theater scholar Doris Kolesch has rightly claimed that "language exists only in its concrete and situated spatial and temporal execution, as a vocal, scriptural or gestural articulation"; it should therefore be conceptualized as "embodied language, although 'embodiment' does not mark an apriori of the body, but rather a specific materiality and mediality" (Kolesch 2005, 320). It is helpful to refer to the categories of "situationality" (Beaugrande and Dressler 1981, 12 and 169-187) or "situativity" (Heinemann and Heinemann 2002, 99 and 134) here, which were developed in the field of text linguistics. With these terms one denotes the "situative, interactional and discursive embedding" of a text (*ibid.*, 134). It is only within the respective "situational, operational frames of reference" (Ong 1982, 49) established by a concrete cultural and medial setting that the 'poetic work' as an aesthetic event takes place. One may also refer to Erving Goffman's concept of 'keys' as a "set of conventions by which a given activity, one already meaningful in terms of some primary framework, is transformed into something patterned on this activity but seen by the participants to be something quite else" (Goffman 1974, 43-44). This "process of transcription" (*ibid.*, 44) takes place regardless of whether the simple speaking of a poetry text by its author is conceived as a competition entry or as an artistic solo performance. Such 'keyings' may simply consist of (medial) paratexts (cf. Genette 1997; Kreimeier and Stanitzek 2004; Gray 2010) that contextualize a poem, through its organization within a cycle, an oeuvre, an anthology, a genre on a media platform or a certain type of event. In live performance, the performance setting – the moderation, applause, lighting, and musical intro – creates an additional medial and site-specific paratextual and paramedial framing. Contrary to these techniques of oral performance, processes of mediatization and remediatization take place whenever a live poetry performance is transformed into another situative context. Recording processes involve techniques of "recontextualization" that follow those of "decontextualisation", as "two aspects of the same process, though time and other factors may mediate between the two phases" (Baumann and Briggs 1990, 75). A fundamental aspect of the decontextualization of oral language (discourse) is the necessity to transform it into a 'text' in the first place:

At the heart of the process of decentering discourse is the more fundamental process – *entextualization*. In simple terms [...] it is the process of rendering discourse extractable, of making a stretch of linguistic production into a unit – a *text* – that can be lifted out of its interactional setting. A text, then, from this vantage point, is discourse rendered decontextualizable. (ibid., 73)

For such translations the media linguist Ludwig Jäger has developed the concept of “transcriptivity”. Jäger understands “transcription” as a process that “restores the *legibility* of text excerpts [...] that have become illegible” (Jäger 2004, 72) and defines transcriptions as being “in the mode of intra- and intermedial referentiality of signs to signs, or of media to media” (Jäger 2010, 82). According to Jäger, the transmission of ‘content’ into another medium requires transcription, for “[u]nder [the] conditions of transcriptivity the identical replication of a ‘cognitive original’ cannot be achieved in different sign formats” (ibid., 79) – if anything it has to do with continuous transitions:

Transcription then could be described as the respective transition from *disruption* to *transparency*, of de- and recontextualization of the signs/media in focus. While disruption as the starting point of transcriptive procedures implements remediation, thereby focusing on the sign/medium as the (disrupted) operator of meaning, transparency can be looked at as that state in the process of media performance in which the respective sign/medium disappears, becoming transparent regarding the contents it mediates. (ibid., 82)

Given these assumptions, it can be asserted that all of the medial transformations poetry is subjected to in the digital age, explicitly or implicitly, refer to each other and that these transformations are never fully concluded, so that meaning is established only ‘in between’ media, embodiments and modalities. Therefore, even a silent reading by an individual reader relates to other existing forms of poetry presentation.

### **The medium of the voice**

“The voice is a paradigm of the event, because it comes to an end. All events must end; texts can live on indefinitely.” (Peters 2004, 99) Eventfulness and intensity are both attributed to the human voice, especially in live situations. If a voice is recorded, it loses these characteristics in a phenomenal respect although they persist conceptually. The recorded voice is not performative in the strict sense of the word, i.e. as something that renders perceivable the ‘here and now’ and the tension and fragility of the physical co-presence of speaker and listener – the “specific sonsphere, that arises in the speaking and hearing that takes place between humans” (Kolesch 2004, 36). Notwithstanding, a recorded voice retains this eventfulness as a characteristic. Qualities of an individual voice such as its affective and atmospheric qualities are not lost but rather desituated and decontextualized. The recorded voice may therefore be considered as a “bodily trace” and as “a residue that refers both to a presence and an absence of the performative process of vocal articulation” (Pinto 2012, 11).

Specific features are attributed to the voices of poets performing their own texts, above all that of authenticity: “Traditionally the vocal sound as an aura around a body, whose truth is its word, promised nothing less than the subjective, and in the double sense of the word ‘certain’ identity of a human being” (Lehmann 2004, 58-59). This notion of the voice can be described by key words such as auratization and embodiment and is closely related to the “myth of uttered language as ‘original’ sound” and “authentic vivification” (Bickenbach 2007, 193). Paradoxically, however, it is only the possibility of technical recording that brought about the concept of ‘original sound’ (in German: ‘O-Ton’), which means that only a sound “that is long gone” becomes the “original of a documentary function” (ibid., 194). Other theorists have shared this skeptical view on originality and authenticity in audio-visual media, even with regard to ‘media of presence’ such as the theater. Philipp Auslander, for instance, considers the concept of ‘liveness’ nothing more than an effect of mediatization: “In many instances, live performances are produced either as replications of mediatized representations or as raw materials for subsequent mediatization” (Auslander 1999, 162). It is therefore helpful to consider them as (aesthetic or ideological) strategies rather than as claims to the authenticity

or originality of a given voice: “[W]e might focus not so much on the digital voice as somehow post-authentic, but rather ask how in digital media and art there is an *authenticity effect* through voice and in voice. ‘[A]uthenticity’ itself may be heard as performative” (Neumark 2010, 95) – which is particularly the case in a mediatized culture.

Here one might also mention the paradoxical phenomenon whereby the voice creates a strong intimacy with the recipient, especially through the use of technology – nothing sounds as physically close as a telephone partner at the other end of the line! Obviously, this has to do with the factual proximity of the telephone receiver or headphones to the ear, through which ambient noise is eliminated; of course, it also has to do with the sole concentration on auditory perception while using the telephone. In audio-visual media such as film, intimacy with the recipient can also be established when the visual body is absent from the screen altogether but the voice appears throughout as an off-voice –, “in the scene’s ‘here and now,’ but outside the frame” (Chion 1999, 18). With regard to film, Michel Chion has called this phenomenon ‘acousmatic’ sound. This term stands for a dislocated voice that becomes part of the invisible and therefore limitless space in which the audience is also situated when the film begins. The implications of *acousmètre* can be summarized under four notions that are particularly strong when the speaking body is not represented on the screen at all: “ubiquity, panopticism, omniscience, omnipotence” (ibid., 24).

In the case of poetry readings or poetry slams, one seldom hears the voice of the speaker without technical amplification, even in live situations. Because of this, a paradoxical acoustic space is produced: an increased auditory proximity that stands in opposition to a certain visual and kinetic distance (e.g. in large theater spaces). Especially in the poetry slam setting, the microphone as an “amputation and extension of [the poet-performer’s] own being” (McLuhan 1964, 11) is as important as, e.g., the erect position of the poet standing on the stage. Through the use of microphone and amplification technology, however, a second dispositive is created: that of recording and repeatability:

The voice in an age of electronic media becomes removable from the body, from a world of ostensive reference, from the

limits of singularity, from its original spatial signature, tempo, intonation – with all kinds of uncanny results. [...] Recording technology makes possible the paradox of an identically repeatable performance.

Every performance is unique and unrepeatable in some ways, just as every signature is both unique and identical. The aura of uniqueness clings to performance. Performance is singular and recording is multiple. (Peters 2004, 91-92)

The repeatability of performance through recording technologies does not release it from its ‘singularity’. Not only does the aura of uniqueness (of the past moment) cling to it, but each iteration every time an audio or video recording is replayed is, strictly speaking, likewise non-repeatable, as it can also be considered a ‘unique performance’: It is situational and bound to a specific attitude of reception that is never identical to the time before.

### **Exemplary Mediatizations of Performed Poetry by Thomas Kling and Nora Gomringer**

Following these theoretical remarks on the topic of the oral performance of poetry, two exemplary works by well-known contemporary German poets, Thomas Kling and Nora Gomringer, will now be discussed, both prominent due to their interest in ‘spoken word poetry’ and live performance. In a poetry reading or a poetry slam performance, textual parameters specific to lyric poetry, such as verse, stanza or punctuation are translated into ‘media of presence’, namely the body and the voice. Oral language retains the literariness typical of written poetry and it may even intensify it, for example in the ostentatious foregrounding of tonal correspondences or semantic ambiguities (cf. Mukařovský 2007, 19-20). “Articulatory parameters” such as rhythm, pitch, volume, articulation and timbre (cf. Novak 2011, 85-125) work as “paralinguistic features” (ibid., 86) that may provide spoken texts with additional semantic signification. This intensification through verbalization is the case with both Kling and Gomringer, who consider the oral presentation of their work to be crucial – be it in a live situation or in a recording. A helpful category for analyzing their performance is that of the “audiotext” as the “audible acoustic text” or “the poet’s acoustic performance” (Bernstein 1998, 12).



The media platform *lyrikline.org*, an initiative of several German literary institutions, presents poetry from all over the world. Poems are available in their original languages, accompanied by translations into German as well as other tongues. Below the written texts one finds publishing and translation references and next to them the author's photographic portrait, some brief biographical information as well as, if they exist, the audio files of readings of the respective poem by the author. The latter is a specificity of this web platform although it is of course to be found elsewhere as well (e.g. on *lyrikzeitung.com* – a German Internet platform whose name translates as 'poetry newspaper'). The concept of *lyrikline* as a modular media platform is, therefore, to present language as multimodal and heteroglossic, as a typical feature of the Web 2.0 era environment (cf. Androutsopoulos 2010; Kress and Van Leeuwen 2010). The written poem and the poet's voice may be either received simultaneously or separately. One may also listen and read the text in different languages at the same time.

Thomas Kling's long poem *Bildprogramme* (1993), available as an audiotext at *lyrikline*, will serve as an example for the present discussion. Until his early death in 2005, Kling was considered one of the most important poets of his generation. As far back as 1983, he began presenting his poems in public readings that often had a performance character; additionally, he frequently appeared together with a jazz drummer. In their composition, Kling's poems are characterized by performative elements in that sound, rhythm and melody play a constitutive role. However, the poet distanced himself with his concept of readings from that of (more spontaneous and contingent) performances, e.g. those of the Vienna Group, and he decisively considered it to be what he called a "Sprachinstallation" ('language installation'). Even though this seems to indicate that he put the oral performance at the center of his poetics, Kling, at the same time, emphasized that the "plural semantic chargings" of his texts "only become evident through repetitive readings, which nothing but the written text can accommodate" (Kling quoted in Lenz and Pütz 2002, 2). One may decipher in these self-statements a tension between the written text and the verbal performance. Both modalities transcriptively refer to each other and to their respective abilities and lacks. Kling once remarked with regard to one of his poetry volumes:

In *Fernhandel*, which is a collection of poetry with a CD, it becomes obvious that the audience uses both at once, and I consider this an important matter. That the oral experience obviously functions as an introductory aid into the linear form of the text, not as a supplement; they are two literary products that both have their own history, also separate histories. (Kling quoted in Balmes 2000, 14)

On the one hand, the concept of ‘language installation’ implies a certain spatiality that is significant, e.g. for a stage setting – as in technical installations or recent forms of installation art – but, on the other hand, it refers to the process of constellating different layers of language and text types, which is constitutive of Kling’s poetics:

His poems perform media changes of all kinds. They mix historical and contemporary productions, be it forms of language, letters, photographs or live reportages; they use the language of filmic or digital image and sound directing. The poetry reading as a lecture is therefore closely related to the intermediality of the texts themselves. (Bickenbach 2007, 200)

*Bildprogramme* consists of three parts and the focus here will primarily be on the first part (for an English translation, please see the appendix). Its literariness is dense and it utilizes, among other things, an irregular orthography that builds upon certain graphic-visual procedures. Specific features of this very artistic poem are: the elimination of vowels that are not spoken – e.g. in the heading of this first part: “ZWISCHNBERICHT” (‘interim report’), whose second syllable is missing an ‘E’, which could be considered a peculiar transcription of dialect or an insertion of orality into script (cf. Vorrath 2017); the capitalization of striking and pictorial terms and phrases – e.g. “SPRACHINSTALLATION” in line 4, or “ALLEGORIEN” in line 9; and syllabification presented as line breaks in strange places, which cannot be considered a traditional technique of enjambment but rather produces confusing caesuras and ruptures, creating ‘stumbling blocks’ of memory (see for the latter Bickenbach 2007, 202-203). This poem’s complication of form

and content may be related to what Marjorie Perloff calls *Radical Artifice* in her book about poetry in the age of media. She remarks that in the postmodern era a significant body of poetry has been produced that is “unnaturally *difficult*”: “eccentric in its syntax, obscure in its language, and mathematical rather than musical in its form” (Perloff 1994, xi). She argues convincingly that this development is related to electronic media – on the one hand as a counter-reaction (a heightened artificiality in opposition to mass culture), on the other as the integration of digital paradigms, e.g. in digital poetry. Kling can be considered an artist of the first group, relating strongly, as I will show, to traditional media and the ‘pre-postmodern’ idea of the divide between high art and mass culture (cf. Perloff, xii).

In hermetic diction, Kling’s poem describes the optical features and materiality of several related artworks. In literary and art history, such a linguistic technique can be described using the term *ekphrasis* (“the verbal representation of visual representation”; Heffernan 1993). “Bildprogramm” is likewise a term that originated in German art theory; the English equivalent would be ‘iconographic program’. The existence of a ‘Bildprogramm’ implies the thematic subordination of the individual images of a cycle under a complex *leitmotif* or sujet – for instance the life of an important personality, an historic event or an allegorical theme (virtues, vices, seasons etc.). The relationship to the respective iconographic program is a decisive key to understanding each individual image. Since the literary rhetoric also features the category of ‘images’ – figurative speech, tropes etc. – Kling’s title is semantically polyvalent (not to mention that nowadays in German the term ‘Bildprogramm’ denotes specific software for picture editing, which was, however, not as prominent in the early 1990s). A further tension is created in that we are dealing here with a poem that ‘speaks’ about visual phenomena, that makes them audible and can therefore – in the habitus of ‘surpassing’ – be related to the topos and impulse of the *paragone* (‘competition’) between the arts. In Jäger’s terms, Kling works with a “recursive self-processing” (Jäger 2010, 80), where the arts refer to themselves as well as to each other. Lyric poetry here functions as an “intermedium, as a repository and an effect of intermedial, namely tonal, textual and visual evocations” (Bickenbach 2007, 201).

The recording of Kling reciting his *Bildprogramme* is not based on a live performance by the poet but on a production by the German public

radio channel 'Deutschlandradio' from 1999. For this reason, the 'performative and delivery features' (Finnegan) are not that of a live performance but were rather produced by the author for an exclusive acoustic reception and therefore with an emphasis on the paralinguistic features of the audiotext. Kling, a former choir pupil who enjoyed professional voice training, speaks his poem in both a highly articulate as well as artificial manner. On the one hand, the poet tries to translate the specificities of his script into voice, for instance when he pauses while speaking the line-transcending adjective "pro-tzigste" ('swanky' or 'pretentious', line 1) or through a verbal emphasis on the term "ALLEGORIEN" ('allegories', line 9), likewise important for the visual arts and literature as a signifier of figurative forms of artistic representation. In Kling's oral performance, these features are not necessarily understood as script-specific but merely as poetic deviations, as disruptions within the continuous flow of speech. On the other hand, the poet-performer subdivides his monumental poem into several characters by strongly altering his voice's pitch, timbre and volume – from a loud declamation to a mere whisper. One gets the impression that several fictitious characters are engaged in a dialogue here (e.g. an art historian, a radio reporter, an astonished viewer), whose contributions are partly underlain by irony. Kling calls this practice "polyphony" (Kling quoted in Balmes 2000, 22) and one may stress that his oral performance of *Bildprogramme* illuminates a level of control over the linguistic material that corresponds to the ubiquity, panoptism, omniscience, and omnipotence that Chion stated as features of the acousmatic voice.

In fact, the possibility of a synchronic reception of script and voice allows a fuller understanding of this complex poem, its syntax and pictorial language. Correspondingly, as quoted earlier, Kling called the oral experience an 'introductory aid' into the 'linear form' of the text and emphasized that he is generally interested in the "making audible of texts, in the performance, in the *actio* of language that takes place at all, in the first instance, within the poem itself" (Kling quoted in Balmes 2000, 15). In contrast to this bimodal approach, in poetry readings in front of an audience, one also hears the author verbalize his or her own words but usually does not read the text at the same time (which would be considered impolite in the presence of the poet). Through the invisibility of the speaker, the remediatization on the poetry platform *lyrikline* eliminates one semiotic code

– the visibility of the speech act – while at the same time adding another through the availability of the script. According to Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin, this falls into variant two of their category of remediatization, where “the electronic version is offered as an improvement, although the new is still justified in terms of the old and seeks to remain faithful to the older medium’s character” (Bolter and Grusin 1999, 46).

In contrast to the conceptualization of live ‘language installations’ by the poet-performer Kling as singular ‘events’ that the recipients experience passively as a collective, requiring constant concentration – and also to the original radio event of 1999 with its evanescent character and contingent reception situation – the acoustic language material offered online is permanently available and may be paused and repeated as desired. Because of this, the tension and concentration that both the live performance and the “‘radiophonic’ situation” (Pinto 2012, 12) demand are overcome. The online voice of this long-dead poet produces, however, an unsettling “fiction of immediacy” (Zumthor 1988, 708). In the present example, with the combined text and audio presentation, Kling’s voice uttering words from some kind of afterlife not only revives the ‘dead’ script but also fundamentally adds to its plasticity and comprehension.

Nora Gomringer refers to herself as both an author of poetry and a slam poet. She has published several poetry collections combined with audio CDs. These are based on live performances of her texts as well as studio recordings. On stage she recites her own poetry as well as that of others and she performs both solo and in ‘teams’. For the present context, her audio-poem *Mia, bring mia was mit, | wenn du wieder kommst, | falls du wieder kommst* has been chosen (the English title would be ‘*Mia, bring me something | when you come back | if you come back*’; see the poem with an English translation in the appendix). In contrast to Kling’s *Bildprogramme*, when searching the Internet, one finds the poem as an audio file only – there is no video recording of a recitation by the poet available and the text can only be read at [googlebooks.com](http://googlebooks.com). This presentation mode corresponds to the concept of “Sprechtex-te” (‘spoken texts’) that Gomringer has established for her poetry works. It can be considered an acoustic counter-strategy to the traditional modality of poetry as printed in a book – as presented for example on the Internet platform *spokenwordberlin*, which asserts that

it is the ‘mouthpiece’ of the Berlin poetry scene. Gomringer’s *Mia, bring mia was mit* can be found as an audio file on this website<sup>3</sup> and, until very recently, it was available on her personal website as well. The audio file of the poem originated in Gomringer’s bi-medial publication *Sag doch mal was zur Nacht* (*Say something about the night*, 2006), an anthology with lyric ‘spoken texts’ accompanied by a CD containing some of these texts in an additional audio version. Hence, the reduction to the acoustic level, to the audiotext, is a specific reception situation that can only be found on the Internet. The phenomenon in general may be related to the promotion and growing popularity of the medium of the audio book – especially prominent in German-speaking countries – usually offered in book stores as CDs without a printed text and therefore explicitly constituting an alternative to the reception mode of reading. Most audio books on sale are narrative texts; poetry publications on the contrary are usually available as bimodal products (printed poems plus audio file, as is the case in Gomringer’s publications).

*Mia, bring mia was mit* is a prose poem that achieves its effect mostly through its timbre and its dense semantic composition. The poet, who, like Kling, underwent professional vocal training, speaks all of her texts in a highly expressive manner and with a sonorous and strongly modulated voice. The poem is full of alliteration, assonance and onomatopoeic elements as well as word play, relying on pop songs and idiomatic expressions – for instance “deine geregnete Rose” (line 10), which refers to the song “Für mich soll’s rote Rosen regnen” (‘for me it should rain red roses’) – the Hildgard Knef rendition of which became famous in German-speaking countries – or “alles an Suppe wie Hecht vorbeizog” (lines 13-14) – which refers to the German saying “es zieht wie Hechtsuppe”, meaning, ‘there is a terrible draft here!’ Even though these rhetoric means can be found in the written text as well, their point or punch line, however, is more fully developed in the verbal realization. The title itself programmatically refers to a tension between oral and written language, for example in the word play “Mia”/“mia” (with capital vs. small first letter), where the first word is a female name and the second is the Bavarian variant of the German pronoun *mir* (‘me’).

The name in the title refers most likely to the slam poet and cabaret artist Mia Pitroff, with whom Gomringer won the German team poetry slam championship in 2005. The poem is a call to her absent friend –

whose lonely “Stroh-witwer” (‘grass widower’, line 20) the speaker has to console – to bring back feelings, objects, souvenirs from the faraway place. Gomringer’s performance consists of a long and nearly ceaseless address, in which the speaker talks about her own life, both in the form of complaint and praise, and imagines Mia’s simultaneous life in the metropolis Berlin. The poet-performer also uses her voice mimetically: for vocal articulations such as “jaulen” (‘yowl’, line 18) und “gurren” (‘coo’, line 30), she does not just speak these verbs but also performs them as animal-like sounds. Due to her both sensitive and slightly accentuated diction, which varies in pace and dynamics, Gomringer creates a dense web of sound and meaning. Formal features of the typography and layout of the printed version – for instance the presentation of the title as a miniature poem in three lines and italics, although the poem is presented as a justified running text like a prose text – are translated by prosodic and articulatory means into the acoustic sphere. In her mode of speaking, the poet-performer transforms the written text into a continuous and intense sound carpet. With reference to Jäger, this mediatization is self-sufficient and therefore highly transparent.

At the same time, however, the medium of script remains thematically present – not only because the text refers to media of written communication (message in a bottle, letters that are bridled onto the falling stars, a quill) – but also through recourse to intertexts, most prominently the fairy tale “Die Gänsemagd” (“The Goose Girl”) by the Brothers Grimm (lines 39-41; the head of a horse named Fallada on the Brandenburg gate, the combing of hair, tending to the geese). With the use of this intertext, Mia is turned into a princess who is denied her crown in the place faraway. The poem interweaves several layers of poetic style as well as history: on the one hand, there is the dominant present tense in the messages to Mia in Berlin, on the other hand, Gomringer alludes to several violent incidences, both on the level of history (the second world war, the German invasion of Poland) and on the level of fairy tales and children’s as well as adolescent imagology. She combines these spheres in her modulate voice that sounds both youthful and grown up at the same time.

It is only at the end, that this audio performance is marked as ‘live’ through Gomringer’s “Thank you!” and the audience’s brief applause. The place and time of the performance nevertheless remain indefinite (which is one of the most important differences to slam poetry, which is documented

on the Internet with a concrete place, time and poetry slam event). The aim is to produce a universally receivable audio file of the poet-performer speaking her text rather than to document a specific performance. This audio-poem is therefore desituated and decontextualized, as is the case with Kling's *Bildprogramme*. It receives its framing through Gomringer's poetry collections published as books plus CDs.

### Résumé

The two examples presented in this paper, in which poetry is given a voice by the authors themselves, adhere to the contemporary trend of listening to literature being performed (on a stage or in audio data formats) rather than reading it on the basis of the traditional medium of the poetry book. The processes of mediatizing and remediatizing poetry are 'translations' of the sensual perceptibility of the literature being performed live. Mediated poetry performances make use of strategies of producing 'presence' through voice, address, camera shots (close-up) or the direct gaze of the performer into the camera. The audiotexts by Kling and Gomringer contain many features of classical poetry – independent of the fact that the poets consider them to be 'language installations' (Kling; *Sprachinstallationen*) or 'spoken texts' (Gomringer; *Sprechtex*) to mark their difference from this traditional literary genre:

*The specific practice of poetry consists, in particular, in the activation of primary and secondary linguistic forms (phonetic and rhythmic-prosodic forms, grammar – that is morphological and lexical-semantic forms – as well as phraseology, tropes and figures of speech), to uncover them, to make them productive, to densify, to re-shape and to expose them [...].*  
(Helmstetter 1995, 30)

It is precisely the 'practice of poetry' described here that these two contemporary German poetry texts execute. The authors' oral interpretations put into effect and emphasize poetic means (for instance rhyme, alliterations, and repetition) using differentiated vocal modulation and appropriation.

Due to the development within the field of performance poetry and its mediatization, the dichotomic opposition of orality and scriptuality



that theorists like Ong, Zumthor and several scholars from performance studies have established, must be questioned (cf. Furniss 2004, 131-141). As has become evident in the two examples discussed, both modalities are strongly interwoven, which is why they should not be conceptualized as “two different types of literature each with its own characteristics [...]”, but rather [as] a spectrum of variations along multiple dimensions” (Finnegan 2003, 395). It is therefore useful, as the linguists Peter Koch and Wulf Oesterreicher have suggested, to differentiate between orality and literaricity not ontologically but merely “conceptually”. They have developed the notions of “conceptual orality” and “conceptual literaricity”, which are not necessarily congruent with the factual orality or literaricity of a given text: the former utilizes a “language of proximity” while the latter utilizes a “language of distance” (cf. Koch and Oesterreicher 1985, 23). Whereas the differentiation between the “phonic” versus the “graphic code” supposes a “strict dichotomy”, the concepts of the spoken and the written offer a huge spectrum of possible conceptualizations (cf. *ibid.*, p. 17). As a consequence, a written text may be ‘conceptually oral’ if it contains dominant features of a ‘language of proximity’, for instance of spontaneity or expressivity (cf. *ibid.*, 21). Correspondingly, the audiotexts by Kling and Gomringer remain ‘conceptually scriptural’, which becomes evident, for instance, when comparing them to slam poetry. Those texts contain many more elements of a ‘conceptual orality’, for instance involvement, situational entanglement, expressivity, processuality (cf. *ibid.*, 23) or the necessity of the structural elements of rhythm, rhyme, prosodic rules etc. to increase memorability (cf. Ong 1982, 33-41). The audio versions of Kling’s *Bildprogramme* and Gomringer’s *Mia, bring mia was mit* spoken by the poet-performers are conceptually scriptural, not because they are based on pre-written texts but because they consist of many features of a ‘language of distance’, such as elaborateness, compactness, theme fixation etc. (cf. Koch and Oesterreicher 1985, 23).

In this context, Jäger’s recent concept of ‘audioliterality’ may also be useful, which he conceives as follows:

In general, all productions of linguistic meaning should be called autoliteral, in which scriptural and vocal-audial elements of communication are interwoven or related to each

other in different regards, to the extent that the process of the construction of meaning can be understood as the result of intermedial movements. (Jäger 2014, 245)

As Jäger emphasizes, audioliterality is a concept that considers both modalities as closely related. This is especially obvious when language as a medium is self-reflexively thematized, as is the case with both Gomringer and Kling. The “poetic language stages ‘the word as word’” and guides the listener’s or reader’s attention “to the material, structural and relational qualities of the words themselves” (Helmstetter 1995, 34). With regard to Jäger, this literary technique can be considered as ‘intramedial recursivity’, that is, as the self-thematizing of the medium of language and its different modalities within the act of uttering, within the performative execution. The fact that such phenomena can be found more frequently in the digital age refers to the persistency of ‘old’ medialities and modalities of language that become visible as a trace in their changing modes of presentation. This reflexivity is likewise marked by the intermedial recourses that both audio-texts perform – for instance, in Gomringer, in the medium of the letter, and, in Kling, in the medium of painting or, more generally, the visual arts.

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## Notes

- 1 This publication originated in the context of the research project ‘*Performing Poetry: Medial Translations and Situational Framings of Contemporary Poetry*’ within the collaborative research group *Translating and Framing: Practices of Medial Transformations*, funded by the Authority of Science and Research Hamburg, Germany. It adopts ideas and formulations from three previous German articles on this topic, one of which is still in print; cf. Benthien (2013), Benthien (2016), Benthien and Prange (2017).
- 2 All quotations of texts that appear in German texts in the bibliography have been translated into English by the author, who would like to thank Lydia White and Amy Jones for her proofreading and assistance with the English manuscript.
- 3 Cf. [http://www.epoet.de/spokenwordberlin/mp3/april\\_04/mia\\_n\\_MP3%20standard%20128k.mp3](http://www.epoet.de/spokenwordberlin/mp3/april_04/mia_n_MP3%20standard%20128k.mp3).

# Appendix

THOMAS KLING

## *Bildprogramme*

1.  
*Zwischenbericht*

gegenüber. eingelassene plattn; pro-  
zigste heraldik. weißestn marmors  
parade: di superfette SPRACH-  
INSTALLATION.

(innenan-

sicht außnvor: hat sichsn fürstbi-  
schof feingemacht, getäfelt, drin. drauf-  
sicht intarsienspielchn; draufsicht turm-  
ofn ALLEGORIEN; nix wi mädeln  
mit blankn möpsn auffe reliefkacheln,  
hübsch glasierte ofnwärme.)

geblendet. kellen, kehrbleche. aus-  
gräbersound. DIE GESCHICHTE  
HERBRETTERND AUF SACKKARREN.  
der ganze weggeächzte schutt, durch-  
gesiebte sprache. dies asservieren auf  
knien; kratzen geschieht, gekratz, bürstn,  
abgepinselt. knien, nebnnander, an  
irgend (kloster)mauer bei rasselnm,  
heiser schlürfendm INDUSTRIESTAUB-  
SAUGER. so landn, schürf-schürf, schä-  
del in obstkistn marke "papa clemente";  
säuberlich schädeldeckn (caput mortuum),  
sargbrettchn (pestbeständig, siena) in  
cellophantüttn, auf geflattertm, windgezerr-  
tm zeitungspapier. gotisch und durch-  
numeriert. durchnumerierter  
grabungsbericht.

[...]

(Kling 2006, 635-636)

## *Iconographic Programs*

1.  
*Interm report*

1 opposite, embedded plates, most pre-  
tentious heraldry. whitest marble's  
parade: the superphat LANGUAGE  
INSTALLATION.

5 (interior  
view outside: a prince bi-  
shop has dressed up, paneled, inside. top  
view little intarsia game; top view tower  
oven ALLEGORIES; nothing like girls  
with bare tits on the relief tiles,  
nicely glazed oven heat.)

und vor-

imposed. trowels. dustpans. ex-  
cavator-sound. HISTORY  
15 HURLING UP ON SACK TRUCKS.  
all this moaned off rubble, sifted  
language. this storing on  
knees; scratching happens, scrapings, scrubbing,  
brushed off. kneeling next to each other, at  
20 any (cloister) wall with rattling,  
hoarsely slurping INDUSTRIAL VACUUM  
CLEANER. so they land, dig-dig, skulls  
in fruit boxes brand "papa clemente";  
neat skullcaps (caput mortuum),  
25 coffin lids (plague resistant, siena) in  
cellophane bags, on fluttered, wind-wren-  
ched newsprint. gothic and serially  
numbered. serially numbered  
excavation report.

and super-

[...]

(a rather literal translation by C.B.)

*Mia, bring mia was mit,  
wenn du wieder kommst,  
falls du wiederkommst*

Bringst mir ein Herz. Ein Herzerl. Für das rechte Fleckerl.  
Zur Blutstillung für das leckgeschlagene. Bring einen  
Baustein, einen Chemiebaukasten. Eine Streubombe. Bring  
eine Absicht und einen Willen und vielleicht einen  
Wunsch. Bring ein HeileHeileGänschen und ein Pusten  
in einer kleinen Flasche. Saug mich an durch Vakuum.  
Um Fidibum. Um Fidibum. Saug mich an durch Vakuum.

Mia, bring mia was mit, wenn du wieder kommst,  
falls Du wieder kommst. Lass mich hier sein. Dein Koffer  
in Berlin, deine geregnete Rose, dein Lugosi-Sarg. Lass  
mich hier sein was du willst, von mir wolltest. Lass mich.

Für den Moment, an dem alles an Lichtern ausging,  
alles an Flaschen poppte, alles an Suppen wie Hecht  
vorbeizog. Lass mich in deinem Maoampapier warten,  
geschmiegt an die Kaumasse. Bringst mir ein Nikotinfilerl.  
Ein Papierl. Wickelst mich nicht a wengerl ein in deine  
Zigarette, dunkles Mädchen.

Schlosshundjauuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuln für die Daheim-  
gebliebenen. Wie ein Meerschweinchen frag ich dich nach  
dem Heu-te und Stroh-witwer, den du mir dalässt. Dessen  
Wunden ich lecke. Dessen Wirbel ich entheddern muss,  
damit sie wieder Sprossen auf der Kopfleiter werden. Der  
arme Kerl kann nicht mehr denken, seit du sagtest, heute  
und morgen nicht mehr. Ehrlich gar nicht mehr. Amen.  
Lieben war, wie jemanden im Schrank eingesperrt fest-  
halten und auf Lösegeld warten. Lieben ist wie Einbuch-  
tungen auf Mohnsamen mit der Zunge ertasten. Mit  
He-Man und She-Ra Tretboot fahren und Skeletors Boot  
rammen. Wie Meerschweinbeinchen sachte ziehen und  
ein Gurren hervorrufen. Brauseufos lutschen. Wenn wir  
uns abends über Polen hermachten, über Landstriche und  
Geschichten. War Mias Oma mia auch immer nahe. In dem  
Birkenwäldchen leg ich oft mein Herz in ein Kuckucksloch.  
Mia in Berlin. Wird wohl jonglieren, parlieren und irri-  
tieren mit dem Zigeunerblick und der spitzegeäumten  
Unterwäsche. Wird wohl, wird wohl. Wirf eine Flaschen-  
post in die Spree. Schreib den Ara[nora]namen darauf. Und für  
die Nächte fern, zäume Briefe den Schnuppen auf. Lass  
den Wind sie jagen, bis ich mich geflochten und fertig ge-  
kämmt. Weh, weh, Windchen. Sieh den Fallada, wie er  
dort hängt. Am Brandenburger Tor. Der Pferdekopf. Mia  
hüt eine Gans und schick eine Feder vom Bauch und eine  
mit einem dicken Kiel. Falls du wiederkommst. Alles merk ich  
mir. Naja, viel.

*Mia, bring me something,  
when you return,  
if you return.*

1 Bring me a heart. A little heart. For the right spot.  
To stop the bleeding of the leaking one. Bring a  
building block, a chemistry set. A cluster bomb. Bring  
an intention and a will and perhaps a  
5 wish. Bring a HealHealLittleGoose and a puff  
in a small bottle. Suck me in through a vacuum.  
Um fidibum. Um fidibum. Suck me in through a vacuum.

Mia, bring me something when you return,  
if you return. Let me be here. Your suitcase  
10 in Berlin, your rained rose, your Lugosi coffin. Let  
me be here what you want, wanted from me. Let me.

For that moment when all the lights went out.  
all the bottles popped, all the soups passed by  
like pike. Let me wait in your Maoam candy wrapper,  
15 snuggled up at the chewy mass. You bring me a nicotine filter.  
A paper. You wrap me not just little into your  
cigarette, dark girl.

Yooooooooowling like a castle dog for those who re-  
20 mained at home. Like a guinea pig I ask you for  
the to-day and grass widower, who you leave to me. Whose  
wounds I lick. Whose vertebrae I have to detangle,  
so that they become rungs on the head ladder again. The  
poor guy can't think since you said, not today  
and tomorrow no longer. Honestly, no more at all. Amen.  
25 Loving was, like keeping someone locked up in a  
closet and waiting for the ransom. Loving is like feeling out inden-  
tations on poppy seeds with your tongue. Riding on  
a pedal boat with He-Man and She-Ra and ramming Skeletor's  
boat. Pulling gently like little guinea pig legs and  
30 evoking a coo. Sucking on sherbet wafers. When we  
pounced on Poland in the evening, over stretches of land and  
stories. Mia's grandma was always close to me. In the  
little birch tree forest I often put my heart in a cuckoo's hole.  
Mia in Berlin. Will probably juggle, converse, irri-  
35 tate with her gipsy gaze and her lace-edged  
underwear. Probably will, probably will. Throw a message  
in a bottle into the Spree. Write the Ara[nora] name on it. And for  
the faraway nights far, bridle letters onto the falling stars. Let  
the wind chase them, 'til I have braided and finished com-  
bing myself. Blow, blow, little wind. Look at Fallada, how he  
40 hangs there. At the Brandenburg Gate. The horse's head. Mia  
tend to a goose und send a feather from its belly and one  
with a thick quill. If you come back. I will remember everything.  
Well, a lot.





# MIGRATION, CIRCULATION, DRIFT: TRANSLATION AND VISUALITY IN MODERNIST AND CONTEMPORARY POETRY

REBECCA BEASLEY

## **Poetry at large: the transnational imaginary**

In 1996 Arjun Appadurai published *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*. Drawing together work written over the previous eight years, he proposed a corrective to the pessimism of Max Weber, the Frankfurt School critics, and their followers regarding the effect of modernity on our subjective life. According to Appadurai, the twin forces of electronic media – able to reach a wider audience than ever before – and migration – dispersing nationalities and ethnic groups over great distances – had brought about an emphatically new stage, or form, of modernity, ‘modernity at large’. The distinctive feature of this new form of modernity was that imagination played a newly significant role in it: ‘The image, the imagined, the imaginary’, he wrote in the first chapter,

these are all terms that direct us to something critical and new in global cultural processes: *the imagination as a social practice*. No longer mere fantasy (opium for the masses whose real work is elsewhere), no longer simple escape (from a world defined principally by more concrete purposes and structures), no longer elite pastime (thus not relevant to the lives of ordinary people), and no longer mere contemplation (irrelevant for new forms of desire and subjectivity), the imagination has become an organized field of social practices, a form of work (in the sense of both labor and culturally organized practice), and a form of negotiation between sites of agency (individuals) and globally defined fields of possibility [...]. The imagination is now central to all forms of agency, is itself a social fact, and is the key component of the new global order. (Appadurai 1996, 31)

Rather than caged by “commoditization, industrial capitalism, and the generalized regimentation and secularization of the world”, the imagination has broken the bounds of the individual mind and the special space of “art, myth, and ritual” through the conditions created by electronic media for “collective reading, criticism, and pleasure” (Appadurai 1996, 31, 5, 8).

As these quotations suggest, the visual nature of much electronic media is important to Appadurai’s argument: the image is assumed to have a privileged connection to the imagination. Indeed, Appadurai defines such “mediascapes” as “image-centred, narrative-based accounts of strips of reality, and what they offer to those who experience and transform them is a series of elements (such as characters, plots, and textual forms) out of which scripts can be formed of imagined lives, their own as well as those of others living in other places” (Appadurai 1996, 35). Publishing these words in 1996 (and in fact the chapter first appeared as an article in 1990), Appadurai was inevitably concerned with media that now seem outdated if not yet obsolete – television, video, and cinema – but his argument has nevertheless been taken up as prescient of our contemporary experience of the movement of digital media over the internet.

It is also clearly relevant for our thinking about poetry in the digital age, in characterising the welcome opportunities for, first, moving the poet’s products out of their historical locations of court, salon, parlour and study to an unprecedented number and range of locations, and, second, transforming the nature of the poet’s materials, to include visual technologies with notable frequency. As Eduardo Kac remarks in the introduction to his anthology *Media Poetry*, “It is a unique sign of the new boundary-blurring condition of language-based media art that many works are equally comfortable in “visual art” or “creative writing” circuits – what makes this clearly different from 1960s conceptual art is the literary dimension of these works in direct engagement with the new cultural context of global digital networks” (Kac 2007, 8).

In these senses, digital poetry, while antithetical to the pessimistic forecasts of the early twentieth-century theorists of modernity Appadurai rebuts, might be seen as the realization of the dream of early twentieth-century literary modernism – or at least of one of its dreams. Modernist poets routinely turned to the model of the visual arts, and more generally to visual metaphors, yearning for an immediacy the visual seemed to represent, to

which the temporal art of poetry could only aspire. “Poetry should be an uninterrupted sequence of new images, or it is mere anaemia and green-sickness”, wrote Filippo Marinetti in 1912, and when Marinetti and his fellow Futurists visited London in 1913, poets and critics were as struck by the size of their audience as they were by their aesthetic experiments (Marinetti 1991, 93). Produced in a “spirit of fun and recklessness”, Futurist “poetry automatically regains something of its popular appeal”, wrote the poet, editor and bookseller, Harold Monro. “We desire to see a public created that may read verse as it now reads its newspapers” (Monro 1913, 265). For many modernist poets, that public was conceived as international. Indeed, during the last ten years, modernist critics have been much interested in exploring the contemporary critical concept of transnational poetics back to a modernist origin. In his manifesto article for teaching poetry transnationally, rather than divided into, for example, English, American, and Caribbean literature courses, Jahan Ramazani notes that “many of the key modernists were expatriates and exiles, transients and émigrés”, and that

the proliferation of cartography-traversing technologies such as the telephone, cinema, and radio, the increasing ease of travel by ship and by air, the massive migration of black North Americans from the rural south to the urban north, the circulation of avant-garde art and translations among European and North American cities, the rapid global movement of capital, the researches of globe-trotting anthropologists, the dramatic expansion of the British Empire across a quarter of the land’s surface by World War I, the emergence at the same time of the US as a new political and economic world power, all meant that even poets “at home” in America or Britain were coming into contact with images, peoples, arts, cultures, and ideas from across continents and even hemispheres. (Ramazani 2006, 333-334)

Visuality, popularity, transnationalism: this is not an uncontested characterisation of modernism’s dreams. For an influential strain of literary criticism in the 1980s and 1990s, modernism’s defining trait was its failure to engage with these cartography-traversing, mechanically-reproducing technologies

of the telephone, cinema, and radio. Such technologies were the province of the not-modernisms: the historical avant-garde and postmodernism.<sup>1</sup> But there is another objection to this liberatory visual-cultural, mass-cultural, transnational account of modernism that has more direct relevance for the themes of this volume, and it is an objection that suggests how we might refine and extend Appadurai's and Ramazani's accounts of the global and transnational, not only for modernism, but also for contemporary poetry. That objection concerns our inattention to certain formal properties of the products through which we encounter the global and the transnational.

Ramazani acknowledges that teaching a transnational poetics will inevitably reassert the national categories it aims to move beyond: "Viewing poets as creolizing Imagism or New Critical formalism, Euromodernism or Black Arts feminism requires ethnicizing and nationalizing writers and aesthetics, each of which results from a complex history of earlier creolizations". Here I want to explore the extent to which it also requires nationalizing the very transnationalism of modern poetry. For while few would argue with Ramazani's point that "the modernists translated their frequent geographic displacement and transcultural alienation into a poetics of bricolage and translocation, dissonance and defamiliarization" (Ramazani 2006, 353, 333), that mode of translation was, and is, itself informed by certain national imperatives.

### **The nationality of transnational poetry: Ezra Pound and American comparative literature**

I start my enquiry by looking back at a particularly relevant early twentieth-century attempt to find new methods with which to think about contemporary poetry. Just over a hundred years ago Ezra Pound published a series of essays under the title "I Gather the Limbs of Osiris" in the socialist periodical, the *New Age*. At the time, Pound still saw himself as an academic, if an unorthodox one: after leaving the University of Pennsylvania before the completion of his doctorate, he had had lecturing positions at a liberal arts college in Indiana and, after arriving in London, at the Regent Street Polytechnic. In 1910, just a year before his series appeared in the *New Age*, he had published his first book of criticism, based on his lectures, *The Spirit of Romance*, presenting himself on its title page as both academic – "Ezra Pound, M.A." – and poet – "Author of 'Personae' and 'Exultations'".

In “I Gather the Limbs of Osiris”, Pound proposed a “new method in scholarship”, one that will depart from what he characterises as “the prevailing mode of to-day – that is, the method of multitudinous detail”, and “the method of yesterday, the method of sentiment and generalisation” (1911b, 130). His aim is to understand and convey the “stages” by which poetry has “grown from what it was to what it is”, and to do so by reference to a broad range of geographical and historical examples (Pound 1911c, 179). In fact, this global perspective is what Pound cited four years later as his key contribution to the intellectual culture of his time: he had, he wrote, “an active sense not merely of comparative literature, but of the need for a uniform criticism of excellence based on world-poetry, and not of the fashion of any one particular decade of English verse, or even on English verse as a whole” (1911b, 130). What might this precedent have to tell us about finding a “new method” relevant for twenty-first century poetry?

Pound famously described his “new method” as “the method of Luminous Detail”, whereby the scholar presents a small number of carefully-chosen “facts”, examples or literary works that “give one a sudden insight into circumjacent conditions, into their causes, their effects, into sequence, and law”. As the prevalence of light metaphors suggests, this is a theory that privileges knowledge gained as if by looking, rather than reading. The light-giving detail is “illuminating” in the way that “a few days in a good gallery are more illuminating than years would be if spent in reading a description of these pictures”. And, confessing that he “dislike[s] writing prose”, Pound tells his readers that in this series of essays, he has substituted a verbal method with one that is metaphorically visual: “I have, if you will, hung my gallery, a gallery of photographs, of perhaps not very good photographs, but of the best I can lay hold of” (Pound 1911b, 130-31). The visual is consistently represented in Pound’s criticism as having a greater and more efficient explanatory power than the verbal, and the visual comparison of luminous details is intended to automatically yield a taxonomy of elements common to or distinct in each work, generating a new approach that can evaluate poetry, including contemporary poetry, across time and space, that can “weigh Theocritus and Mr Yeats with one balance”, as he’d written the year before (Pound 1910, vi). “I hope”, he concluded his second instalment, that “this sort of work may not fail utterly to be of service to the living art. For it is certain we have had no “greatest poet” and no “great

period” save at, or after, a time when many people were busy examining the media and the traditions of the art” (Pound 1911b, 131).

One imagines that Pound’s proposal of a series on “a new method in scholarship” would have seemed promising to the *New Age*, interested as it was, at just this moment, in transformations in theatre and the visual arts. But the contemporary relevance of the series was certainly not apparent in the first instalment. It consisted solely of Pound’s abridged translation of the Old English poem *The Seafarer*, followed by a “Philological note”, detailing particular word choices in the translation, and a brief history of the poem (Pound 1911a, 107).

The *New Age*’s editor, A. R. Orage, added an explanatory note to these unpromising columns with their singularly uninformative title: “Under this heading Mr. Pound will contribute expositions and translations in illustration of ‘The New Method’ in scholarship”. But what could this first illustration of the new method have meant to a *New Age* reader? If they had any knowledge of the poem, readers would have been struck by some idiosyncratic choices in translation and an impressionistic rendering of the alliterative measure, though – as Fred C. Robinson and Chris Jones have shown – the translation mistakes were largely consistent with scholarship of the period (Robinson 1982, 199-224 and Jones 2008, 29-30). It was not until the next issue that Pound provided his initial explanation of what the series was about, what the “new method” was, and a hint at the relevance of *The Seafarer*. There, Pound noted that in his own poetry, he had “sought in Anglo-Saxon a certain element which has transmuted the various qualities of poetry which have drifted up from the south, which has sometimes enriched and made them English, sometimes rejected them, and refused combination” (Pound 1911b, 131). And it is only in the fourth instalment (after a third that consisted of sonnets and ballate by the thirteenth-century Tuscan poet, Guido Cavalcanti) that Pound provides an indication of what his translations are intended to demonstrate:

Assume that, by the translations of ‘The Seafarer’ and of Guido’s lyrics, I have given evidence that fine poetry may consist of elements that are or seem to be almost mutually exclusive. In the canzoni of Arnaut Daniel we find a beauty, a beauty of elements almost unused in these two other very different sorts

of poetry [...]. In the translation (to follow next week) I give that beauty – reproduced, that is, as nearly as I can reproduce it in English – for what it is worth. (Pound 1911c, 179)

Together, these examples are designed to create “a sort of chemical spectrum of their art” (Pound 1911b, 131).

This new method of scholarship, then, is one above all of comparison: the scholar chooses the luminous details and puts them into a comparative relation, and the student compares them by... looking. Though Pound eventually provides some information about what the “beauties” of Daniel’s poetry are, the rhetoric of the series is that the comparison alone will reveal the “beauties” to the student. Here, of course, Pound is concerned with a critical method of comparing works by different authors, but he would shortly make comparison fundamental to his poetic practice too, first in his imagist poems and subsequently in *The Cantos*. Indeed, the implications for his own poetry are briefly mentioned when Pound remarks that he is seeking for his poetry one element in Anglo-Saxon, and other elements in the poetry of “the south”, that is in Provençal and Tuscan poetry: even at this stage, he conceives of his poetry as a mixture of discrete elements from different poetic traditions. In the late nineteen twenties and early nineteen thirties Pound renamed “the method of Luminous Detail” as “the ideogrammic method”, drawing on his imperfect but productive knowledge of Chinese, and by that point in his career he had turned what began as a critical tool into a poetic technique, juxtaposing distinct references, sections of text, non-transliterated script, and visual signs to suggest a relationship between them (Pound 1934, 8) (Fig.1 next page).

Looking at this later product of Pound’s critical “new method” in his poetic practice in *The Cantos* reminds us of how central visuality was to this conception from the beginning. His description of his examples in “I Gather the Limbs of Osiris” – “I have, if you will, hung my gallery, a gallery of photographs, of perhaps not very good photographs, but of the best I can lay hold of” – seems entirely transferrable to this poem, where the layout appears to do part of the poetic work, and it has frequently resulted in characterisations of the poem as a collage or hypertext. Marjorie Perloff, for example, makes the much-quoted observation that “Pound’s basic strategy in the *Cantos* is to create a flat surface, as in a cubist or early dada



止

chih in the 3rd/ tone  
and a radical.

Was not unanimous

'Αθήνα broke tie,

That is 6 jurors against 6 jurors

needed 'Αθήνα.

Right, all of it, was under Shang

save what came in Athens.

Y Yin, Ocellus, Erigena:

“All things are lights.”

Greek tags in Erigena's verses.

And when they bumped off Alexander in Babylon  
that wrecked, said Golievski “a good deal”.

Greece had no Quattrocento.

Justinian's codes inefficient

“abbiamo fatto un mucchio . . .

(a haystack of laws on paper)

Mus. viva voce:

“We ask 'em to settle between 'em.

If they can't, the State intervenes.”

They deny, of course, but it percolates,

Ocellus:

jih

日

hsin

新

the faint green in spring time.

The play shaped from *φλογιζόμενον*

*gospada* *Δηάνειρα*, *λαμπρά συμβαίνει*

Fig. 1: Ezra Pound: “Canto 87” (Pound 1994, 591).

collage, upon which verbal elements, fragmented images, and truncated bits of narrative, drawn from the most disparate contexts, are brought into collusion” (Perloff 1981, 181).<sup>2</sup> Tim Redman has argued that “*The Cantos* may be considered a protohypertext, a new poetic form intuited by its author, and that there may be a new kind of poetics, a poetics of hypertext, that offers a valuable way of approach to Pound’s difficult epic” (Redman 1997, 117). It is worth noting that two prominent new media poets, the digital poet John Cayley and the video and holographic poet Richard Kostelanetz, have also written on *The Cantos*.<sup>3</sup>

It is at this point – where we seem to have established both Pound’s theory of poetry and his practice as in the tradition of transnational poetry described by Ramazani, and even as foreshadowing an aesthetic version of the visual, transnational mediascapes described by Appadurai – that I want to halt to think about the limitations of tracing this genealogy for digital poetics and transnational poetics back to modernism, and particularly back to a Poundian modernism.<sup>4</sup>

Although Pound represents his ‘new method in Scholarship’ as new, in fact it has much in common with the discipline of comparative literature, and specifically comparative literature as practiced in the universities of the United States at the turn of the twentieth century. As Pound presented the “method of Luminous Detail” as hostile to both “the method of multitudinous detail” and “the method of sentiment and generalisation” (Pound 1911b, 131), turn-of-the-century American comparatists also envisaged that comparative literature would provide an alternative mode of scholarship from those offered by the philologists and their “generalist opposition”, to use Gerald Graff’s phrase (Graff 2007, 81). In 1896 the first professorial Chair in Comparative Literature in the United States, Arthur Marsh at Harvard, had represented comparative literature as “the true line of approach”, that would resolve the “doubt and hesitation” of, on the one hand, the philologists (“the men of science, sure of their linguistics, but uncertain of their aesthetics, treating literature as a *corpus vile* for linguistic illustration”) and, on the other, the generalists (“the representatives (often very imperfect ones) of the older tradition clamouring for the so-called literary teaching of literature, and endeavouring to win us to aesthetic appreciations”) (Marsh 1896, 160). In Pound’s “luminous details” and his aim to “weigh Theocritus and Mr Yeats with one balance” we can hear Mat-

threw Arnold's influence on American comparatists: Charles Mill Gayley, who taught one of the earliest comparative literature courses from 1889 at Berkeley, described the method of comparative literature as "marked out by Arnold, when he advocated the comparison of literary classics in one language, or in many, with a view to determining their relative excellence" (Gayley 1903, 58). Pound's echo of these American comparatists is hardly surprising, since we know that he encountered their critical works in his English Literary Criticism class at the University of Pennsylvania: Charles Mills Gayley's *An Introduction to the Methods and Materials of Literary Criticism*, for example, was one of the course's general readers.<sup>5</sup>

The point of returning Pound's "new method" to its disciplinary context is to draw attention to the fact that it is governed by a nationally and historically specific politics. Although, unlike their early French and German counterparts, American comparatists did not deploy comparative literature as a directly patriotic tool, they nevertheless deployed it indirectly. The new discipline seemed particularly well equipped to respond to the multi-national and polylingual culture of the United States, and it could also point towards the creation of a distinctively American literature that, in its fusion of diversity, could be simultaneously conceived as model for a future world literature. In the editorial of the first number of the short-lived *Journal of Comparative Literature*, George E. Woodberry, Professor of Comparative Literature at Columbia, and Chair of the first department of Comparative Literature in the United States wrote:

The parts of the world draw together, and with them the parts of knowledge, slowly knitting into that one intellectual state which, above the sphere of politics and with no more institutional machinery than tribunals of jurists and congresses of gentlemen, will be at last the true bond of the world. The modern scholar shares more than other citizens in the benefits of this enlargement and intercommunication, this age equally of expansion and concentration on the vast scale, this infinitely extended and intimate commingling of the nations with one another and with the past [...]. The emergence and growth of the new study known as Comparative Literature are incidental to the coming of this larger world and the entrance of schol-

ars upon its work; the study will run its course, and together with other converging elements goes to its goal in the unity of mankind found in the spiritual unities of science, art and love. (Woodberry 1903, 3-4)

The supposedly transnational poetics of *The Cantos* are, in fact, a representative work of early twentieth-century *American* comparative literature. The poem assembles touchstones in the Arnoldian sense, at first literary (Homer's *Odyssey* and *Iliad*, Browning's *Sordello*, Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, Dante's *Commedia*), subsequently more broadly cultural (the writings of Thomas Jefferson and John Adams, de Mailla's *Histoire generale de la Chine*, the *Shu Jing*, Alexander del Mar's *History of Monetary Systems*, Edward Coke's *Institutes of the Laws of England*). It traces themes and images across periods and cultures (monetary systems, good governance, metamorphoses, femme fatales), and it registers textual transmissions and tracks etymologies (Divus's Latin translation of the *Odyssey* in Canto 1, "Eleanor, ἑλέναυς and ἐλέπτολις" in Canto 2, *noigandres* in Canto 20). Like comparative literature, it is conceived, at least initially, as an argument against nationalism and provincialism: the protagonists affirmed by the poem – Odysseus, Eleanor of Aquitaine, Sigismondo Malatesta and Jefferson--are travellers between nations, and when we first encounter a speaker we can identify with the poet, he appears as a tourist in Venice. And in the paradisaical sections of the poem – the sections Pound planned to lead to a culmination and an end to the poem, – we find images of "the parts of the world draw[n] together" (Froula 1984, 18-20), to return to Woodberry's terms. Initially based on the poetry of the Renaissance Latinists Pound had described in *The Spirit of Romance*, but also drawing on the work of Ernest Fenollosa on Chinese language culture, on Dante's *Paradiso* and Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, the paradisaical sections of *The Cantos* portray a transcendent sphere in which source materials from discrete national literatures brought into the comparative text, which are precisely delineated in other parts of the poem, become less easily distinguished, fused into what Pound thought of as pure poetry, "poetic utterness" (Pound 1908, 446). The characteristic imagery of Pound's paradisaical sections, translucency, glitter, "ply over ply", colours expressed as doubled ("green-gray", "salt-white", "glare-purple") conveys heterogeneity fused into harmony: a portrait of an ideal fu-

ture that models, as Kathleen Pyne writes of American impressionist painting, “a harmonious society that could embrace diversity in its unity” (Pyne 1996, 3). *The Cantos*, like many modernist works, draws on sources from different cultures and in different languages – in that sense it is “transnational” – but what I want to insist on is that its mode of bringing these sources together, its *form*, is a variety of specifically American comparative literature. In Pound’s poetry and in Woodberry’s call to arms we see the dream of the American modernist poet and the comparative literary critic to synthesise cultures and to change the world. Visual metaphors connoting the clarity and efficiency of textual comparison are embedded in this project, from Arnold’s touchstones to Pound’s “gallery of paintings” and his ideogrammic method.

### **“Words are a matter of shaking”: Caroline Bergvall’s *Drift***

How might thinking about modernism in this way inform our interpretation of contemporary poetry? Caroline Bergvall’s most recent poetic work, *Drift*, uses *The Seafarer* as a template for its two products, a performance in collaboration with a percussionist and artist, and a book. The book consists of six sections of text: a translation and poetic reworking of *The Seafarer*, also using parts of Norse and Icelandic sagas; quotation from a report on the 2011 incident in which a boat of African refugees trying to reach Lampedusa from Libya were left to die; loose translations from the Old Norse poem *Hávamál*; a diary, or “Log”, of the process of *Drift*’s production, and two prose poems on the letter thorn (þ) from the Old English, Old Norse and Icelandic alphabets.

Bergvall’s use of *The Seafarer* has something in common with Pound’s, and a comparison with his use of the *Odyssey* at the beginning of *The Cantos* is even more apposite. Both poets reach back to an ancient literary text to deploy the common trope of the difficult sea journey as an analogy for poetic endeavour. In the “Log”, Bergvall remarks that “the Seafarer’s stark, repetitive and sorrowful beating at the waves and at the soul resonates with me in more ways than one” (Bergvall 2014, 130), and though the “Log” is not explicit, it is clear that these include being, like the poem, a product of the North, being, like the speaker, personally estranged from her home (Bergvall refers to the breakup of her relationship during the process of writing the poem), and being, like the speaker and in some ways the

poem, a migrant between cultures and languages. But she also notes that the analogy between the poet and the seafarer has become more strained as transport technologies have changed:

These days travelling great distances by sea is mainly done for luxurious leisure, or as a last resort. It is the last option. How many overfilled open boats fleeing war zones and political oppression have resorted to dangerous, clandestine crossings of the Mediterranean Sea, of the Sicily Channel, of the Aegean sea, of the Caribbean sea, of the Red Sea, of the Gulf of Thailand, of the South China Sea. (Bergvall 2014, 148)

Luxurious leisure has no place in *Drift*, and Bergvall, unlike Pound, is not interested in exploring the position of poet-hero. Her poet-seafarer, as the title of the book and performance makes clear, is not going home to Ithaca, nor moving towards a final paradisaic resting place; her destination, if she has one, is obscure. For Bergvall, *The Seafarer* thus provides the opportunity to explore one of Appadurai's two key forces of modernity: migration.

*Drift* is just as interested in Appadurai's other force, the ability of electronic media to capture and transmit images globally. The report on the Libyan "left-to-die-boat", as it was called in the media, demonstrated that it was seen and photographed, in distress, from close proximity by a number of vessels and aircraft, including military vessels and aircraft, none of whom rescued the dying refugees. After about twelve hours, a patrol aircraft took a photograph of the ship. At the end of the first day a helicopter appeared, "I think I saw them take pictures. I think I saw a photo camera or something like that", said Daniel Haile Gebre, one of the boat's nine survivors. On the sixth day a military vessel came close, "The people on the boat took pictures, nothing else". (Bergvall 2014, 76, 80).<sup>6</sup> *Drift* highlights the fact that the production and circulation of images does not itself build community and enable empathy on the Appadurain model. This camera eye is the eye of state surveillance, an eye that either does not see effectively, or does not respond emphatically to what it sees. Looking, for Bergvall, does not connote, as it does for Pound, efficiency and clarity, the immediate acquisition of knowledge. Images in this volume are hard to make out, hard to understand, opaque. The quotations

from the report are preceded by images derived from a photograph taken of the refugees' boat by a French aircraft that reported it to Rome maritime rescue on the first day of the journey. The first is the photograph rendered in black and white (Fig. 2), and the next three are magnified versions (Figs 3, 4, 5): we look more closely but we see less and less clearly. Only when we consult the original colour image in the source report is *Driff's* photograph legible (Fig. 6).



Fig. 2: Bergvall (2014, 60-61).

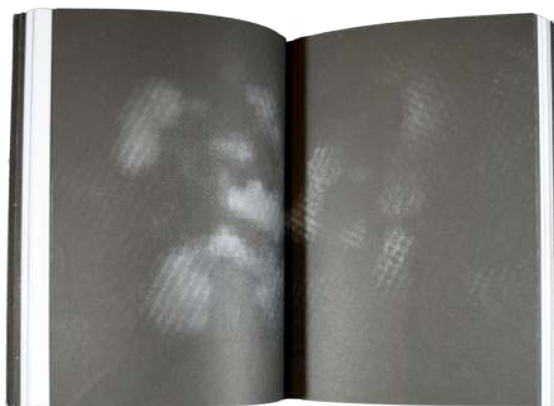


Fig. 4: Bergvall (2014, 64-65).



Fig. 3: Bergvall (2014, 62-63).



Fig. 5: Bergvall (2014, 66-67).

## AIRCRAFT SIGHTING

On 27 March at 14:55 GMT, a French aircraft informed Rome MRCC of the sighting of a boat with about fifty persons on-board. The aircraft established the position of the boat and took a picture of the vessel that was sent to Rome MCRR.



Fig. 7. Picture taken by the French aircraft and sent to Rome MRCC.

Fig. 6: Heller et al (2012, 52).

These are images of migration, but this is horrifically failed migration: if this journey was inspired by the circulation of images of other, better, lives in the way Appadurai describes, there is a bitter irony in those better lives being kept from their imaginers' by the circumstances of a journey resolutely non-modern in its technologies, even while monitored, and turned



into imagery, by modern technology. In the “Log”, without commenting on the parallel between the “left-to-die-boat” and *The Seafarer*, Bergvall lists the conditions of “Medieval navigation”, most of which were also the conditions of these twenty-first century refugees after the first day of their journey, when the boat’s captain threw his GPS, satellite phone and compass into the sea to avoid identification as a smuggler (“no engines/ no fuel/ no magnetic compasses/ no sea charts [...]” (Bergvall 2014, 160)).

Bergvall’s meditations on migration and communication are also explored metapoetically, and just as Pound turned to *The Seafarer* for its place at a point of departure for the English language, so does Bergvall approach this text for its linguistic significance. Both put the poem in comparison with other works – both work comparatively – but with different aims. Pound approaches *The Seafarer* as the oldest poem in English, an English version of the *Odyssey*, as his university textbook told him, in order to find “a certain element” particular to Old English literature, a “beauty” distinct from the beauties of the medieval poetry of Southern Europe (Jones 2008, 27). Bergvall, half-Norwegian and not educated in a nineteenth-century philological tradition, does not read the poem as an originary moment for English but rather as a crucible for a mixture of languages. But it is a mixture from which she is estranged: despite her stated attraction to the poem she confesses, early on in the project, that

in its original language the text evades me nearly completely. I stumble on the largely incomprehensible quality of the Old English language, the obsolete letters, the pervasive syntactical declension, its internal poetic rhyming and chain of alliterations, the repetitive and compact narration, very little of which can be accessed via contemporary English. Indeed at times it feels easier to think of it in relation to historical Norwegian, another language I know next to nothing about. (Bergvall 2014, 130)

Bergvall finds herself, figuratively, “at sea” working with *The Seafarer*, lost in what she calls a fog, without a compass. Her solution is to allow herself to “drift” on its language, working parts of the text through by sound association. “By engaging with the source text in a loose homophonic

call and response, I can both cut away from the less yielding aspects of this transhistoric contact and value the strongly sound-led rules of the original”, she writes, “I pretend to a possible one-to-one sound-to-sound assimilations, indulge in false friends and fake slippages, flatten out etymologies and historic developments” (Bergvall 2014, 144). Her method is immediately apparent when we compare quotations from three versions of *The Seafarer*: an edition of the Old English poem, Pound’s translation, and Bergvall’s.

Nap nihtscua, norþan sniwde,	Neareth nightshade, snoweth from north,	dark nihtscua nightsky nightclouds
hrim hrusan bond, hægl feol on eorþan,	Frost froze the land, hail fell on earth then,	shadowy northan snows earthless orphans
corna caldast. For þon cnyssað nu	Corn of the coldest. Nathless there knocketh now	hurdled in containers noodled on plastic beach in the corner coldest of the storm. [...]
heortan geþohtas þæt ic hean streamas,	The heart’s thought that I on high streams	Thats why crossing high streams on gebattered ships mind moves nomad with all tha t-tossing
sealtyþa gelac sylf cunnige –	The salt-wavy tumult traverse alone.	That’s why never one so proud and bold what goes seafaring without mægaworry ohman of
monað modes lust mæla gehwylce	Moaneth always my mind’s lust	being broken into code Ferð to feran far to fare Ferð to feran feor to go further heonan further
ferð to feran, þæt ic feor heonan	That I fare forth, that I afar hence	hereon go forth Farout to the four winds to the outlands Trip it journey wayfaring outvoyage to
eþeodigra eard gesece –	Seek out a foreign fastness.	geseek others plucked from this eard this earp this harp ok the bearded geese Blow wind blow, anon am I
(Gordon 1996, 38)	(Pound 1911a, 107)	(Bergvall 2014, 48-49)

The fact that *Drift* was conceived for oral performance and for book publication enables Bergvall to explore both oral and graphic instances of language. In the *Seafarer* section of *Drift*, she interpolates a section of the Laxdæla saga describing the sailors losing their way in the fog, finding themselves in the condition of “hafville”, the Old Norse word for having no sense of direction. This is depicted orally (sounds move between words or disappear) and graphically (space replaces them). As Bergvall struggles with the opacity of her source texts, so the sailors struggle to see through the fog, so we

struggle to interpret their language – or rather, as we are made very much aware, Bergvall’s version of their language – until only isolated glimpses of letters make their way through to us (Figs. 7, 8). In performance the “t” at the end of the section becomes a cloud of one letter (Fig. 9).

The third textual section of the volume, “Shake”, made up of loose translations from the poems of *Håvamål*, reflects directly on *Drift*’s representation of language:

Language started shaking  
ok the day started shaking  
ok words are a matter of shaking  
ok openly handled  
ok ok turn gold to goats  
(Bergvall 2014, 108)

What is language but a shaking up of sounds and signs? Gold can turn to goat with an infinitesimal vocal and visible change, the language of *The Seafarer* shakes into the Norwegian of Bergvall’s father or the English of her adopted country. But this stanza is more than a description: it is a manifesto. When faced by change, especially a change of location, when migrating, we might seek to stabilise ourselves within familiarity:

Here is ok  
mine home embodies ok  
walk inside your own walk  
sit inside your own seat  
talk within your own voice  
spread within your own shape  
(Bergvall 2014, 107)

but the poem rejects familiarity and instead concludes by advocating destabilizing, *hafville*, drift:

Let the tides shake your life  
let your life shake the ground  
until your bones are bonedust  
until your smile is smiledust

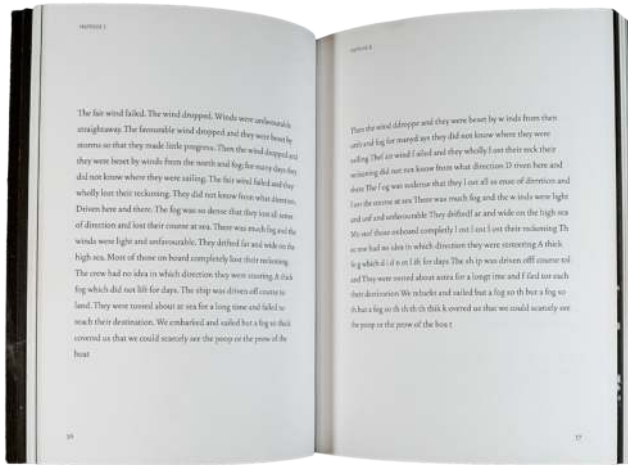


Fig. 7: Bergvall (2014, 36-37).

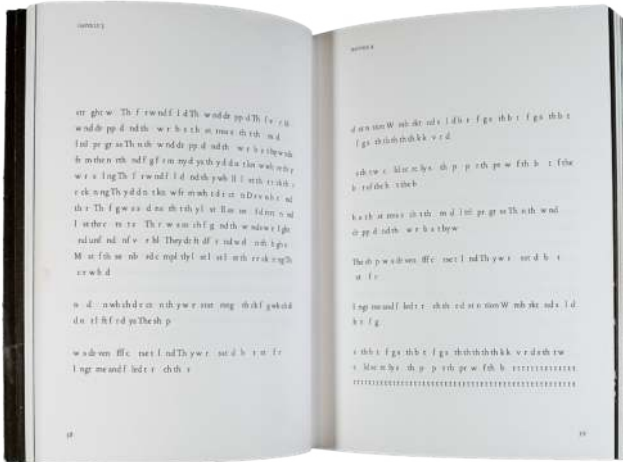


Fig. 8: Bergvall (2014, 38-39).



Fig. 9: Bergvall performing *Drift*. Photographed by Josh Redman for *Penned in the Margins*.

until your courage is delivered  
ok ok until it is done.  
(Bergvall 2014, 110)

In *Drift*, comparison between discrete elements is not a process of synthesis, fusion, aspiring towards a single world culture, as it is in Pound's poetry or early twentieth-century American comparative literature. Difference is here retained and valued, the opaque and the foreign are let in. "Shake" ends with increasingly illegible drawings of the "thorn", the letter that comes to signify the resistance of Anglo-Saxon and Old Norse from Bergvall's knowledge of English and Norwegian.

### **The poet's version: poetry as translation**

In the "Log" detailing the construction of *Drift*, Bergvall writes,

To remind myself that this project is not an exercise in translation, however closely I work with the original text. It is a template for writing. And for excavating language. For finding the teeth of my own text, for locating its workable memory trails. Bizarrely it has also become a template for tackling the painful obtuse persistence of the unfolding events in my life. (Bergvall 2014, 151)

Bergvall's reluctance to think about *Drift* in terms of translation is instructive: she is resisting, of course, associations between translation and secondariness, equivalence, fluency, and transparency. But *Drift* is a translation, or several translations, and I want to conclude by suggesting that it is precisely in thinking about *Drift* as translation that we find some of its most valuable lessons.

Translations like *Drift* work productively against the conventional instrumental model in which the translation is understood to simply transfer an invariant contained in the source text. Lawrence Venuti calls such anti-instrumental translations "poet's versions", texts deriving from a specified source, but often departing so "widely from that source as to constitute a wholesale revision that answers primarily to the poet-translator's literary interests". Venuti traces this form of translating to Pound,

and specifically to his version of *The Seafarer* – possibly the first “poet’s version” as he defines it – and he assigns the form greater ethical value than conventional translations, because in “poet’s versions” we are made aware that translation is always an interpretation. (Venuti 2011, 230-231) He describes the process in this way:

The translator inscribes an interpretation by applying a category that mediates between the source language and culture, on the one hand, and the translating language and culture, on the other, a method of transforming the source text into the translation. This category consists of interpretants, which may be formal or thematic. Formal interpretants may include a concept of equivalence, such as a semantic equivalence based on philological research or dictionaries, or a concept of style, a distinctive lexicon and syntax related to a genre or discourse. Thematic interpretants are codes: values, beliefs, and representations that may be affiliated to specific social groups and institutions; a discourse in the sense of a relatively coherent body of concepts, problems, and arguments; or a particular interpretation of the source text that has been articulated independently in commentary. The modern poet’s version, for example, often begins with a specific formal interpretant, a distinctive poetics or a preexisting translation by another hand, both of which are simultaneously thematic, encoded by the repertoire of topics that the versioning poet has treated in his or her poetry or by the previous translator’s interpretation which undergoes revision according to a different set of interpretants applied by the poet. (Venuti 2011, 236)

Venuti reminds us here that a translation’s interpretative work occurs not only in the translation of words, syntax and metrical patterns, but also in the translation of forms and themes. As Venuti points out, even the “concept of equivalence” is a formal interpretant, a culturally-specific lens through which a translation is made. Similarly, our concepts of the image and of visuality, via which modernity is “at large”, as well as the content of images themselves, are culturally and historically specific interpretants.

So too are the concepts of the transnational and the comparative that Ramazani and Pound advocate, as well as their more obviously specific ingredients. I have defined Bergvall's "poet's version" primarily in the ways that it departs from the codes of Poundian modernism, particularly in its rejection of the early twentieth-century concept of comparative literature, and of the visual as an unproblematic alibi for knowledge. In 2011 Bergvall defined this departure in her remark that she had been "thinking a lot about questions of cultural hybridity or mixed linguistic work, not as a utopian bypassing of identity into an idealized babel patchwork, but rather as punctual, productive ruptures from the monolingual citizen or the monolingual text or its nationalist demands"; she cited Gayatri Spivak's "transnational literacy" and Edouard Glissant's "poetics of relation" as productive tools (Kinnahan 2011, 243).<sup>7</sup> This attention to the cultural specificity of formal and thematic codes is essential not only in reading translations, but in understanding literature and culture more generally. Any aesthetic of contemporary poetry, where remediation and translation have become so important, and whose authors and audiences are ever less mono-lingual and mono-cultural, must be productively informed by conceiving of poetry itself as a historically and culturally specific translation, as indeed a "poet's version".

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## Notes

- 1 Particularly influential were Berman (1983), Bürger (1984) and Huyssen (1986).
- 2 See also Perloff (1986), Altieri (1984), Clearfield (1984, 143), Korg (1989), and Laughlin (1987, 107).
- 3 See Cayley (1982-3), (1984), (1985), and (1995). Richard Kostelanetz has published reviews of *The Cantos* (in *Commonweal*, July 28, 1972), *Ezra Pound and the Visual Arts*, ed. by Harriet Zinnes (in *New York Times Book Review*, 18 January 1981), and *Pound/Cummings: The Correspondence of Ezra Pound and E. E. Cummings*, ed. by Barry Ahearn (in *Spring. The Journal of the E.E. Cummings Society*, 1998, Number 7).
- 4 Pound has been prominent in discussions of transnational modernism: as well as Ramazani, see Yunte Huang (2002), and Daniel Katz (2007).
- 5 Pound: “College Notes: Literary Criticism ms. notes”.
- 6 Bergvall here quotes and paraphrases Charles Heller et al (2012, 20 & 22).
- 7 See Bergvall (2009, 8), Spivak (2000, 123) and Glissant (1997).

## **ON THE DANGER OF PUSHING POETRY TOWARDS MUSIC**

**The successes and failures of Hugo Ball, René Ghil,  
and Stéphane Mallarmé**

PETER DAYAN

This essay concerns a trap for poetry that was uncovered a century ago. It might legitimately be asked why the anatomy of this trap might be worth talking about in the context of a research project on contemporary poetry. After all, there have been some decisive changes since the 1960s in the range of aesthetic positions available to poets, therefore in the very definition of poetry; are the peculiar perils internal to the earlier period's poetics still relevant? As I wrote the paper on which this essay is based, for the conference in Aalborg "Poetry - a genre in expansion?" in December 2013, I was keenly aware of this question. Not being myself an expert on the expanding range of contemporary poetry, I realised I would have to wait for an answer until I had heard the other papers at the conference.

When I heard those papers, I realised, to my great relief, that the threat posed by music to poetry remains as alive as ever. The definitions of poetry that emerged, implicitly or explicitly, from the fascinating variety of types of work presented at the conference, frequently threw into sharp relief precisely the problems of situating poetry at the borders of language which my own paper had sought to clarify. Discussions around those problems were not only among the liveliest at the conference; they were also among those that drew in the greatest range of contributions. So I have allowed myself to believe that the trap of music remains an ever present danger for poetry. This, I should confess, is what my research over the previous two decades had led me to expect. Starting from the Romantic period and working forward in time, I have been struck by the extraordinary durability and invariability of the relationship between poetry and music, and the model of artistic reception that it invites; a model that has varied far less than we would like to think over the past two hundred years.

But if the relationship between poetry and music has not fundamentally changed, critical perspectives on it certainly have changed, and with them,

poetic practices. Those changes have generally been driven, since the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, by poets reflecting on the ways in which their words signify. They were not, it must be emphasized, contesting or even questioning what actually *constitutes* poetry; they continued to accept that poetry generally consists of the works previously defined as such, plus, of course, they trusted, their own. Rather, they were contesting what they saw as an incorrect alignment of poetic reading practices with the reading practices which had become the common currency of democratic mercantile society. They were reclaiming the specificity, the difference, of the poetic word. And no statement of that difference could be clearer or more far-reaching than the definition of Dada given by Hugo Ball in his first Dada manifesto, read out at the first Dada soirée, on 14 July (Bastille Day, appropriately enough), 1916.

Dada ist eine neue Kunstrichtung. Das kann man daran erkennen, daß bisher niemand etwas davon wußte und morgen ganz Zürich davon reden wird. Dada stammt aus dem Lexikon. Es ist furchtbar einfach. Im Französischen bedeutet's Steckenpferd. Im Deutschen heißt's Addio, steigt mir bitte den Rücken runter, auf Wiedersehen ein ander Mal! Im Rumänischen: »Ja wahrhaftig, Sie haben recht, so ist's. Jawohl, wirklich. Machen wir.« Und so weiter.

Ein internationales Wort. Nur ein Wort und das Wort als Bewegung. Sehr leicht zu verstehen.<sup>1</sup>

(Dada is a new direction for art. This is plain from the fact that until now no one knew anything about it and tomorrow all Zurich will be talking about it. Dada comes from the dictionary. It's fearfully simple. In French it means hobby-horse. In German it means Addio, be so kind as to get off my back, goodbye and see you later. In Rumanian: Yes indeed, you are right, that is how it is. Absolutely, really. Let's do it. And so on.

An international word. Just a word and the word as a movement. Very easy to understand.)

Dada, says Ball, is a word. Very easy to understand. An international word; a word which makes sense in many languages, but does not have an orig-

inal home in any one of them. It is in the first place a collection of four letters – or perhaps four phonemes (and we will later see that the distinction matters, even though I am going to ignore it for a while) – a collection of four letters, not a link between those four letters and any specific sense. That is what makes Dada such a threat to traditional models of poetic composition. And the key to understanding that threat is a notion of translation which has now become unfashionable.<sup>2</sup>

The practice of poetic translation, to all poets before Dada and to many since, is predicated on the idea that the identity of a poem depends in some essential (though never defined) way on the sense of its words, and that the sense of words can remain more or less constant when the physical form of those words is completely changed in interlingual translation. Poe wrote *The Raven*; Mallarmé (like Baudelaire) translates it as *Le Corbeau*; and we, like Mallarmé (and Baudelaire), generally seem happy to believe that in a sense which is not worth contesting, the French translation is the same poem, even though the two titles have few letters in common, and even though Poe's poem is very conspicuously in rhyming verse, whereas Baudelaire's and Mallarmé's translations are in prose. The word Dada, on the other hand, unlike the word "Raven" and the poem "The Raven", cannot keep its identity if its letters are changed. It cannot be translated, because its identity is defined by its letters, not by its meaning. So we could say that it is not really a sign in the generally accepted linguistic sense; it is not a meeting-point of signifier and signified within a given language system. Rather, as an international word, it is an object to which many different signifieds can be and have been attached, in many languages, ranging, as Ball says, from a hobby-horse to the best lily-milk soap in the world, and none of those signifieds is more correct or more plausible than any other. That is how the word constitutes a movement. It indicates a new perspective on the poetic word: the word as object, rather than as window onto a meaning; as an object whose identity depends not on its translatable sense, but on its physical presence as notation on the page or as sound in performance.

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One powerful impulse behind this redefinition of the poetic word was certainly the Dada reaction against the kind of rational sense-making which,

according to the Dadaists, had led to the insanities of the War. A second impulse, however, could be described as an attraction rather than a repulsion. By 1916, it had been exerting a gravitational pull on poetry for more than half a century, and Ball was certainly well aware of this. There had been since Romantic times an art in Europe whose building-blocks were, like the Dada word, to be received, not as windows onto a fixed translatable meaning, but rather as objects whose identity depended on their physical presence as notation on the page or as sound in performance: music, the music of the great Romantic and post-Romantic tradition, running, let us say, from Chopin, Schumann and Berlioz to Debussy, Schoenberg and Stravinsky. For all these composers, the identity of the musical work was not accessible to any kind of reduction to signifieds, and the work was for that reason not translatable. Certainly, it was generally accepted, by composers, poets, and critics alike, that people, when they listen to a piece of music, do see a sense in it, which they generally receive in the form of images or narratives. These images and narratives are themselves quite translatable, since they can be presented in words. Composers and performers cannot stop this process from taking place, and the general consensus was that they should not try to. Nonetheless, the composer can and probably should try to remind us that these translatable images and narratives do not constitute the identity of the work. In exactly the same way, the various senses of the word Dada, in various languages, can be translated; “Steckenpferd” is a hobby-horse, “Addio” means goodbye. But the word Dada itself cannot be. That which gives it its identity is beyond translation. And this is what, for Ball, gives it its force, as determining a “neue Kunstrichtung”.

In short: music can always be received as having a meaning, just as the word Dada can; but if we are to appreciate the distinctive character of art, we must recognise the contingent nature of that meaning, and its irrelevance to the true identity of the work. Composers, working with the aesthetic of music as untranslatable object, had over the previous century and a half developed a technique for presenting to the public this peculiar status of the relationship between sense and the work of art. They did it through a dual process of initially suggesting what a piece of music might mean to them personally; then indicating, usually with some kind of impatience or irony, and always while highlighting the differences between the functioning of music and that of language, narrative, or image-crea-

tion, that this personal meaning should not be taken as in any way essential to the understanding of the music. Indeed, most of these composers have a very characteristic jokey and provocative way of presenting their own interpretations of their music, which, it seems to me, modern critics often fail to appreciate. There are innumerable examples of this. I will allow myself to cite an unusually late one, since it concerns a composer esteemed by Ball, whose work was performed at a Zurich Dada soirée. I am grateful to Ruth Jacobs for bringing it to my attention.

If one looks at critical commentaries on Schoenberg's string trio, one invariably finds it said that Schoenberg told his friends (including Thomas Mann) that the work reflected or depicted his recent experience of suffering a heart attack, and the hospital treatment he received for it (Bailey 1984, 154-156). But the only authentic sentence we have penned by Schoenberg himself on the subject is this:

Das Trio, von dem ich vielen Leuten erzählt habe, dass es eine "humoristische" Darstellung meiner Krankheit ist, habe ich, bald nachdem ich aus dem Argsten heraus war, angefangen. (Bailey 1984, 152)<sup>3</sup>

I began work on the Trio shortly after I was over the worst; I have told many people the tale that it is a "humorous" representation of my illness.

The word "humoristische" in that sentence, which Schoenberg himself puts into what appear to be "scare quotes", is perplexing enough; why should the representation of a near-fatal illness and its distressing aftermath be humorous? Could it be that when one tries to consider music as representation, even humour cannot be taken seriously? In any case, it is at least clear that Schoenberg is keeping a certain critical distance from the notion of the trio as representation – a distance that is also present in the expression "vielen Leuten erzählt habe", which suggests that he has been, as it were, telling people a story, spinning them a yarn, rather than furnishing them with an objective truth. It is well known, as Bailey shows (Bailey 1984, 159-163), that Schoenberg distrusted programme music. It is equally obvious that he knew people always want to associate music with programmes. So what he



does, in exactly the same way as Stravinsky and Debussy,<sup>4</sup> is to give programmes with one hand while taking them away with the other, irony and humour being an essential part of the technique.

Hugo Ball was an admirer of all three composers, and my feeling is that he understood very well the nature of the relationship between music and meaning that informs their aesthetic. He is also himself a master of irony, of suggesting meanings and then making it clear that no meaning has an essential relationship to the identity of the work of art. The word “Dada” could be said to operate like a musical work in that it can be received as having a meaning, but no specific meaning carries a privileged link to its true identity and value – and whenever its creator speaks of its meanings, he is clearly enough spinning yarns and being “humorous”. But Hugo Ball did not stop at the word Dada in his pursuit of a poetry whose identity, like that of music, depends on sound or notation rather than meaning. He also wrote, in 1916 and 1917, half a dozen “Klanggedichte”<sup>5</sup> or sound poems, made up of words which, like “Dada”, are not simply attached to a sense in any one language. He read one of these poems out at the same first Dada soirée as the manifesto I have been quoting, describing it on the programme (Bolliger 1994, 255) as “Verse ohne Worte”. He thus situates his new poetry, as Verlaine had with his *Romances sans paroles* in 1874, within the movement begun by Mendelssohn’s “Lieder ohne Worte”: their art needs words in one sense, but refuses them in another, and it is up to us to distinguish between the two. He had already read out three of these poems a few weeks earlier at an evening in the Cabaret Voltaire, which he describes in his published diary *Die Flucht aus der Zeit*. And in that description, he clearly recognises the pull of the musical in the performance of these poems.

Ich hatte jetzt rechts am Notenständer «Labadas Gesang an die Wolken» und links die «Elefantenkarawane» absolviert und wandte mich wieder zur mittleren Staffelei, fleißig mit den Flügeln schlagend. Die schweren Vokalreihen und der schleppende Rhythmus der Elefanten hatten mir eben noch eine letzte Steigerung erlaubt. Wie sollte ich’s aber zu Ende führen? Da bemerkte ich, daß meine Stimme, der kein anderer Weg mehr blieb, die uralte Kadenz der priesterlichen Lamentation annahm, jenen Stil des Meßgesangs, wie er

durch die katholischen Kirchen des Morgen- und Abendlandes wehklagt.

Ich weiß nicht, was mir diese Musik eingab. (Ball 1946, 99-100)

(I had got through “Ladaba’s Song to the Clouds”, on the music stand to my right, and “Elephant caravan” on my left; now I turned back to the central easel, flapping my wings industriously. The heavy sound rows and the dragging rhythms of the elephants had given me a chance to build towards a climax. But how to proceed thence to a conclusion? Then I noticed that my voice, for which there was no other way forward, was taking on the ancient cadence of priestly lamentation, that style of singing in high mass, as it resounds in sorrow through the Catholic churches of East and West.

I do not know what inspired this music in me.)

Ball’s stated ignorance of the origin of this music is the key to an entire aesthetic. Where, indeed, did the music come from? And where did it leave Ball’s poetry? Before returning to those questions, I think it will be worth looking back a couple of decades at what happened when another poet, this time a Frenchman, had tried in a rather different way, and without the benefit of Ball’s divine ignorance, to write poetry that worked like music.

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René Ghil (1862-1925) is one of the most famous failures in the history of French poetry. His work is almost universally held to be deadly serious, deadly dull and numbingly boring. He remains famous mainly as the result of a well-known polemic with Mallarmé on the subject of the proper relationship between poetry and music, which is splendidly recounted in Joseph Acquisto (2006). To put it simply: Ghil maintained that poetry could work in the same way as music, essentially as sound rather than sense; that the poet should therefore focus on the sound of his verse, equat-

ing certain sounds to certain musical effects; furthermore, that the equation between those sounds of words and musical effects could be analysed and demonstrated scientifically. Mallarmé, on the other hand, remained convinced that the sense of words was vital to the effect of poetry. Not because he thought poetry's task was to communicate a message – he certainly did not think that – but because to him, the essence, the identity of any work of art, whether it be poetry or music, is not, in the last resort, to be located in its sound or in its notation; it is something that we sense beyond the physical substance of the work. When we read a poem, in that process of sensing, the meanings of words play a rôle, whether we like it or not.

Parler n'a trait à la réalité des choses que commercialement:  
en littérature, cela se contente d'y faire une allusion ou de  
distraindre leur qualité qu'incorporera quelque idée.

À cette condition s'élançe le chant, qu'une joie allégée.

Cette visée, je la dis Transposition – Structure, une autre.

L'œuvre pure implique la disparition élocutoire du poète, qui cède l'initiative aux mots, par le heurt de leur inégalité mobilisés; ils s'allument de reflets réciproques comme une virtuelle traînée de feux sur des pierreries, remplaçant la respiration perceptible en l'ancien souffle lyrique ou la direction personnelle enthousiaste de la phrase. (Mallarmé 2003, 210-211)

(To speak relates to the reality of things only commercially: in literature, it contents itself with alluding thereto or with distracting their quality which will be incorporated by some idea.

This the condition for song to rise up, that a joy lightened.

The pure work implies the elocutory disappearance of the poet, who cedes the initiative to words mobilised by the clash of their inequality; they light up with reciprocal reflections as

of a virtual trail of fire over gemstones, replacing the breath formerly perceptible in lyrical inspiration or the direction given to the sentence by personal enthusiasm.)

It would be too easy to read the first sentence of this famous passage as suggesting that the meaning of words is irrelevant to poetry. In fact, Mallarmé is telling us quite clearly that literary language, while its central concern is certainly not the reality of things, can and does allude to that reality. Indeed, it is allusion (or what he elsewhere calls evocation, or suggestion) that allows song to be released; and allusion, like evocation or suggestion, works with the meaning of words.

Similarly, it would be too easy to read the last sentence of the above quotation as implying that the structure of the poem is something independent of the meaning of its words. On the contrary: poetry that aims for structure gives the initiative to words, and allows them to reflect upon each other; and that reflection is crucially dependent upon their sense.

Ghil's poems, like Mallarmé's, are made out of words; not international words like Dada, but recognisably French words. They do not serve, within the poem, to describe the real world, obviously enough. But just as obviously, they are full of allusions, which are incorporated, as Mallarmé would expect, by an idea; allusions that depend on their referential meaning, incorporated by an idea that works with that meaning. If Ghil writes "Shiva", that alludes to an Indian goddess, whose divinity becomes part of the idea of the poem. Furthermore, the structure of the poem is also a function of the sense of its words, and more so in French than in any other language. After all, the structure of a poem surely depends on its rhythm. The rhythm of a poem is determined by its stress patterns. In languages like English or German, one can analyse these patterns to some extent without reference to the sense of words, because words have naturally stressed and unstressed syllables, independently of their meaning. But this does not apply in French. The position of accented syllables within a line of French verse is only settled by the distribution of sense units, by meaning and syntax; and this has always been recognised by analysts of French metrics.

Let us take, as a concrete example, the beginning of a section of Ghil's great work, known simply as *Œuvre*:

Autant loin que le vent des épis pleins et mêmes  
aux lourds pans à rares Fenêtres des hameaux  
siffle – à large égrènement, siffle... (Ghil 1883, 7)

(As much distantly as the wind from the full and even ears of corn  
at the heavy panels with their rare Windows of the hamlets  
whistles – with a broad counting out, whistles...)

The general rule, as given in all manuals of French versification, is that the accent falls on the last syllable of a unit of sense (or the penultimate, if the last is a mute “e”). The longer the unit, and the more syntactically marked the pause after it, the heavier the accent will be. That rule produces a strong accent on both occurrences of the word “siffle”. The poem begins with a single twenty-five syllable sense unit, composed so that the words run on from each other in an unbroken sequence. The sequence ends on a word whose sound is received, in French, as one of the language’s relatively rare onomatopoeias. The effect is unmistakably of a wind whistling over distances. The sound echoes the sense alluded to. That sound is also determined by the structure, which in turn not only echoes the sense alluded to, it is actually created by the form of its expression. It follows that if the music of a poem is synonymous with its sound (which Ghil implied it was), then the very music of this poem is shaped by its sense.

A reader who knew no French would not have direct access to the structured sound of the poem. She or he would therefore be unable to hear the music of this poetry, as Ghil conceived it. But what would happen if she or he heard it read out by a competent reader of French verse, who would understand and perform that structure as sound? Rationally speaking, if one were to take Ghil’s theories seriously, the non-Francophone should be able to appreciate the poem’s musicality even without understanding the sense of the words. However, that is plainly not the case in practice. Ghil’s poetry rapidly becomes tedious even if one understands his words; that sense too often evokes either poetic commonplaces, or else such vague pointers towards something absolute or universal that one does not feel transported or inspired. But I defy anyone who does not understand the sense to find any aesthetic value in them beyond the first few lines. It can be striking; it cannot, over the very considerable span of the entire poem,

hold our attention to the point where we can appreciate it as a whole artistic work. Without the allusion, without the active participation in structuring the poem that comes from following the sense as it unfolds, without the sparkle that is produced as words reflect on each other *through their sense*, we simply lose our own sense of what gives it its form, its identity, its poetic value; and with its poetic value, we lose its musical value.

Ghil's poetry, therefore, is in a specific language – French – and can only be appreciated, even considered as music, if it can be appreciated at all, within the context of that language. Its identity as a work of art depends on its intralinguistic sense. As a consequence, according to the normal conventions governing translation, we should deem that it can be translated. And indeed, it has been. Joseph Acquisto, for example, in *French Symbolist Poetry and the Idea of Music*, provides English translations of all the poetry by Ghil that he cites, and I have provided my own translation of the lines quoted above.

In that sense, our reception of Ghil's verse is radically opposed to our reception of Ball's "Klanggedichte", which, to my knowledge, are never subjected to translation in this way by the critics who analyse them (including myself), because they are deemed not to have their place within any language. This does not mean that the words in these poems by Ball have no relationship to linguistic signification. Rather, I would suggest, we should understand their relationship to signification in a manner more akin to that which composers saw in their music. And indeed, Ball, like the composers he admired, talked about what his Dada verbal creations meant to him personally, in a jokey and provocative manner which gives us to understand, on reflection, that this meaning cannot constitute any kind of essential element of the work's identity. His first Dada manifesto concludes thus:

Jede Sache hat ihr Wort; da ist das Wort selber zur Sache geworden. Warum kann der Baum nicht Pluplusch heißen, und Pluplubasch, wenn es geregnet hat? Und warum muß er überhaupt etwas heissen? Müssen wir denn überall unseren Mund dran hängen? Das Wort, das Wort, das Weh gerade an diesem Ort, das Wort, meine Herren, das Wort ist eine öffentliche Angelegenheit ersten Ranges. (Bolliger 1994, 256)

(Each thing has its word; now the word itself has become the thing. Why can't a tree be called Pluplusch, and Pluplubasch if it has been raining? And why must it be called anything? Do we always have to hang our mouths on that? The word, the word, the pain precisely at this spot, the word, gentlemen, the word is a public affair of the first importance.)

Why cannot a tree be called Pluplusch? There is a perfectly good answer to this question, which is the same as the answer to the question: why cannot a given musical note mean Tree? You can call something by any name you like, but no one will understand the reference unless it is either part of a shared language, or else explained through a shared language. If Ball hadn't told us that he associates Pluplusch with trees, we wouldn't have guessed. A word isn't a word *in a language* unless it has a shared meaning. And Ball certainly knew this. Now, there are plenty of words in his "Klanggedichte" which, like Pluplusch, are not words in any known language. But crucially, Ball never even tried to imply that any of those words actually meant anything specific. He plainly expected them to be taken, like Dada, as words that do not have a fixed signified, that are not translatable. Pluplusch as a word that specifically means tree is simply not the kind of thing that Ball ever made poetry out of. So the apparent description he gives in that Manifesto of the Dada word in poetry is totally and provocatively misleading. Why did he do it?

The answer to that question is: precisely because it is provocatively misleading, and we have to be misled and provoked. Ball implies to us that his invented words have a meaning for the same reason as Schoenberg tells his friends that his trio represents his near-death experience. He does it because he knows we can't help seeing meanings in works of art; he knows that applies to him, too; and he wants to rub our noses in the dual fact that we compulsively look for meaning, and that every meaning, even the meaning the work has for its creator, is in fact not guaranteed, and remains separate from the work's artistic identity. Ball, like Schoenberg and the other composers I have mentioned, gives us meaning with one hand, only to take it away with the other, laughing at us if we take it seriously. And there is another way in which Ball, in and around his sound poetry, plays the same game as many contemporary composers. Even for poems whose

words make very little sense, he often gives titles which indicate a sense. “Elefantenkarawane”, “Labadas Gesang an die Wolken”, “Seepferdchen und Flugfische”: these titles, like the descriptive titles which Debussy often gave to his works, serve as a verbal support to our imagination; but their relationship with the work’s identity is endlessly problematic.

Ball, in other words, is here appropriating a properly musical technique which consists of allowing meaning to be associated with his work, at the same time as he also demonstrates that the real identity of his poetry cannot be pinned to any meaning, not even the meaning it has for him personally. But this technique, while it worked well for composers for well over a century, and indeed perhaps still does today, is highly dangerous for poetry.

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We have seen how Dada is an international word, rather than a word in any language, because its identity depends on its letters, not on its meaning. But let us remember that Ball did not publish his Manifesto in 1916; he read it out. Now, the four letters of the word Dada keep their identity whichever language you write them in. But the sound of it changes. If I may be allowed to quote another sentence from Ball’s manifesto, this time without attempting to translate it:

Dada Tzara, Dada Huelsenbeck, Dada m’dada, Dada m’hm  
Dada, Dada Hue, Dada Tza. (Bolliger 1994, 256)

The way one reads out this sentence, which may naturally vary in the course of the sentence, can indicate the home language of each word, whether it is Dada in German or Dada in Rumanian or Dada in some pseudo-primitive Negro language; and that in turn fixes to some extent at least its sense. When one says it out loud, one’s accent inevitably reduces its international quality, and Dada ceases to be a word that belongs to no language. It becomes a word which is to some extent in a language; the language of its pronunciation.

Context in a printed text can perform the same function of reducing international quality, and suggesting national senses. In the middle of a string of German words, Dada will not mean the same as in the context of



a string of Rumanian words. The same applies to the words of a “Klanggedicht”, which are not really merely sounds, as music may be merely sounds; they speak, strangely but unmistakably, within a language. To take as an example one of the poems read out by Ball in 1916:

Seepferdchen und Flugfische

tressli bessli nebogen leila  
flusch kata  
ballubasch  
zack hitti zopp

zack hitti zopp  
hitti betzli betzli  
prusch kata  
ballubasch  
fasch kitti bimm

zitti kitillabi billabi billabi  
zikko di zakkobam  
fisch kitti bisch

bumbalo bumbalo bumbalo bambo  
zitti kitillabi  
zack hitti zopp

treßli beßli nebogen grügrü  
blaulala violabimini bisch  
violabimini bimini bimini  
fusch kata  
ballubasch  
zick hiti zopp (Ball 2011, 27)

Dada was a multilingual movement. Nonetheless, there are enough flags in this poem to suggest its home language is German: its title, the word “fisch” recurring in the body of the poem, characteristically German (rather than

French, Italian, Rumanian or English) combinations of letters, and so on. What happens if one ignores those flags, and reads the poem as if its home language were French or English? One notes immediately that there are changes in the allusions that emerge, and hence, as Mallarmé would have predicted, in the idea that emerges from the poem. But the rhythm is also affected, and with it, doubtless, the structure, the music of the poem. To take as an example the line “violabimini bimini bimini”: “bimini”, to any cultured German of Ball’s time, is an unmistakable reference to Heine’s (unfinished but well known) poem of that name. The word has its main stress accent on the first syllable, as does “viola”, which suggests either the musical instrument known in English as the viola da gamba, or perhaps the Shakespearean character from *Twelfth Night*. But in French “viola” is the past tense of the verb meaning “to rape”. French listeners would be unlikely to catch the allusion to Heine’s poem; more likely, I suspect, they would hear in the word “bimini” a concatenation of the two elements “bi-” (as in “bicyclette”) and “mini” (as in “minimum”). Both “viola” and “bimini”, and a fortiori “violabimini”, would tend to have a main stress accent on the last, not on the first syllable. To an anglophone reader, “viola” could mean either a stringed instrument (but normally the member of the violin family known in German as “Bratsche” and in French as “alto”, rather than the viola da gamba), or the Shakespearean character; but in English, the name of the character “Viola” is not pronounced in the same way as the musical instrument “viola”, so the performer would have a choice to make, which would determine not only the vowel sounds, but the position of the stress accent. And so on. An English ear would certainly also hear a reference to hitting in the last line which would be inaudible to others – as to Ball.

In short: vast and incalculable differences in allusion, idea, and rhythm emerge as one shifts the poem, international though it initially seems, between language homes. In a traditional poem such as “The Raven”, it is possible to move from one language to another without losing the poem’s core identity, because we conveniently confuse that identity with its meaning, which can be translated. But a “Klanggedicht” cannot be translated, because the fundamental principle of the Dada word is that its identity is a collection of letters or phonemes, not a meaning. One might have hoped that this would mean it could keep its identity unchanged between languages; that language specifics would be unable to affect its music, its structure, its

essential being. But the opposite turns out to be the case. Rather, the Dada “Klanggedicht” is as dependent as any poem on its language home; and its identity turns out to be impossible to maintain in any passage between languages. It simply cannot be the same thing to different people with different linguistic backgrounds. Let us remember that Ball’s audience in Zurich was very multi-lingual, and he was acutely aware of this.

A “Klanggedicht” has neither the kind of translatable identity that allows Poe’s “Raven” to survive as “Le Corbeau”, nor the kind of purely formal untranslatable identity that marks out absolute music. It relies, like all poetry, on the translatable meaning provided by its language home, and yet it is itself untranslatable. This renders the identity of the “Klanggedicht”, as conceived and practiced by Ball, uniquely and vertiginously elusive. A first consequence is that as an aesthetic object, it perpetually slips beyond the grasp of criticism. It is extremely difficult to talk about why “Seepferdchen und Flugfische” is such a wonderful poem. (And yet it is; I know it is, I love it, and I cannot tell you why.) A second consequence is that it undermines the fundamental definition of the work of art as having a unique identity which had underpinned art in all media since Romantic times.

Dada, for Ball, as he says in his Manifesto, is an artistic direction. But for many people, it soon became an anti-artistic one. It should now be apparent how this happened. When the identity of the work becomes inaccessible to analysis, when it is no longer perceived as controlled by its author or recuperable by its interpreters from an agreed place, the work becomes open to chance. Dada poetry, indeed, soon became associated with chance, most notoriously in Tzara’s famous recipe for making a Dada poem.

Pour faire un poème dadaïste.

Prenez un journal.

Prenez des ciseaux.

Choisissez dans ce journal un article ayant la longueur que vous comptez donner à votre poème.

Découpez l’article.

Découpez ensuite avec soin chacun des mots qui forment cet article et mettez-les dans un sac.

Agitez doucement.

Sortez ensuite chaque coupure l'une après l'autre.  
Copiez les consciencieusement dans l'ordre où elles ont quitté le sac.  
Le poème vous ressemblera.  
Et vous voilà un écrivain infiniment original et d'une sensibilité  
charmante, encore qu'incomprise du vulgaire (Tzara 1975, 382)

(To make a dadaist poem.

Take a newspaper.  
Take a pair of scissors.  
Choose in your newspaper an article of the length you intend to give  
to your poem.  
Cut out the article.  
Then carefully cut out each of the words that constitute your article and  
put them in a bag.  
Shake gently.  
Then take out the pieces of paper one by one.  
Conscientiously copy them out in the order in which they left the bag.  
The poem will resemble you.  
And here you are, a poet whose originality is infinite and whose sensibili-  
ties are charming, even though the common herd understands them not)

In writing this recipe, Tzara was being no more (and no less) serious than Ball when he proposed using Pluplusch to mean tree, or Schoenberg when he told his friends that his trio was a “humorous” representation of his illness. Ball never wrote poems that actually expect the reader to recognise made-up words as if they had specific senses. Schoenberg never wrote music that we can actually receive as a humorous representation of an illness. Tzara never made a poem by cutting up words and picking them out of a bag, randomly.<sup>6</sup> What all three men were doing was not telling us how their work was composed, so that we should know to interpret it. On the contrary: they were opening up an essential space, an absolute barrier, between authorial control on the one hand, and audience reception on the other. Between the two, between artist and audience, blocking all direct communication, stands the work. The meaning of the work belongs neither to its creator, nor to its receiver. It is; but it cannot be owned. If, as

Tzara (and to a lesser extent, perhaps, all the other Dadaists) would like us to do, we accept the full consequences of this status of the work of art, then we have to accept that among its key distinguishing features is that it appears open to chance. We cannot know what it is; so every time we think we can say what it is, we should be aware that our interpretation has no necessary connection to the work itself.

There is an essay, or perhaps a PhD thesis, waiting to be written about Mallarmé and Tzara, and their remarkably concordant views concerning the role of chance in poetry. Both of them feel that chance, in fact, rules the world. Both of them see that if poetry were simply about the world, then chance should rule poetry. Both of them provoke the public by making this plain, and by implying that in fact, their poetry might indeed be seen as random. But both of them also react against this in the name of a musical ideal, which assures us that even if chance rules the material world, there is something else, something that escapes (absolutely, necessarily, and by definition) all rational discourse and which relies on faith, something which actually matters more, or should matter more, to humans; a music which is also in poetry.

The effect of that musical ideal is to take poetry away from the sense of words, and towards a fraternity with the other arts in its concern with its visual and aural materiality. That in turn leads to the endless formal innovations and discoveries of avant-garde poetry. But at the same time, the musical ideal threatens to cut poetry loose from its structural moorings. All works of art protect themselves against chance by persuading us that they have an identity that is dependent on their unique structure. Unlike the painting or the piece of pure music, a poem depends for its structure, and therefore for its very identity, on the meaning of its words. But if the structure of a poem depends on senses which we cannot assume to have been determined by its author or even within a given language, then we do not know what the poem *is*. And I would suggest that we have a simple test to determine to what extent a poem falls into this category. It is to ask to what extent the poem can be translated.

The untranslatable poem has a decisive advantage over the translatable poem in that it can only be received as what it is: a poem, a work of art, rather than the communication of a meaning. But the untranslatable poem also has a decisive vulnerability: having no meaning that can ex-

ist beyond the form of its words, which themselves compose a structure whose properties are actually impossible to determine, its identity eludes us, and it always threatens to fall victim to chance. Its resistance depends on what Mallarmé would call a miracle; and only faith can create miracles. The problem is that the faith which creates the miracle of untranslatable poetry is necessarily a highly unstable one, for which no rationally convincing theology is available.

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Hugo Ball described his first Dada manifesto as also a farewell to Dada (Ball 1946, 103-104). Although he did return to perform in other Dada soirées (after a stay in Italy), his entire Dada phase lasted for only a year and a half, after which, worn out, he fled from Switzerland. The striking thing for me is that his greatest poetic hero at the time, Rimbaud, also fled from poetry and from the country which represented his poetic language. Rimbaud, like Ball, pushed language to the limits at which we can sense the structuring power of the poet, and in that sense, to the edge of art. Beyond that, there is only the vulgarity of meaning in one direction, and the maddening void of chance in the other.

In fact, if one thinks of the great French poets of the age (with the instructive exception of Verlaine) and how their work progressed over time, it is striking how, at varying speeds, they all seem in some way to move over their poetic lifetime in the same direction as Rimbaud and Ball. In every case, as they move away from vulgar meaning, one could say that the pull of music takes them towards a position where they can feel the vertiginous threat posed by the loss of identity, and by chance. That clearly applies to Apollinaire; it equally clearly applies, in fact, to Mallarmé, whose last great work is entitled “Un coup de dés jamais n’abolira le hasard” (“A throw of the dice will never abolish chance”). Showing the proofs of the poem to Paul Valéry, he reportedly asked him: “Ne trouvez-vous pas que c’est un acte de démente?” (“Do you not think it is an act of madness?”).<sup>7</sup> Yes, it is; as is “Seepferdchen und Flugfische”. But it is also, to me, again, a uniquely wonderful and timeless contemporary poem. It is no coincidence that its clearest theme, the idea that most obviously incorporates its allusions, is chance; and that in the “Notice” which he published with the poem, Mal-

larmé indicates a link between his poem and music which cannot be taken any more seriously than Ball's Pluplusch, Schoenberg's "humorous" yarn, or Tzara's recipe for poetry writing. He invites us to read the poem as if it were a musical score, with the intonation rising and descending according to the position of words on the page – as if the music of a poem could be independent of the meaning of its words.

Music attracts poetry because it represents the possibility of creating a work of art that is not structured by signification. But a poem is in fact always structured by signification. Poetry that tries to work like music becomes unreadable if, like Ghil, the poet ignores this simple fact. A poet who, like Hugo Ball, does recognise this fact, does recognise the inescapable force of the structuring power of meaning in the poem, may nonetheless try to create a kind of writing that is not simply within any one language; a poem that therefore, like music, cannot be translated; a poem that thus, again like music, seems beyond reduction to meaning. But the creator of such poetry quickly becomes exhausted; for the identity, the distinctive quality, of a poem that cannot be translated escapes from every kind of definition and control.

Poetry, it would seem, can only be what it is by ceding to the temptation of music, the temptation to be like music. Music draws it in. But at the same time, music destroys its identity. Music eats up language homes as it eats up translatability, and poetry without a language home always threatens to fall prey to chance. The untranslatable creative moment never allows poetry to settle. That moment can only be an active process, operating in time as music corrodes the poetic material, to the point where language ceases to provide the poem with any stable identity. For the sake of its own survival, poetry after Dada is thus condemned to be, to take up the title of the Aalborg conference, a genre perpetually in expansion. Only continued expansion, expansion through signification in all its forms, expansion away from the musical heart of the matter, can save it, and give it stability. But perhaps we do not always want poetry to be saved. Perhaps music is to poetry as the proverbial flame to the moth. It draws it in and burns it up; but the brief glimpse of the burning moth in the light of the candle before it dies is unforgettable. Nothing is more beautiful than poetry whose viability as a genre is being destroyed by its own musicality.  
zack hiti zopp

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## Notes

- 1 Ball's typescript is reproduced in Bolliger (1994, 256). All translations throughout this essay are mine.
- 2 I am well aware that in the field of Translation Studies, concepts of "translation" are current which are unrelated to the one on which this essay is based. I do not seek to engage with those; as long as my own definition is clear, I trust my essay will make sense on its own terms.
- 3 This is a quotation from an essay in Schoenberg's own hand, posthumously published.
- 4 I hope I may be forgiven for referring to my own publications concerning the ways in which Debussy and Stravinsky perform this trick. See, for example, Dayan (2011, 119-145) and Dayan (2005).



- 5 I use this term in preference to the more usual “Lautgedicht” not only because it fits my argument better, but also because it is the one used by Ball himself in his description of the first performance of these poems. See Ball (1946, 100).
- 6 The only text he ever published that purported to have been composed in this way is one that he gives as an “example” in a footnote to the recipe quoted above. However, it is perfectly obvious that this “example” is itself a hoax, and is not in fact composed as described. The vocabulary, the division into lines of free verse, and not infrequently the syntax are all too close to Tzara’s poetic diction and too far from the language of newspapers. Furthermore, the references to the process of poetic reading are quite clear: “apprécier le rêve époque des yeux” ... (ibid.).
- 7 See, for example, Oster (1981, 161).

## WHAT ALSO COULD POETRY BE? Technogenesis in Johannes Heldén's *Evolution*

HANS KRISTIAN RUSTAD

### Introduction

Digital poetry is a valuable and convenient art form for explorations into the relationship between poetry and technology. Poetic language enters networked and programmable machines and emerge as digital poems. The digital poems might just as non-digital poems present and debate themes such as love, death, poverty, ecology, economy, autobiography etc., and as poetry they primarily are self-reflexive. To draw attention towards itself implies for digital poetry to take considerations on the amalgam of poetry and digital technology. As researchers and critics in the broad field of digital literature agree on, you cannot separate text and technology, digital poetry and computer (see Morris and Swiss 2006; Hayles 2008; Simanowski 2011; Bell et.al. 2014). Hence, on different levels and in different ways digital poetry examines connections between poetry and technology.

In this article I will address the question of the relationship between poetry and digital technology. This issue is explored in Johannes Heldén's book and digital poem *Evolution* (co-written with the programmer Håkan Jonson). The digital poem (2013) and the book (2014) are complimentary and need to be approached as one work. Together they demonstrate what poetry can be in digital media, and consequently, how computer technology changes both poetry and the idea of the role of the author. And I will argue that Heldén not only demonstrates the material conditions of (intermedial) poetry as *Evolution* is distributed and presented across different media, but more important, that he explores the role of the media and the medial condition in writing and producing poetry. In what follows, I will approach the metareflexivity of and the poetological (technogenetic) aspects of *Evolution*.

### *Evolution*

Johannes Heldén is a Swedish poet, music composer, visual artist and programmer who works in interdisciplinary fields, with both traditional art

forms and hybrid art forms. His poetry and arts are engaged in eco-criticism, technology and science, and are closely linked to the genres and themes of science fiction. Heldén is an intermedial artist regarding different levels of media conceptions. His works are intermedial and involve two or more technical media, such as books and computers, as well as basic media such as pictures, music and sound, written language, and animations. He creates and distributes poetry books, art installations, and experimental music, often with apocalyptic connotations. Further, he creates digital art works and digital poetry, and most interesting not only does he combine different art forms and semiotic modalities such as written poetry, visual poetry, art music, graphics, and photography, he also combines different media, giving his poetry different platforms for production, distribution and reception.

The characteristics highlighted above are significant for Heldén's poetic work, and have previously been thematized in critical works on Heldén's poetry (see Rustad 2013; Mønster 2015; Olsson 2014). Just as much as Heldén's poetry is engaged in the relationship between different media and different art forms, it continually poses the question of the relationship between poetry and technology. In some of his earlier work, Heldén explores this relationship with emphasize on the reader's function. For instance in *The Prime Directive* (2006) the reader needs to take action to make poetic fragments appear on the screen by moving what seems to be a night binoculars over the screen. The reader also needs to make use of the mouse pointer to make poetic fragments appearing. As much as *The Prime Directive* is a science fiction poem, staging a cold, waste and technological dominated world, a world similar to the one we for instance encounter in Fritz Lang's science fiction classic *Metropolis*, it also emphasizes the role of technology in the materialization of the text and in the act of reading. Likewise, in Heldén's *Entropi* (2010), which by genre and theme coincide with *The Prime Directive*, highlight the significant role of technology in the production and reception of poetry in digital media. Here the reader has to click (or shoot) on white dots that drifts over the screen to make part of a poem appear. In addition, the reader needs to click on different fields on the screen to call forward fragments of another poem. Heldén follows up and utilizes these methods and modes of engagement further in yet other works, such as in *The Factory* (2013).

In these works reading becomes an activity executed by humans with the assistance of a computer, and subsequently an activity where the com-

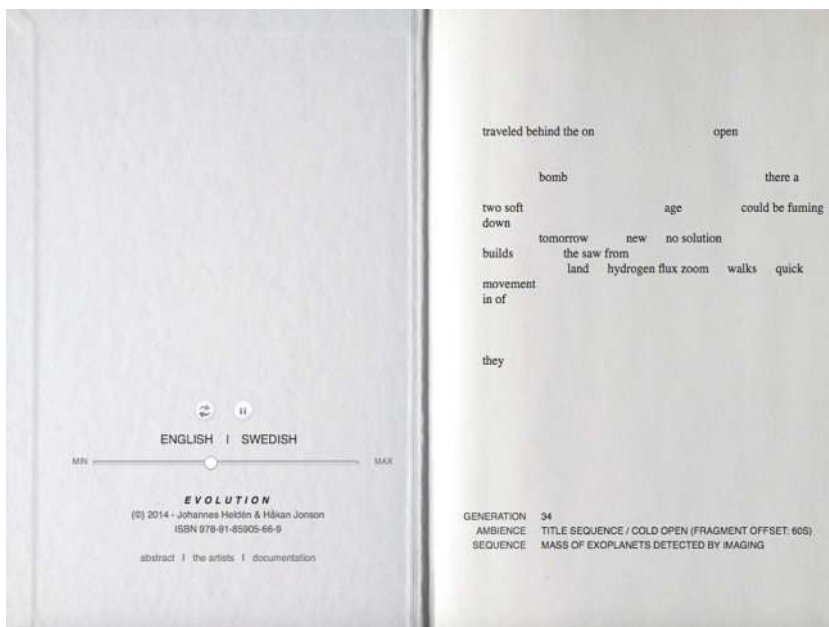


Fig 1: Screen shot from Heldén's digital *Evolution*.

puter as an assistant also affects how we read. Heldén alter his focus in *Evolution* and puts emphasize more closely on the role of the author, and the computer as the generator of texts.

*Evolution* is partly a digital poem, available on the internet, that can be classified as algorithmic poetry and cybertext poetry. Computer algorithms select and combine words and phrases from a database that consists of fragments from Heldén's earlier poetic works and music compositions. In other words, the machine is reading the algorithms and thereby decides which fragments that will appear on the screen, and how they will be displayed. The reader's ergodic interaction with the poem is minimal, and involves the possibility of controlling the pace of the text generation. In his definition of "cybertext" Espen Aarseth put weight on the "determining" role of the medium. He writes that it is a text where "the mechanical parts play a defining role in determining the aesthetic process." (Aarseth 1997, 22) He argues that cybertext can be regarded as a textual machine, with three significant components: The verbal and semiotic signs, the operator who is the author

and/or programmer, and the media involved, which in this case are the computer and the book. In his model, Aarseth puts weight on the meaning and the significance of the medium. Medium is here conceptualized as the component that generates the sign, based on pre-defined algorithms, defined by the authors and/or programmers. From a reader-oriented perspective, we might say that cybertext is “designed so as to diminish readerly agency to such an extent that the underlying machine code seems to be either fully or partially in control,” (Bell et.al. 2014, 10). Regarding the author’s perspective, in cybertexts the author has partly transferred his role and, submitted himself to the machine.

The other half of the work is the printed book *Evolution*. The book was awarded “The N. Katherine Hayles Award for Criticism of Electronic Literature” in 2014. It is a heteronomous book and artwork, produced after the digital work. *Evolution* contains an introduction, 6 short essays written by six different scholars, poetic texts, which are excerpts generated by the digital part, and texts written in different Java code languages, which most likely are reproductions of the digital codes from the digital part. In addition, it also includes schemas with information from longitude measuring of natural phenomena, such as temperature of the northern hemisphere during the period from 1880 to 2014, and extratropical storm tracks in 1998 and 1999.

The book is as mentioned produced after the digital part, which is rather unusual in regards to previous adaptations and remediations in the history of digital literature. Most often the printed book exist before the digital work, which makes the digital work to some exist imitates the printed book and its content. Here the role of the two mediums have switched. Not only is the book produced after the digital work, *Evolution*, the majority of the book content imitates the codes of the computer language. In what follows, I will argue that *Evolution* explores the relation between poetry and media technology, and hence participate in an ongoing discussion on contemporary technogenesis.

### **Contemporary technogenesis, or Heldén’s imitation game?**

As a cybertext *Evolution* represents what Astrid Ensslin (2007) has coined the third generation of digital literature, and is a kind of digital literature that best demonstrates the potential of digital media as a literary medium.

Katherine Hayles claim is similar in regards to cybertexts: “It is precisely when these multilayered, multiply sited processes within humans and machines interact through intermediating dynamics that the rich effects of electronic literature are created, performed, and experimented” (Hayles 2008, 119). One of these effects is the evoking of the idea of contemporary technogenesis. Contemporary technogenesis implies according to Hayles continuous reciprocal causality between bodies and technics. The idea is that human is defined by its co-evolution with various tools and technologies, and that subjectivity always is contaminated by technology. Hayles is particularly concerned with cognitive evolution. She argues that cognition involves more than the neocortex, and that it includes the body and its extended material and technological environment. In addition, she argues that the technogenetic spiral changes brain morphology and functions (Hayles 2012, 123).

Such an idea is more in general argued by Friedrich Kittler, who claims that a technical media is an autonomous force that decides and determines the subject. Media determine our situation, Kittler has famously claimed, and according to him, media also determine the situation of the art, of poetry, and of communication (Kittler 2012). They not only shape the artist and his or her arts, but actually constitute the one that writes, and what he or she writes. Thus a medium is not only a medium for communication, a necessity to materialize poetry, it also shapes and interacts with our thoughts, our writings, and our subjectivity.<sup>1</sup>

The idea of technogenesis thus emphasizes the relationship between subjectivity and technology. A medium can in this regard be a computer, but the idea of contaminated relationships are just as valuable for more traditional media technologies such as papyrus, books, and radios. The perspective highlights that the poet and subsequently poetic texts evolve in collaboration with media and the technological evolution. This relationship and the idea of technogenesis, I will argue, are explored in an explicit manner in Heldén’s *Evolution*. While Kittler in his book *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter* argues that “those early and seemingly harmless machines capable of storing and therefore separating sounds, sights and writing ushered in a technologising of information” (Kittler 1999, xi), I will argue that Heldén with his intermedial work *Evolution* put further this claim by Kittler, and explores the technologizing of poetry.

This becomes obvious already in a peritext folder that is attached to the book *Evolution*. Here Heldén writes: “The release of *Evolution* will mark the end of Johannes Heldén writing books of poetry. He has, in a sense, been replaced.” (Heldén 2014, unpaginated). On the first page in the book, the authors provide an explicit frame of reference for their project: “*Evolution* is an online artwork designed to emulate the text and music of poet and artist Johannes Heldén, with the ultimate goal of passing ‘The Imitation Game Test’ as proposed by Alan Turing in 1951.” Interestingly enough the idea that Heldén has been replaced by the computer represents the almost opposite intention than what seems to be at stake in much contemporary literature, where the strategies of self-presentation and autobiographies frequently appear. Alan Turing released in 1951 the idea to design a machine that could exhibit intelligent behavior equivalent to that of a human, and where the ultimate goal was to pass the Turing test, which means that the human judge in the test could not reliably tell a machine’s answer and response from a human’s response. *Evolution* is a similar project as the Turing test. The computer’s behavior is equivalent with the writing and music of the poet Johannes Heldén. But just as much as no machine has passed the Turing test, as far as I know, the computer cannot completely replace the poet Heldén.

Still, with this project, Heldén seriously explores the possibility that a computer can imitate his poetry, and from now on, replace him as a poet that writes book poetry. According to Roberto Simanowski (2007, 94) the first appearance of a computer program that generated text and in that sense could be said to *replace* the author, is Christopher Strachey’s *Love Letter Generator* from 1952, a program that automatically generated love letters. Simanowski points out that *Love Letter Generator* can be read as an ironic comment on the genre love letters, and hence it can be interpreted as a program that rather than replaces the author, is a program that is authored to communicate Strachey’s feelings and intensions (ibid., 94).

We can read Heldén’s statement in the book as a manifesto where he claims that he will never write book poetry anymore. This is not just another proclamation of the death of the author, but rather that from now on the computer will generate the book texts. The book *Evolution* illustrates and follows up on this idea. Nevertheless, Heldén’s statement should not be taken literary. Rather it highlights the relationship between the poet and technology, and hence, poetry and media technology. Maria Engberg writes

in a short essay on *Evolution* that the author «always underscore its omnipresence in the work.» *Evolution* demonstrates that media are much integrated in Heldén's poetry, and to such an extent, that media and Heldén's poetry cannot be separated from each other. Both the digital text and the book bears marks that tell us that they are (partly, at least) produced by a computer, that this, a poetry machine, since both of them mainly are produced by and contains computer language and codes.

Even though the computer has not fully replaced the poet Heldén, the computer language has taken an significant role in the poetic work, which make us ask whether the fact that Heldén writes program language is a result of the fact that the computer has made Heldén more like a computer. This is of course a trope in the science fiction genre, but it is also a possible outcome of the idea of technogenesis. Both humans and texts evolve in interaction with technology.

### **The evolution of poetry**

Both the digital poem and the book are hybrid aesthetic texts. They contain figurative language and program language that can be perceived by and are available for our senses. In the digital poem the codes are not present for our senses, but can be "read" by the computer that executes the predefined commands. The book contains verbal language, poetic language, photographs, and codes. Here the codes have ceased to exist as codes meant for a computer to read, and appear for the reader to sense, enjoy, dislike and (perhaps) interpret.

As the title of the work indicate, text is evolving. *Evolution* appears as a trading zone in which language and code mutually put pressure on one another, penetrate into a book surface as ink mark on paper and on the screen surface as digital signs. Hence, Heldén's work both explores and contributes to the evolution of poetry as an art form. In his work the evolution has come to the point where the binary opposition between print literature and digital literature have inversed. Rather than displaying the relation between the two media as antagonistic, the two kinds of literature, with their different codes in their deep structure, has melted together as a consequence of the evolution of poetry, and the evolution of the technological poet.

In her book with the technogenetic title *My mother was a computer* Hayles discusses the interactional relationship between digital and print



media. She claims that the hierarchy between these two media has changed, and that digital media from the perspective of production must be regarded as the primarily medium that produces among others books: “Given present modes of book production, it is more accurate to view print as a particular form of output for electronic text than it is to regard print as a realm separate from digital media.” (Hayles 2005, 117) Since print books most often are written on a computer, the computer will by necessity put its mark on the book.

It is fair to say that Heldén takes this idea one step further. While Hayles is engaged in how digital media set its footprint on print, Heldén explores how this interaction goes both ways. Actually, in Heldén’s work the two media, print and digital, does not appear as two different media opposing each other. Rather, they appears as two media in one work. This is obvious when reading, experiencing, and interpreting *Evolution*, because one will need to be engaged in both media to be able to grasp the work. If you only read the book, you have just read half the work, just as much as the digital poem only counts for half the work.

The digital *Evolution* and the print *Evolution* can from an ontological perspective be regarded as one work. The book contains the codes that generates the digital text, which means that both the print and the digital text are present in both media. The code is present in the digital text and make the digital poem appear, but are not available for the reader (unless one hacks the text, and has the competence to read codes). The digital poem with its figurative language are present in the print book, but only through the codes. And the poem would only be available for the reader of the book, if the reader are able to read the codes, in other words, if the reader acts and reads like a computer, or as he was a computer, to rephrase the title on Hayles’ book.

*Evolution* does not only work as a bridge between digital and print media, but also serves as an amalgam for what might be regarded as the opposition between figurative language and codes. In the much-referred article “The code is not the text (unless it is the text)” (Cayley 2005) John Cayley distinguishes between code and literary text. He claims that the code is only text and a target for a hermeneutic approach when it appears as text on the surface. As long as the codes are hidden “below” the text surface, it is not part of the text, but rather the ones that generates texts and controls its behavior.

This means that the figurative language is meant for the human reader to read, enjoy and interpret. Program language has usually the computer as its target. Therefore, in digital poetry, and digital text more in general, one would expect that the program language and the codes stay with the computer, hidden for the human reader, while the figurative and poetic language appears for the pleasure of the reader. But in *Evolution* this relationship is turned upside down. Not only is both the figurative language and the codes available for the reader as they appear on the surface in both media, but the code belonging to the computer, appears in the book, and the figurative language appears on the computer screen. Hence, not only are the two language system mixed, also the human-machine relation is changed.

As a code work *Evolution* challenges the basic idea about reading and interpretation. Hermeneutic approaches is after all developed to disclose metaphorically speaking the hidden text from literary speaking the visible text. Even though the codes primarily are meant for a computer, and in addition, the programmers that wrote the codes, or other programmers, the codes in Heldén's work have multiple audiences. Most obvious all sort of readers would read (at least some part of) the codes, including those who are not able to understand them. Even hackers could be the target for the codes, and perhaps the visualization of the codes is an invitation from Heldén to try out the codes, and even experiment with and change them.

Cayley (2015) argues that the codes written in program language is meant for a computer. He explains that such codes primarily works "as a list of commands that will generate a performance, an inscription, an output." Read by a computer, things will happen. Read by a human, nothing will happen. The code has ceased to function as code", as Cayley points out. The human reader might be able to recognize and identify the function of the code, and thereby imagine which actions the codes will perform. Thus, the outcome is imaginary, and we might ask if code work has led to the paradoxical situation that the digital work that posits the technology and codes for making real performance, movements, and interaction, in Heldén's work has reached a point where it again metaphorically presents these features.

In opposition to such a view on the function and aesthetic of the codes, Mark Marino (2006) argues for the field *Critical code studies*, and claims that in the current study of computer codes, the "emphasis on func-

tionality neglects the meaning that code bears for its human audiences. Marino suggest that “we no longer speak of the code as a text in metaphorical terms, but that we begin to analyze and explicate code as a text, as a sign system with its own rhetoric, as verbal communication that possesses significance in excess of its functional utility.” (Marino 2006) He claims that codes has meaning beyond functionality, because they also contribute with “symbolic expression and interaction.”

By moving the codes from back to front, Heldén introduces the question of technogenesis, and further, he turns as already pointed out the work into a computer work and less a human work. In his article, Marino puts weight on the same issue and asks: “People like to project humanity onto the computer, but is it possible that with regard to coding we do just the opposite and strip the code of its human significance, imagining that it is a sign system within which the extensive analyses of semiotic systems and signification, connotation, and denotation do not apply?”

In Heldén’s book this might be the case. What takes place is a sort of dehumanization because most readers would assume that the codes are not meant for them, and associate them with machine language. In that sense the codes in the book becomes a sort of defamiliarization. Marino links this defamiliarization to Shklovsky’s concept, among others because the codes, he claim by quoting Shklovsky, produces “a disordering which cannot be predicted.” (see Shklovsky 1997; Marino 2006) To what extent the visualization of computer codes on a text’s surface can count as what the Russian formalist called defamiliarization, relay on whether the codes function “to make the stone stony” (Shklovsky 1997, 20). Shklovsky write that defamiliarization in art exists so as to recover the sensation of life. Truly, computer codes would make poetry “unfamiliar” and the form difficult, and “increase the difficulty and length of perception” (ibid., 20), but this sort of unfamiliarity does not make the code more “codey” or the poem more “poem-y”. Rather, their appearance on the surface interrupts the reading, and make the reading not only difficult, but impossible for most readers unfamiliar with codes and program language.

Still, Marino point out an important dimension in digital poems where the codes appear on the text surface: They reveal codes and make the mechanism of production visible to the viewer, by moving the codes from background to foreground (see also Raley 2002, 2–4). Heldén, by

doing this, emphasis the significant role of codes for the creation of digital poetry and of contemporary and future book. They are both traces of and the precondition for writing.

### **The role of the media**

The evolution of poetry, as it is explored in *Evolution*, implies the technological contamination of poetry. But *Evolution* is more than that. It is not just a result of technologized subject that has submitted itself to the computer technology. Its multilayered processes of human-machine relations manifest a rich intermediating dynamics. The two media texts in addition contains traces of other media and artforms, and most significantly, they convey iconic traces of Heldén's earlier poetic work. This is important to remember because neither *Evolution* nor Heldén expresses a pure media determinacy and specificity.

In *Evolution* words appear alone or in small chunks, surrounded by white fields. This visual expression is typical for Heldén. For instance, we find the same visual design in *The Prime Directive* (2006), in *Entropi* (2010) – both the book and the digital poem – as well as in many of Heldén's poetry books. In the digital poems, the words and phrases flash or change form and meaning. This metamorphic process provides a dynamic aspect, not least emphasized in the title of *Evolution*, and is a visual feature, materialized because of the affordances of digital technology. Still, it is not a media specific affordance, because we can get the same effect in analogue tv or on film. And as already pointed out we find the same expression in Heldén's book poetry.

This kind of visual expression where the words are organized non-conventional on a paper or on a screen is also found in other kinds of poetry (non-digital). The perhaps most famous example of this organization is Stéphane Mallarmé's poem "Un coup de dés" (1897) (See next page). According to Christophe Wall-Romana (2013, 55–59) Mallarmé's poem expresses that the poet was inspired by the film, which at that time was a new medium. Wall-Romana explains that the white parts on the paper both are imaginary rooms for readers to fill in, and represent how each phrase is different cuts or intense events from a movie.

Rosalind Krauss (1999), who claims that some visual poetry, where words are organized in a non-conventional way, would be unthinkable if

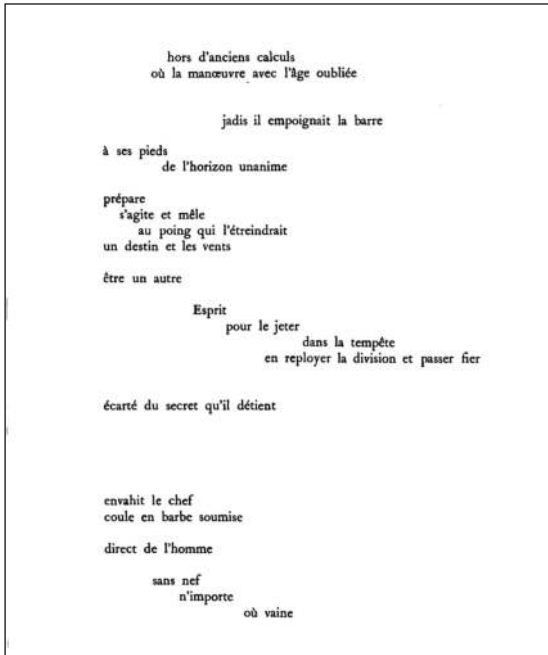


Fig. 2: From Mallarmé's poem  
"Un coup de dés".

it had not been for the invention of photography, underscore Wall-Romana's argument. Photography as a mechanical recording of moments and details, inspired according to Krauss, poets to think and write poetry as dots or points, where each dot or point represents a moment, a concentrated observation, a photographic recording. Thus, *Evolution* may be linked to several media, such as books, photography, film and digital media. In that sense we can argue that the work exemplifies how different media are omnipresent and that media have impact on the writing subject and the poetic text.

Kittler's point is that media has what he calls a catalyzing effect on body and subjectivity, which means that the medium we communicate with and through, has an impact on us and our writing. Hayles demonstrates more specifically how embodiment and technology are entangled in each other. This relation gives according to Hayles "a richer, fuller account of the potential of technology to accelerate and direct evolution." (Hayles 2008, 119) And she continues, that the goal of techogenesis is "to favor further changes". This implies that the phenomena evolution in general is

a process not entirely controlled or produced by humans, not entirely controlled by nature, and not entirely controlled or produced by technology and machines. Rather it is a kind of interaction between humans and technology so intimate and close that when it comes to the question of evolution and evolutionary forces, the one cannot be separated from the other.

### **Conclusion**

With *Evolution* Heldén tematizes the significance of the medium or media for his poetry, and manifests the medium of his art, computer and book, as wider than the physical support of the representation. He also includes and emphasizes the code work and the role of the programmer, the normally invisible partners in digital poetry. From the perspective of technogenesis, we cannot separate the poet from the medium and the surrounding technology, and according to this perspective, poetry is interacting with media and affected by the media evolution. Hence, the question is not whether *Evolution* is Heldén's or the computer's poetry. Rather it is a question of how we can understand the relationship between Heldén and the computer, and by that, what poetry can be. The title *Evolution* can be interpreted as an exploration of poetry, process, writing and reading on different levels. It points towards the work as something that is continually developing or evolving. Furthermore, it emphasizes the co-evolution of computers and humans, what I have referred to as technogenesis.<sup>2</sup> And it refers to the evolution of poetry as an art form.

In his essay about algorithmic poetry, Jesper Olsson writes that "Algorithmic poetry will not set humans against machines, the subjective against the objective, but overturn and display such binaries in an attempt to let things happen, take place, expand and change and perhaps, for good or bad, evolve." (Olsson 2014). There is no distinction or opposition between the poet Heldén and the computer. Rather *Evolution* is a result of a feedback loop between Heldén's writing and the computer, a feedback loop that also includes other media. Thus, the work *Evolution* can be described as a result of a symbiotic relationship between media technologies, and between different texts, and as a process where the final goal is not known, except the evolution process itself.<sup>3</sup>

It is a rather dystopian prediction in Kittler's theory as he plays with the idea that humans are subordinate to media. This idea is explored and

challenged in *Evolution*. Here Heldén creates an illusion that the poet is subordinate to the computer's artificial intelligence. But this subordination becomes nothing more than an illusion, because *Evolution* is a strong confirmation of the necessity of the poet and the dependency of the poet in creating meaning, order, cohesion, and coherence. On a general level *Evolution* demonstrates that evolution always happens in an interplay between humans and technology. The computer does not make the poet Heldén excess, it doesn't erase him, but rather demonstrates an interaction and a co-evolution between the poet and digital media, an interaction that constitute the poetic texts.

What then is *Evolution*, and what does it bring into play? Maria Engberg refers to Brian Eno, one of the founding fathers of the music genre ambient, and points out that there is a similarity between Eno's music and the sound in the digital poem *Evolution*. But it is also a similarity between Eno's way to think about music and Heldén's way to think about poetry: "As Brian Eno points out, the experiments then were more about the process than the product. The experiment was, Eno suggests, the 'continual re-asking of the question 'what also could music be?'" (Engberg 2014)

*Evolution* emphasizes the process more than the product. The work reflects a process that never stops, never settles down. New texts are always generated. Something is always happening, changing, evolving. Rather than allowing the text to end in one final form, one single pattern, *Evolution* demonstrates what poetry may be, and implicitly it poses the question "What also could poetry be?"

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## Notes

- 1 See Kittler's ref. to Nietzsche who argued that our writing tools take part in the composition and evolution of our thoughts (Kittler 1999, 200).
- 2 This is an evolution that more generally could be said to have taken place between technology and human beings since the invention of the fire and human beings' invention of tools, according to the myth of Prometheus.
- 3 Here the evolution is seen as a result of selection and innovation. A conceptualization of poetry that is in understanding with the Greek word *techné*, which refers both to technology and poetry.

# FROM PRESSING THE BUTTON TO CLICKING THE MOUSE

## The Shift from Static to Dynamic Media

MATTI KANGASKOSKI

### **Prologue: *The Killing Machine***

I arrived in Aarhus the night before the conference "Poetry, Mediatization and New Sensibilities".<sup>1</sup> I had a few hours to walk around the city and my main goal was to find food and a coffee place to think about my presentation, in which I would discuss the role of the "push-button" as a precursor for clicking the mouse in the digital environment, and how the change from pushing a button to clicking on a screen represents the shift from static operations to dynamic, and finally, how that affects the act of reading poetry. The hotel personnel were kind enough to tell me which direction to go to find the needed nourishment. They also said that the museum of contemporary art, AROS, was open until 10pm, and if I saw a building whose top was lit in the colors of the rainbow, I would know where to go.

And sure enough, after having dinner, as I was looking for a place to sit and think about the button, and having already passed some prominent looking establishments, I spotted a building in rainbow colors and started navigating towards it. It was already quite late, so I thought I would just pop in and sit in the cafe. What could be a better place for thinking than a spacious, well-lit museum cafe?

I entered the museum but instead of going straight to the cafe I was drawn to the brochures sitting quietly next to the ticket counter. I picked up a rectangular brochure with an image of an analog medium, the vinyl disk, and opened it. The brochure presented one of the exhibitions, Janet Cardiff and George Bures Miller's *Something Strange This Way*. The description of the first work, named *The Killing Machine*, was the following:

As we enter the dark room, a simple desk lamp illuminates a large red button. There is a note scrawled enticing us to 'press'. Once we do, the machine is activated. There is no going back.

There it was, the button, waiting for me to press it. But it was late, and I had the cafe to sit down in. I was faced with the binary question of entering or not entering, accepting or declining, saying “yes” or “no” to the button.

I said yes.

\*\*\*

I am holding a fairly thin book with black-and-grey covers. The front cover has a rectangular box saying “zaroum” in red typewriter font. Under it there is the text “cia rinne” in black typewriter font. I conclude that these must be the title and the author of the book.<sup>2</sup> Very conventional. I am not puzzled. I know what to do with a codex. I open it in my hands and move my eyes on the pages.

After the epigraph “was einmal gedacht worden ist / kann nicht zurückgenommen werden”<sup>3</sup> on the bottom of the next page I am asked to make a promise, “la promesa”: to choose either “yes” or “no”.

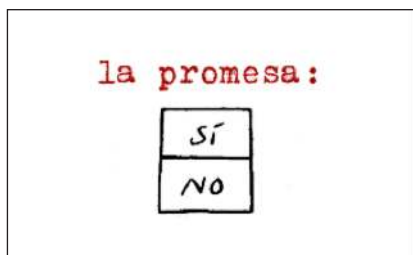


Fig. 1: Screenshot from *Cia Rinne: archives zaroum* (2008).

It resembles a questionnaire with binary options, and asks the reader to make a promise. *Zaroum* presents many similar situations in the following pages. The reader is faced with choices or given alternative ways of “seeing” the elements of the poems. I start reading them conventionally by directing my focus to one element at a time and then moving to the next one. I quickly discover, however, that *zaroum* doesn’t have to be read like many other codices from top left to bottom right. *zaroum* questions the direction of reading by spreading various elements across the page and mixing hand drawn pictures in with text. This allows for an exploration of the page in unconventional ways. The elements can be read independently or in con-

nection to each other and in whatever order. But even if *zaroum* enables an unconventional direction of reading, as a print book it is bound to its form and is forced to present its material all at once, as physical, relatively static marks on paper. This changes when we move to the digital platform.

Some of the textual and pictorial content of *zaroum* is found also in digital form, on a digital application called *archives zaroum* (2008). The data is presented as an “archive”: a page with seven folders that remediate the familiar, yellow-tinted cardboard office folder on which also most of the computer desktop “folder” icons are based. In fact, the “desktop” is an office desk remediation, as are many of its other elements such as the trash can, the notepad, the document and so on.

To get to *archives zaroum* I had to navigate to the *afsnitp.dk* website, click on the “galleri” section, and then click on “archives zaroum”, and after three more clicks I find myself in the first folder of the archives. Again, at the bottom of the page I read “la promesa”. But there is no box. I am not puzzled yet, although I am not as comfortable as I was with the codex. After all, I *know* what the codex entails. It works with paper and ink. With the digital screen, however, I have a working idea of code, algorithm, software, voltages and pixels. I move the mouse cursor, the pointing arrow, on the page and upon moving it on top of “la promesa” a sense of relief goes through me: the cursor morphs into a hand with its index finger erect. The element is clickable, I rejoice silently. Moreover, I get to push the element with a virtual finger instead of a cold pointer. I push the button of the mouse, I hear a click, and the box, by now familiar from the printed *zaroum*, appears. But it only has “si” as an option. I push the button of the mouse, hear a click, the “si” disappears and “no” appears on the other box. I click several times more and find out that the two options alternate; by pushing the button I can either choose “yes” or “no”.

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I have presented these two elementary reading situations in great detail to discern the differences between the two platforms, the print and the digital. Even from this simple setting a few differences become apparent. First, the concrete action of reading has acquired an addition: we advance the reading by clicking like we navigate a website. Consecutive clicks uncover hitherto unseen information. Clicking, along with moving the eyes

and recognizing text and images and so on, is one of the *defining* actions by which we explore the digital page. Second, the digital screen has the potential to present its information in layers, unlike the print page, which is forced to present all its information in a spatially consecutive manner.<sup>4</sup> On the screen we uncover the information bit by bit – or, click by click. Flipping a page is not the same as clicking an element because the element is *replaced* by another and we have no physical evidence of what will follow and no necessary trace of what was there before. Furthermore, the codex's volume is set; holding it in my hand I can assess the amount of pages within the covers. The digital screen gives no necessary physical cues as to how much information it holds to be uncovered; it holds a potential for massive amounts of data. Although *archives zaroum* with its simple moves does not exploit this potential, it has the same potential as any digital screen.<sup>5</sup> The third difference I want to emphasize derives from the previous points: the change is from a static platform, the paper, to a dynamic one, the screen (and its underlying operations). Thus, uncovering the layers of information by clicking is an *expression* of the dynamicity of the platform.<sup>6</sup>

Now I am in a position to formulate the goal of this essay. I will explore the implications of clicking as a defining readerly action of the digital platform. I will ask how clicking came about and what it means from a phenomenological standpoint. By 'phenomenological standpoint' I mean that I aim to trace the interface experience instead of explaining how the interface works. Finally, I will discuss some aspects of the significance of the change from a static platform to a dynamic one and relate it to the two artworks mentioned, *archives zaroum* and *The Killing Machine*.<sup>7</sup> Let us begin with the examination of the roots of clicking.

### **Push the Button and Something Will Happen**

Clicking is one of the inconspicuous elements of our digital experience, the background snap that we already take for granted. Astonishingly few literary critics<sup>8</sup> have paid attention to clicking, and yet it is a formative action in navigating the digital realm. Indeed, media historian Lisa Gitelman asserts that the success of media depends "at some level on inattention or 'blindness' to the media technologies themselves (and all of their supporting protocols) in favor of attention to the phenomena, 'the content'"

(2006, 6). The mouse is not a medium in itself, but a part of a technological medium, the computer with its keyboard, screen and so on. We are “blind” to many other media technologies, such as the telephone. Even if I am still not quite certain how I am able to call people around the world, how exactly my voice is carried through the air and cables to another device, I am nevertheless using the phone without renewed amazement of how it works. However, I would suggest that we are living in a time where it is still very much possible to be amazed by contemporary technology: every time I download something on my phone from – it seems to me again – the air, and it changes its physical operations. For example, a flashlight “app” which turns the flash of the camera of my phone into a flashlight without making any changes to the hardware itself, without my using any tools other than touchscreen “buttons”. At this I am amazed, not to mention much more complicated operations. I only have a vague conception as to how the wireless technology works, or how the software is changed inside the hardware of my phone by a download. But, I do not need to know in order to operate the interface.

Gitelman records a similar situation: “I see words written on my computer screen, for instance, and I know its operating system and other programs have been written by programmers, but the only related inscriptions of which I can be fully confident are the ones that come rolling out of the attached printer, and possibly the ones that I am told were literally printed onto chips that have been installed somewhere inside” (Gitelman 2006, 19). Whereas the new technological media can still amaze us, they also bring along a degree of insecurity of what is actually happening.

The action of clicking has an obvious precursor, that of pushing the mechanical and electric button. The push button is another technological innovation that has had a major influence on our everyday environment. A quick inventory of how many buttons an average person pushes per day reveals the ubiquitousness. We push buttons to control phones, doorbells, lights, elevators, computers, ATMs, dishwashers, TVs, remote controls and even cars. Many of the technological media that the modern computers mediate, such as the typewriter, the film, and the gramophone – echoing Friedrich A. Kittler’s book title – have been researched, but the push button, originating exactly at the same time with these media, has not received much attention. Granted, it is less a medium in itself and more a supporting device.

Along with the better known technological media inventions, the origin of the push-button dates back to late 19th century, but as Rachel Plotnick, one of the few to write about buttons, observes, it seems to be “impossible to pinpoint any single origin of push buttons” (Plotnick 2012, 818). The buttons evolved from other surfaces, including the buttons in clothing. According to Plotnick, many “mechanical iterations” were around before the button got widespread in the late 1800s. Some of the early sources identified the first use of buttons to the spinet piano from as far back as the 16th century. Along with musical instruments, other “key-driven” devices like the typewriter and the telegraph, played a role in forming the concept of the button (ibid.). The piano already portrays the core concept of the button beautifully: one presses a key on the interface, and “something” happens inside the piano that produces the sound. Furthermore, every sound has its assigned key; the relationship between the key and the sound is entirely determinate. Of course, we might know that upon pushing the key a hammer hits the string inside the piano, and the string produces the sound which is amplified by the acoustic structure. But in order to operate the piano, we need not know what happens inside.

The exact origin and time notwithstanding, around 1900 the push-button was introduced to many households in the form of doorbells and light switches, and portable devices such as portable flashlights and cameras. The introduction of the on/off push-button switch to the flashlight was preceded by the invention of the portable battery in 1887. The definition of a button was something “that an individual could press to perform an action” (ibid., 818). Already the first electric buttons operated on binary logic. They could be either “on” or “off”, “yes” or “no”.

From the beginning, the button represented ease, luxury and control. These ideological aspects gained many faces through the development of the button. As early as 1888 George Eastman from Kodak introduced a commercial camera with the slogan “You press the button, we do the rest”.<sup>9</sup> “[O]ne could merely press the button and then let machines safely take the lead”, concurs Plotnick (2012, 828). The button represented “wish-fulfillment” and “instant gratification” as in the World’s Columbian exposition in Chicago in 1892: “Linking instant gratification with simplistic technology, the world’s fair experience offered visitors a chance to live out a fantasy, if only briefly, of a button-powered world” (ibid.,

832). By 1950's the button was already everywhere, like in cars, where it was advertised as bringing "new motoring luxury". Consider the following commercial from the 1950's:

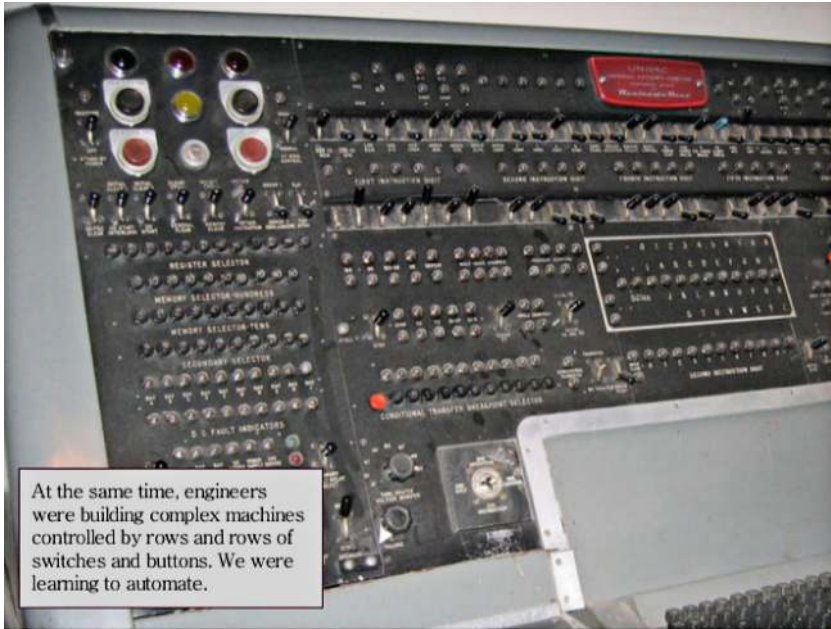


Fig. 2: Fragment of a commercial from a presentation "History of the Button" by Bill DeRouchey.<sup>10</sup>

The text reads: "Some new cars, especially those in the higher price range, are showing up with a surprisingly large crop of push buttons. If you want to raise or lower your window, you *touch a button*. If you want to adjust the driver's seat, *you push another* – and slide along to a *more comfortable position*" (italics mine). Driving a car had never been more effortless. By 1960's the button is found in household machines like ovens, stoves and telephones. Preparing food with an oven controlled by buttons is advertised as "push-button cooking".<sup>1</sup> At roughly the same time the first remote-control was introduced. The first remote control for TV had only two buttons, one for changing the channel and one for muting the sound, but it already portrays another ideological aspect of the button: control. This aspect becomes more vivid if we consider control boards for large



factories or airplanes. Operation of these highly complex technical environments required responsibility and expertise. Operating the *control board* required and *expert*.



*Fig. 3: Picture of a control board from a presentation “History of the Button” by Bill DeRouchey.*

Before landing on a computer mouse the button was found on the Atari joystick as well as Arcade-games in the 1970’s. The most successful players would be the ones who moved the joystick and pushed the buttons the fastest and with the most precision. The combination of moving the joystick and pushing several buttons is already close to the function of the computer mouse: a navigator for a two-dimensional graphic interface. As for the mouse itself, there were several projects, some secret military undertakings, others less secret, that were working on developing these “navigators” for graphic surfaces. The mouse that MacIntosh introduced in its computers in 1984 was based on an invention patented in the 1960’s by Douglas Engelbart. Now a supporting media device, to which we are “blind”, upon introduction was a definitive oddity. To illustrate the initial

newness of the mouse, let us consider the 16-page advertisement MacIntosh published in *Newsweek*. The advertisement was essentially a user's manual, part of which was explaining the use of the mouse in detail.

So, first of all, we made the screen layout resemble a desktop, displaying pictures of objects you'll have no trouble recognizing. File folders. Clipboards. Even a trash can.

Then we developed a natural way for you to pick up, hold, and move these objects around.

We put a pointer on the screen, and attached the pointer to a small, rolling box called a "mouse". The mouse fits in your hand, and as you move the mouse around your desktop, you move the pointer on your screen.

To tell a MacIntosh Personal Computer what you want to do, you simply move the mouse until you're pointing to the object or function you want. Then click the button on top of the mouse, and you instantly begin working with that object. Open a file folder. Review the papers inside. Read a memo. Use a calculator. And so on. (MacIntosh 1984)<sup>12</sup>

Using the mouse meant having to learn new skills. The virtual desktop was now operable by the rolling box dubbed "mouse". An essential difference in using the mouse in comparison to previous buttons was that there was a real button, that of the mouse's, and real pushing that corresponded to a virtual button on the screen and a virtual hand with which the user pushes *in* the screen. So, the virtual button is the effective remediation of the real button: even in our contemporary digital environment, links, i.e. clickable elements, are marked by the cursor showing a hand whose index finger is erect, ready to push the virtual button.

To conclude this brief history, the button has travelled from a one function switch to a massive control board which needs expertise, and back to being just one button on a mouse for us to click on. The ideological aspects of the button, ease, luxury, control, and expertise are still very

much present in our contemporary culture. For example, a *Forbes* article from 2012 discusses user opinions of push-button ignition, found in 58 percent of U.S. car models. “A quick poll of KBB.com visitors in August found that 36 percent of respondents ‘love[d]’ their push-button starts and another 17 percent would ‘love to’ have one but didn’t.” According to the article, push-button ignition is still mostly found in the top-end models. To give one last example, I encountered an advertisement for painkillers recently in a Helsinki metro tunnel:

The text says: “Mute your pain. Take Panadol Zapp”. We see that muting the pain is as easy as pressing the red button.



Fig. 4: Advertisement for Panadol Zapp.

The core function of the button has been the same since its conception. One pushes the button, and *through an operation that is hidden under the interface, something else happens*. By something else I mean that the pushing is not necessarily in an analogical nor even physical relation to the action the button ignites. I push a button and light appears. Sound appears, washing machine starts to churn, a bomb goes off. The force I use for pressing is in no correlation with the magnitude of what happens. Granted, there are cases when the correlation is clearer, as Søren Pold suggests, for example in the old tape recorder’s tape head, which one concretely pushes into place with the button (Pold 2008, 32). In any case, in the mechanical and electronic world, what happens is determined. A button has a single function; and if there are many functions, there are many buttons. Even the remote control has its own button for every function, like the early mobile phones.

The relationship of what happens when the button is pressed changes when the button is introduced to the digital environment. The screen can accommodate the control board or the desktop, in fact, it can represent any kinds of buttons which can have many kinds of functions. Thus, with clicking on an element, the operation, although much conventionalized, is in principle *indeterminate*.<sup>13</sup> It changes the relationship from an action with an analog and hardwired basis to a symbolic one. However, it “disguises” the arbitrariness of the relation as “solid and mechanical in order to make it appear as if the functionality were hardwired: they [the interface buttons] aim to bring the old solid analog machine into the interface” (Ibid.). So, the interface tries to retain the ideals of ease and control and evoke the analogue relation and its “trustworthiness” (Ibid.). But in fact, since the relation is symbolic and arbitrary, clicking can yield many kinds of results, and this is the opening digital literature exploits. In conclusion, the move from the push-button to click is the same as with from paper to screen and typewriter to keyboard: from a static, mechanical environment, to a dynamic and potential environment.

To illustrate the dynamic nature of the digital screen further, let us consider what Mark. B. N. Hansen writes about the digital image in *New Philosophy for New Media*:

If the digital image is an accumulation of such [discrete, elementary points] discontinuous fragments, each of which can be addressed independently of the whole, there is no longer anything materially linking the content of the image with its frame, [...] the image becomes a merely contingent configuration of numerical values that can be subjected to “molecular” modification, that lacks any motivated relation to any image-to-follow, and indeed that always already contains all potential images-to-follow as permutations of the set of its “elementary” numerical points. (Hansen 2004, 9)<sup>14</sup>

Hansen concludes: The digital image “allows for an almost limitless potential to modify the image, that is, *any* image – and specifically, to modify the image in ways that disjoin it from any fixed technical frame [...]” (ibid., 9). The simulated buttons on which we click exist on these kinds of

digital screens, and the link, the “motivated relation”, that still exists in the mechanical and electric button, is in the digital screen and image, lacking. Furthermore, the image on the screen does not exist in the way it was understood before, instead, it has become a process.<sup>15</sup> This, I argue, results in an “ontological” instability of the screen experience. In the same way we don’t have a “page”, but instead, we have a simulation of a page that is really, virtually, composed of numerous elementary points that, which with continuous processing, constantly keep up the simulation of the image.<sup>16</sup> The simulation of the image aside, the platform could accommodate any organization of the same elementary points. The digital platform is dynamic, i.e. it has the potential to change.

Here I would like to stress that the above description applies best from the standpoint of the user experience that does not take into account the underlying operations of the digital computer, which, as Matthew Kirschenbaum demonstrates in *Mechanisms* (2012 [2008]) can be argued to have a strictly determined and material basis. The data exists as actual physical signs on a magnetic hard drive. The computer registers these markings as voltage differences, which a software interprets and translates to the interface. This process, however sophisticated, is admittedly determinate, and I do not aim to reproduce the “medial ideology” Kirschenbaum criticizes.<sup>17</sup> The digital screen, however grounded in physicality, from a user standpoint and in comparison to the mechanical and other static platforms such as paper, is dynamic and indeterminate. In fact, the “software simulation of a function” as Søren Pold states, “aims to hide its mediated character and acts *as if* the function were natural or mechanical in a straight cause-and-effect relation.” (Pold 2008, 33; italics mine). But, of course, it is not so: “it is conventional, coded, arbitrary, and representational, and as such also related to the cultural” (ibid., 33).

Looking into the interface experience we can note that the ‘ontological instability’ results in part from the lack of understanding of the operations underlying the interface. The fear of a lack of understanding was also felt when the push-button got widespread. The industry behind the button tried for several reasons to educate the common users as to the operations of the electric push-button. This project of education ultimately failed: “[T]he button’s simple design, on/off capabilities, and symbolic power meant that few people needed to know what happened behind the

interface” (Plotnick 2012, 836-838). As said above, this is the case with many a user’s attitude towards contemporary media devices; we only need to know how to operate the interface.

To trace the user experience of the digital screen, let us look at two early accounts of attitudes towards the underlying processes of computers. Michael Heim writes in *Electric Language: A Philosophical Discussion of Word Processing* (1987): “The types of physical cues that naturally help a user make sense out of mechanical movements and mechanical connections are simply not available in the electronic environment” (quoted in Kirschenbaum 2012, 40). Heim proceeds to compare writing on a computer screen to riding a bicycle, and saying that riding a bicycle is far more understandable, since there are more clues to how the bicycle works:

Physical signs of the ongoing process, the way that responses of the person are integrated into the operation of the system, the source of occasional blunders and delays, all these are hidden beneath the surface of the activity of digital writing. No pulleys, springs, wheels, or levers are visible; no moving carriage returns indicate what the user’s action is accomplishing and how that action is related to the end product. (Kirschenbaum 2012, 40)

Moreover, there is a physical feeling of causality and control in riding a bicycle. One pedals and feels how the power of the rotating cogwheel translates directly to the speed of the bike. By pressing the brake the power of pressing is in direct relationship to the force of braking, and so on. The mechanical and electric button already lacks the direct feedback of the action, but it is not yet unknown in ways the digital button is. Jacques Derrida writes:

[W]ith pens and typewriters you think you know *how* it works, how ‘it responds’. Whereas with computers, even if people know how to use them up to a point, they rarely know, intuitively and without thinking – at any rate, I don’t know – *how* the internal demon of the apparatus operates. What rules it obeys. This secret with no mystery frequently marks

our dependence in relation to many instruments of modern technology. We know how to use them and what they are for, without knowing what goes on with them, in them, on their side. (Derrida 2005, 23)

Derrida is describing a typical situation, perhaps even more so in the contemporary environment of mobile digital technology (whereas the interview the above words are from was conducted in 1996). It is important, however, to note that this secret is without mystery. It is more due to lack of understanding than demonic proceedings. As the devices get more complicated they seem all the stranger, and the more knowledge we would require to understand them. Hansen writes about 21st century media in his recent book *Feed Forward* (2015), in which he describes how twenty first century media work below the threshold of human perception, which results in a dramatic reconceptualisation of the human experience. “Given that computational processes occur at time frames well below the thresholds constitutive of human perceptual experience, they seem to introduce levels of operability that impact our experience without yielding any perceptual correlate” (Hansen 2015, 4). But let us, for the moment, take a step back and return to the simple act of clicking in the digital environment.

To reiterate: In the analogue realm, the technical medium is in an analogous relationship to the represented, like a clock whose hands move every passing second, or a videotape which moves at the speed of the presentation. In the electric button, this analogous relationship exists only in some instances. Most often, however, we press a button, and something that is not analogous to the movement, happens. The change can, as alluded to above, be portrayed through the example of the typewriter and the keyboard, too. The typewriter can be seen both as an analogue and digital medium at the same time. Compared to handwriting, typewriting is digital: writing by hand happens in a continuous, analogous movement to the signs produced, but the typewriter, on the contrary, proceeds in jumps and jerks, creating full, standardized, discrete signs. The creation of meaningful sentences through the permutation of discrete signs can be seen as digital. However, compared to a digital *device*, the typewriter is mechanical and in a sense analogue; the pressing of a key produces a sign through a visible and tangible operation where the speed and force of pushing are analogous

to the speed and imprint of the appearing letters. Moreover, the typewriter's relationship to its functions is entirely determinate: pushing a certain key will always yield the same result, or at least the same 2-3 results (one can change the color and the size to some degree), or else it is broken. The digital button's relation to what it does is symbolical and arbitrary, which means that the action is not in a definite, mechanical or electric relation to the result. In this sense the relationship is *indeterminate*. The pushing of the same button can be programmed to change without any "physical cues" on the interface as to the change in its operations. This simple difference betrays the essence of the digital platform, its dynamic potential. This essential difference is present in the comparison of the "yes" and "no" of the two versions of the *zaroum*.

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What separates *zaroum* from *archives zaroum* is the push of a button, the act of clicking, and the dynamic potential of the screen. The clicking initiates changes that are not in any necessary relation to the act of pushing a button. And since we are not dealing with mechanics in which the act of pushing a button is determinate, the clicking can, in theory, be programmed to yield any kinds of results.

Language, bound on paper in *zaroum*, is presented in the digital in *archives zaroum*. With a platform that can *show* change – once a word is written<sup>18</sup> it can be deleted, it can be reshuffled, it can move to other contexts – poetry such as Rinne's finds adequate means of expression as it itself presents a state of perpetual change. With the digital platform it is unhinged from the concrete, static form into a dynamic, potential form.

Moreover, it is the reader who initiates the change and explores the potential by clicking. Besides moving the eyes, clicking is the most formative readerly action of *archives zaroum*. The reader is occupying two chairs at the same time, she is both the driver and the passenger; she is the one who controls the clicking, but she doesn't know what the clicking will do (except after reading all the poems). The role of the reader, as it were, in the case of *archives zaroum*, is both active and passive.

The function of the button and of clicking often forces the user to binary choices. Consider a typical situation of accepting or refusing the usage of licensed software. The button's ideological aspect of control ("You push the



button, we do the rest”) is in contrast with the long legal agreement one is asked to read carefully. As Pold notes, when installing Apple’s iTunes player, “its states that by clicking the button you accept a 4000-word contract” (Pold 2008, 34), which includes information ranging from violation of copyright to developing nuclear missiles. There is no way to partially agree to the conditions, it is either yes or no, and accepting is as easy as pushing a button.

The structure of binary choices is explored throughout *zaroum* and *archives zaroum*. In addition to the yes/no promise we find, to mention some of them, the binaries of *up/down*, *here/there*, *west/east*, *vorwärts/ ruckwärts* (*forward and backward*), *home/nowhere*, *before/after*, *time/space*, *either/or*, *sky/sea*, and *a part/apart*. All of the elements are explored by clicking, upon which one or the other option is prominent. By parading these binaries *archives zaroum* shows that they form a structure of thinking that is conventional instead of being necessary, and, like spatial binaries such as *east/west* and *up/down*, depends entirely where one stands, on one’s *perspective*. So, similarly to the binary choice of pushing the button the structure of language and thinking is shown as arbitrary.

Clicking is obviously not a feature unique to *archives zaroum*, but instead forms a large part of reading in the digital platform in general. In some poems the virtual button is in fact staged as a button. For example Edouard Kac’s bio-poem *Genesis* asks the web reader to push a button to cause biological mutations in real bacteria. In the *Program: Møntvask* (2003) by the group StadtFlur the reader pushes remediated virtual buttons to initiate changes. But staging the button as button, however, is not relevant: everything that is clickable has become a button which, under its seemingly simple interface, hides an abyss of values, assumptions and beliefs.

### **Epilogue: The Killing Machine Revisited**

*The Killing Machine* I encountered in AROS plays with the allusion to Kafka’s short story “In the Penal Colony” (1919), in which there is a killing machine that crunches humans with blind, inanimate, senseless power. The chair inside the rectangular structure of Cardiff & Miller’s *Killing Machine* looks like a dentist’s chair over which several tools hover and move in mechanical inexorability. What Kafka’s and Cardiff & Miller’s killing machines have in common is the play with the fear that results from a lack of control; someone or something nameless and faceless, essentially unknown

is exerting power over a victim, over us. Kafka's short story is written in the following decades of the invention of both the typewriter, which the killing machine resembles, and the button, on whose unknown operations it plays with. From the interface point of view Cardiff & Miller's installation is determinate. One pushes the button once and it always performs the same movements and produces the same sounds. However, the visitor who pushes it for the first time does not know what will happen. She is urged to push the button and initiate the action without her knowing the result. Here too, the slogan "You push the button, we do the rest" applies, but in a morbid manner. The horror and pleasure of this artwork derives from the ambiguous position of control and helplessness, of curiosity and fear that hinge on the push of a button.

The fear of the unknown can easily be the feeling of the user of twenty first century media devices, which may seem to have a trajectory independent of their users. What the user is doing most of the time is only pushing buttons. The device is indeed doing the rest, and it is doing it so fast that the human senses do not quite keep up. Yet their impact on our lives is undeniable. This can result to a feeling of being seated in the passenger seat, the feeling of many commercial airline pilots, who, due to automation, the underlying processes below the interface, actually fly the plane for approximately three minutes per flight, and are otherwise reduced to the role of observers of data (cf. Carr 2014). The way, of course, to get back to the proverbial driver's seat, is the study of new media, an understanding of the underlying processes and their effects on our activities, be they clicking around to read news or a conscious close reading strategy of reading poetry.

Once you press the button, "there is no going back", says the brochure for the *Killing Machine*. The epigraph for Cia Rinne's *zaroum*, "What is once thought cannot be unthought", reflects the same idea. In fact, the sentence is taken from Friedrich Dürrenmatt's play *The Physicists* (1964; *Die Physiker*, performed and published 1962), which deals with the responsibility that comes along technological development and scientific innovation (specifically, innovations in warfare). In the play a character named Möbius tries to shield the world from a scientific innovation that would enable the most powerful weapon of all time. According to one of the characters, destroying the manuscript that holds the formula for the weapon would not suffice, since the ideas have already occurred to someone and thus "cannot

be unthought”. “la promesa” then, in the beginning of *zaroum* and *archives zaroum* is a bold invocation to the reader, suggesting that the thoughts in the book are powerful and need to be treated with care.

In the above sense the epigraph can also be interpreted as speaking for artistic creation and reception. The new media of our contemporary moment have an impact on us in ways we perceive and in ways we do not. In this essay I have tried to track down one aspect of this change. The simple act of clicking, I have argued, as compared to its precedent, the push-button, reveals the change from a static platform to a dynamic one, and covers under it a plethora of beliefs and conventions.

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## Notes

- 1 Several of the articles in this volume were initially presented as papers at this conference.
- 2 Cia Rinne’s *zaroum* was published in 2001.
- 3 “What was once thought / cannot be unthought.” I will return to the epigraph in the end of the essay.
- 4 By “spatially consecutive” I mean simply that the elements on the page have to be physically one after another. For the organization or direction of reading one can use words like “linear”, “non-linear”, or “hyper”.

- 5 For digital literary work that exploits the potential of change and layering of information beautifully see e.g. Jud Morrissey's *The Jew's Daughter* (2000) or Samantha Gorman's and Danny Cannizzaro's *Pry* (2014). Additionally, a simple ebook without the location indicators would play with the possibility of having an almost indefinite amount of information. In contrast, *zaroum* doesn't have page numbers; it doesn't need them since the reader can assess the breadth of the book easily by hand.
- 6 Clicking is not the only means by which one navigates the digital screen. We also scroll and mouse over without clicking to make changes to the platform. Some may give commands by hitting the keys of the keyboard or even typing the commands in. Touching is ever more increasing. Touching is not just a different way to click. It changes the relation to the screen. This discussion is, however, outside the scope of this essay. Here I will, for the sake of simplicity, only discuss clicking.
- 7 The ideas of this essay related to Cia Rinne's poetry and its remediation of old technological media are further developed in my forthcoming book on reading strategies of digital poetry.
- 8 I am indebted to Till Heilman, whose project "The Push Button and the Digital Condition" is in progress, for pointing me in a direction of useful resources after a dispiriting search.
- 9 [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/You\\_Press\\_the\\_Button,\\_We\\_Do\\_the\\_Rest](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/You_Press_the_Button,_We_Do_the_Rest).
- 10 <http://www.slideshare.net/billder/history-of-the-button-at-sxsw>.
- 11 <http://www.slideshare.net/billder/history-of-the-button-at-sxsw>.
- 12 Scanned pages of the Newsweek can be found at <http://toastbucket.com/apple1984ad/>.
- 13 Here I refer to Espen Aarseth's definition of determinability: "This variable concerns the stability of the traversal function; a text is determinate if the adjacent scriptons of every scripton are always the same; if not, the text is indeterminate" (Aarseth 1997, 63). This means, in short, that whatever the user function, it produces always the same result. This, as said, happens with push-buttons. In the remediated computer screen interface button, operated by the mouse, the pushing can yield many different results.
- 14 Hansen adds here that the image and its frame are "understood in its Bergsonian-Deleuzian function as a cut into the flux of the real". To get into this conversation is out of the scope of this essay.
- 15 See Manovich (2001, 100) for image not being traditional; and Hansen (2004, 10) for image as process.

- 16 A recent development in technology has enabled screens to “rest”, which means they are not continually renewing their images. This does not, however, change the fundamental potential of the screen.
- 17 The ideology of ephemerality, fungibility and homogeneity (Kirschenbaum 2008, 19).
- 18 The expression: to write something *down* sounds intuitively wrong in the digital environment. We are not effectively putting anything down, what we write appears on the screen in front of us or wherever the screen is positioned.



## FROM PAGE TO SCREEN *The Poetry Project* and the poetics of landscape

ANNE KARHIO

During Ireland's 2013 EU Presidency, the Kinsale Arts Festival, Poetry Ireland and the Royal Hibernian Academy launched *The Poetry Project*, a collaborative venture that brought together Irish poetry and video art. Each Monday, from January to September, a poem coupled with a video artist's work was emailed to the recipients of a mailing list reaching as many as 118 countries around the world. The 36 poems and videos were also archived on the project website. The team carrying out the project consisted of Project Director Gemma Tipton, *The Irish Times* poetry editor Gerry Smyth, Director of Poetry Ireland Joseph Woods, Director Patrick T. Murphy of The Royal Hibernian Academy, and a group of administrators and technicians. The project was jointly funded by the Culture Programme of Ireland's EU Presidency, Culture Ireland and Foras na Gaeilge – as well as the Arts Council of Ireland, Fáilte Ireland and Cork County Council as the financial supporters of the Kinsale Arts Festival. This essay will focus on one specific element in the videos released as a part of *The Poetry Project*, namely the representation of landscape in these works.<sup>1</sup> More specifically, it will discuss how the various acts of framing that take place in the poems and the videos, and within the cultural and institutional context of the project, produce different representations of landscape as they recontextualize or reframe the same verbal/visual terrain.

The chosen poems had all been published in printed collections before being included in *The Project*, and were written by established and emerging contemporary Irish writers, from Seamus Heaney, Derek Mahon and Eiléain Ní Chuilleanáin to Sinéad Morrissey and Peter Sirr, to mention but a few. The video art followed a slightly different trajectory: more than half of the videos were created specifically for *The Poetry Project*, and the artists often produced them with the assigned poems in mind. Some had existing work that could be adapted or edited to suit the purposes of the project. For some of the visual artists, video, animation or digital imaging



were new technological tools for artistic production, and thus offered both a challenge and a possibility for experimentation. Unlike the poets, the video artists would also have been aware of the intermedial context within which their work would be embedded; their videos would not only be in dialogue with the poetic texts, but would also be disseminated via the specific online platform of *The Poetry Project*.

In short, there were several stages involved in the creation and reception of the poem videos, and each of these, this essay argues, was an instance of another act of framing of the landscapes depicted in the individual texts, images and videos. Landscape has been a recurring *leitmotif* in contemporary Irish literature and art, and is not only closely tied to the historical emergence of the idea of the nation and its manifestations in various areas of cultural production, but is also inextricable from the emergence and evolution of the media technologies on which visual and literary representations, too, depend. As John Wylie notes, our understanding of landscape as an artistic trope is closely connected with “the uprooting of vision from the classical order of knowledge in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries [and] its thorough relocation in regimes of machine vision which take off in the twentieth century” (Wylie 2007, 4). Thus, the media contexts of printed poetry and audiovisual art, and the online digital environment where the works included in *The Project* were published, all have an impact on how landscape in many of these videos is to be understood. These media also reflect the functions, values and goals of different forms of cultural and artistic production, including poetry. The voice(s) of lyric poetry, the objectives of the publishing industry, the views of the arts community and the institutions producing and curating the video art, the ambitions of the project’s funders, and the expectations of the transnational audiences all participated in the formation of the landscapes discussed below, made available within the framework of “Irish poetry”. In other words, when the individual poems and video works selected for *The Poetry Project* were presented to the envisioned audiences of the project, they were at the same time embedded in a new cultural, institutional and media context.

The idea of framing informs this essay, and should be understood in the sense of the visual imagery of borders presented in the works, the digital borders framing the videos on the project website, as well as the

wider institutional framework. Here both Gerard Genette's concept of the paratext and Derrida's term *parergon* can be employed to illustrate the act and purpose of framing, and its importance to the emergence of landscape in visual arts, as well as in literature. As Mikko Pirinen points out, the two terms have been used in similar contexts and often in a confusing manner. Both contain the Greek presuffix *para-*, meaning "at or to one side of, beside, side by side", and demarcate that which is produced in the inside by framing it verbally or visually; "the concepts refer to elements that are somehow related to artworks (or texts), but do not belong to them properly" – in other words, both underline the significance of that which lies outside the work itself, and of the border between the work and its material setting, to its meaning (Pirinen 2013, 241). While Genette is, as Pirinen notes, "concerned more with concrete and practical questions", his compatriot's focus is primarily "conceptual and ontological" (Pirinen 2013, 245). For the purposes of this essay, Derrida's discussion on the *parergon* is adopted to illustrate the figurative versus literal dimensions of the conceptual and visual frames that surround the videos of *The Poetry Project*; Genette's theory of the paratext, however, allows for a more concrete highlighting of how context and recontextualisation contribute to the representations of landscapes in the works.

In short, alongside the specific features of the landscapes in the discussed poem videos themselves, attention is here paid on how the various literal acts and figurative imagery of framing participate in the emergence of landscapes in the works. Different meanings, or different interpretative layers become apparent depending on which instance of framing is examined. Understanding landscapes presented within the project through the idea of embedded and/or overlapping textual, visual and institutional frames and frameworks helps demonstrate not only the continuing interest in landscape and its representation in Irish literature and arts, and the changing forms these representations assume, but also how the historical, cultural and technological developments in media platforms continue to impact on how the motif is perceived. I draw on Anne Friedberg's study *The Virtual Window: From Alberti to Microsoft* (2009) to demonstrate how developments in media technology have contributed to contemporary visual aesthetics, or what she terms a new "visual vernacular" of the age of the graphical user interface. Friedberg argues that it is the multiple-win-

dow view of the GUI in particular that has informed the 21<sup>st</sup> century popular visual aesthetic of provisional and fragmented perspectives. Friedberg, too, employs Derrida's discussion on the *parergon*, which bridges the gap between window as a literal, architectural aperture, and the metaphoric potential of the framed opening; she particularly pays attention to how Derrida "zooms out – from the frame to the wall to the architectural space that vaults around the wall, to the historical, economic, and political context of the work" (ibid., 14). Consequently, she applies the philosopher's engagement with the *parergon* as a frame to her own discussion on "[the] everyday frames through which we see things – the 'material' frames of movie screens, television sets, computer screens, car windshields" and "the dominance of the frame and its visual system" (Friedberg 2009, 14). Derrida's use of the image of a view through nested doorways, "in *mise en abyme*", illustrates the convergence of the literal and metaphoric in the concept of the frame. In the works discussed below, a similar process takes place, as the reader/viewer zooms in through the computer screen, the screen window of the website, the framed thumbnails and, finally, the frames depicted, verbally and visually, in the poems and the videos included in the project.

## II

Poetry's intimate relationship with place and landscape in Ireland is well documented (see for example Smyth 2001, 56). The historical significance of the bardic and oral tradition, and its continuing presence in poetry have been widely discussed in previous scholarship, and the Gaelic tradition of *dinnseanchas* (or *dinnsenchas*, as the spelling varies) or "lore of the place" in particular continues to be evoked by contemporary poets.<sup>2</sup> Irish landscapes are, in the words of Patrick J. Duffy, "narrative constructions produced by writers and often more real than reality itself" (Duffy 1997, 66), and nowhere does this relationship manifest itself as profoundly as in poetry. For Pat Sheeran, in Ireland particularly the idea of *genius loci* has been replaced by that of *genius fabulae*, the spirit of the story of the place, and "we are dealing what Baudrillard and Eco, in other contexts, described as hyper-reality. The boundaries between fiction and reality blur and scripts and simulations of the real [place] become more real than reality itself" (Sheeran 2003, 149). Importantly, Sheeran underlines landscape as always already

“virtual”, in the sense used by Friedberg, as a “proxy” for the material terrain (Friedberg 2009, 8). It is a product of verbal and visual expression.

But despite their relative freedom from the pressures of canon and tradition in comparison to poetry, in recent visual and audiovisual art, too, landscape has remained a constant presence. Caoimhín Mac Giolla Léith and Nick Kelly have noted that the last decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century marked a shift from “celebration” to “interrogation” in representing landscape in Irish visual arts, a phenomenon that coincided with a shift in emphasis from rural to urban experience in Irish society. Similar traits and developments have marked both Irish poetry and its criticism in the past couple of decades, and a continuing preoccupation with the role of landscape now coexists with a simultaneous move away from rural landscape as a marker and embodiment of Irish cultural specificity. Poets, as well as visual artists, would now emphasize landscape as a constructed, mediated and in many ways problematic domain, shaped by social, cultural, political and economic forces, and have sought to develop a new aesthetic to reflect this attitude. *The Poetry Project* is thus the product of a historical moment when Irish cultural production is interrogating, or even sidestepping, established views on place and identity, while its own role in promoting Irish literature and art continues to embed the included works within the framework provided by the country’s official national, cultural and literary institutions.

According to Project Director Gemma Tipton, one of the motivating factors behind the setting up the project was a desire to bring poetry into the public arena; while such a public setting could have meant places like “billboards” or “the sides of buildings”, outdoor public spaces were eventually discarded in favour of an online setting (Tipton 2014). The project would thus aim to bridge the gap between “high” and popular literature and art (verbal and visual), and to democratize poetry by placing it in a (digital) everyday environment.<sup>3</sup> This inevitably raises questions on the links between literary and artistic expression, and the institutions that support creative practice. Furthermore, the project’s starting point highlights the role of audiences and institutions in the representation and production of verbal/visual/aural landscapes. In a project endorsed (directly and indirectly) by institutions including Fáilte Ireland (Ireland’s tourism authority) and Culture Ireland, and promoted internationally by Irish embassies, what is the relationship between landscape imagery promoted by

the tourism industry, and the landscapes presented in the works emailed to an international audience? How does the significance of the same visually or verbally depicted terrain alter in a new media context, or does a new frame and a new framework produce an entirely new landscape?

Tipton notes that she “had imagined that the biggest audience [for *The Project*] would be the Irish diaspora, but through the [...] rhizomatic way it spread [...] some of the most ardent fans it had actually had nothing to do with Irish culture” (Tipton 2014). So while the intention was to reach an audience with existing links with Ireland outside the country’s geographical borders, the process did not entirely follow this envisioned trajectory. Nevertheless, as the poems were removed from their original context in printed collections and published online, they entered into a dialogue not with the other poems in specific volumes, but with the video works that accompanied them, as well as the other poems chosen for the purpose. They were now framed – verbally, visually and institutionally – by the title *The Poetry Project: poetry and art from Ireland*, and participated in the “celebration of Ireland’s literary and visual creativity” (*The Poetry Project* website). This title would inform the audience’s engagement with the selected material.

According to Pirinen, a title of an art work can be understood as one of its paratexts; more specifically, it is a peritext, “positioned spatially around the text” (Pirinen 2013, 245). Naming a work can also simultaneously claim it for a certain cultural/institutional setting. Whether addressing Irish identity or not (and poets of the younger generation in particular appear increasingly indifferent to this paradigm), and regardless of whether they were written or produced in Ireland, each work would now be identified as Irish, and disseminated as such to an international audience. Pirinen further suggests that Barbara E. Savedoff’s engagement with frames and “presentational context” can be understood as an example of paratext (ibid., 247). Savedoff’s focus on “the actual physical surroundings” of a work is significant both historically and socially (see Pirinen 2013, 247-248 & Savedoff 2001, 324). In the case of *The Poetry Project*, the project website, as well as the screen views offered to the audience are the surroundings within which the videos are presented and received; the material environment for the digital works is multiplied, extending to thousands of locations around the world. While to some extent such a multiplication of presentational environments also applies to printed books, the audiovisual

online environment's global reach in particular highlights how the computerized setting creates, literally and metaphorically, the outermost frame or presentational context in a series of embedded frames or frameworks. For Derrida, the *parergon* "gives rise to the work" (Derrida 1978, 9). Similarly, it is the act of perception and presentation that transforms a physical terrain into a landscape. For Genette, too, the function of the paratext is to "make present, to ensure the text's presence in the world" (Genette 1987, 1). Each paratext, as presentational context, re-frames and thus recreates the landscape that the frame demarcates. A landscape may not be identified as "Irish" in the text of the poem, but, somewhat paradoxically perhaps, becomes Irish when presented and received in the projects digital/virtual transnational setting.

The fact that the poems and many of the videos included in the project were produced independently of each other before they were brought together on the project website also raises questions regarding genre, media, and their mutual relationship. The chosen poems were mostly short lyric pieces, and while not necessarily conservative by the standards of late 20<sup>th</sup>/early 21<sup>st</sup> century Irish poetry, they did not in any profound manner challenge existing traditions or definitions of poetry. Scholars like Alex Davis have frequently addressed "the absence of an historical avant-garde in Irish poetry", and the social and historical reasons for such an absence (Davis 2000, 81-82). Due to its shorter history and less discernible links with tradition, however, video art has been less confined by expectations of conforming to established cultural ideas or ideals. Tipton herself notes how "it's harder to make judgments about video art because you don't have a whole canon to relate it to" (Tipton 2014). This is not to say that video artists would be oblivious to questions of history, tradition and identity in their work – Fionna Barber, for example, has mapped the complex relationship between visual and audiovisual arts, and cultural identity in Ireland in the late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> century (Barber 2013, 196-278). Yet it is easy to see how aesthetic or formal experimentation would be more readily accepted, or even expected, in a field of artistic production which engages with more recently adopted media, less constrained by cultural and institutional conventions.

Internationally, the development of film and video art in the 20<sup>th</sup> century are closely intertwined, and the rise of digital media has blurred

any existing divisions. Yet the emergence of video in particular as a relatively low-cost medium for audiovisual production has been crucial to its role as an experimental art form. As Michael Rush, for example, has noted, the birth of “the moving image” itself led to “a new spirit of experimentation” in art in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. But it was the video camera that, from the 1960s onwards, offered new degrees of “ease, portability and [...] affordability to the art of the moving image”. Though it was once considered by some “a poor cousin of cinema”, artists would make use of the new technology to challenge established institutional expectations and aesthetic forms, and in this Ireland is no exception. More recently, digital media have made it even easier to “make use of whatever means of moving-image technology is available, frequently a combination of technologies, for their artistic expression”. (Rush 2003, 7-10) Much has been written on how the emergence of the World Wide Web, for example, has resulted in new forms of literary expression. But while the potential of digital media has so far been only patchily and tentatively explored by Irish poets, new media platforms have been readily adopted for the dissemination of poetry online, and for publishing existing poetic works in new audiovisual formats. In other words, new media lend themselves equally to experimentation and the affirming of institutional values and structures. Thus, in the poem videos published within *The Poetry Project*, the experimental potential of combining poetry with audiovisual video art is to be considered alongside the cultural institutional framework supporting the project, or, the aesthetic potential of intermediality is moderated by the presentational setting. If, as Ian Davidson suggests, one of the functions of the poetry anthology has been to “create a national ‘treasure house’ or ‘show case’ of poetry” (Davidson 2007, 139), *The Poetry Project* website also acts as a digital anthology, and is presented as a “treasure house” and “show case” of Ireland’s poetic and artistic talent.

Not all of the poems or video works included in *The Poetry Project* focus on landscape, and even fewer specify their depicted landscape as Irish. Yet most interrogate the relationship between reader/viewer and the material, phenomenal world in ways which have direct consequences on how landscapes are created and perceived. It should be noted here that the terms “place” and “landscape” are at times used interchangeably. Often, the distinction between the two terms is understood as one of

degree rather than kind: Edward J. Casey, for example, notes that “places I understand to be the constituent unites of every landscape, its main modules, its prime numbers” (Casey 2002, xv). But landscape in Western culture is intrinsically linked to human activity and perception, as well as representation: the concept emerged in the context of visual arts in the 16<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>4</sup> In the sense of a “perceived vista” it relies on viewpoint and visual perception more prominently than “places”, which, as Edward Relph has characterized, are “*centres* of our immediate experiences of the world” (Relph 1976, 141; my emphasis). While Casey does go on to outline the historical development of landscape as a genre in visual arts, he pays little attention to how the aesthetics of landscape evolved alongside developments in media and technology. Renaissance scholar Leon Battista Alberti’s 1435 treatise *De pictura* famously introduced the use of perspective within the rectangular frame, described as *aperta finestra* or open window; according to Anne Friedberg, Alberti’s window metaphor was intended for the “representation of narrative *historia*, not for empty landscapes of window-views”, but has been repeatedly understood as an “[opening] onto an un-tampered view of nature” that has “haunted” the subsequent centuries’ engagement with landscape and its visual representation (Friedberg 2009, 32). Thus Alberti’s treatise, and its emphasis on perspective and framing, is a useful reference point for understanding the contemporary engagement with landscape as formed through human perception, as constructed and represented, rather than through mimetic correspondence with a pre-existing physical terrain.

Mac Giolla Léith’s observation regarding a shift to an “interrogation” of landscape in Irish visual arts also applies to poetry, and is well illustrated by the frequent use of the imagery of frames and framed views in the work of a number of contemporary writers. This affirms Friedberg’s point on how the emergence of the multiple-window screen view of the graphical user interface in particular has led to the emergence of a “new visual vernacular” that is “multiple, adjacent, postperspectival” (Friedberg 2009, 22).<sup>5</sup> Such a “visual vernacular” informs not only the aesthetic and formal aspects of the poems and videos published within *The Poetry Project*, but also the project’s complex cultural, social and political framework. From scholars, it requires alertness to the aesthetic significance of changing technologies and new presentational settings.





installation. The audiovisual work paired with Fallon's poem was produced specifically to accompany the chosen poem.

As Patricia Coughlan has observed, Bernard O'Donoghue is a poet whose work's "critical neglect [...] partly stems from his placing, as the title of his 1999 collection puts it, 'here nor there': an early-1960s migrant from North Cork, he is an Oxford academic specializing in medieval literature" (Coughlan 2009, 182). Despite his prolific poetic and critical production, Coughlan also notes how O'Donoghue's "recognition within the received contemporary canon of Irish poetry is at best muted" (ibid., 182). Michael Parker has similarly drawn attention to the scarcity of critical attention dedicated to O'Donoghue's work, and suggests that his settling in England at an early age has led to an uncertainty as to his place within Irish literary culture, not dissimilarly to the reception of Louis MacNeice earlier in the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Parker 2009, 514). Perhaps for this very reason, however, O'Donoghue, whose work constantly returns to questions of home, exile and displacement, was an appropriate choice for a project which envisioned the Irish diaspora as its main audience. "Westering Home" from *Here Nor There* (1999) illustrates the above characterization of his verse. The poem is an exploration of Irish landscape through the description of a landscape not located in Ireland, with the descriptive details filling the poem as it seeks to zoom in close enough to such minutiae to discover the specific elements that would make a physical terrain an embodiment of cultural or national character:

Though you'd be pressed to say exactly where  
It first sets in, driving west through Wales  
Things start to feel like Ireland. It can't be  
The chapels with their clear grey windows,

Or the buzzards menacing the scooped valleys.  
In April, have the blurred blackthorn hedges

Something to do with it?

The rather ambiguous "things" starting to "feel like Ireland" describes a gradual process rather than a sudden arrival. It is not the crossing of a

border (or, in this case, the sea) that prompts the recognition of a vista as that of home, but rather this recognition takes place through association, in the accumulating encounters with specific details. The poem concludes with an acknowledgment of uncertainty of exact location and cultural context: "...the whole business / Neither here nor there, and therefore home." "Home", followed by a full stop, evokes an idea of a geographical place as a centre and a marker of belonging, only to state the opposite. In the title's "Westering", the verb's present continuous suggests a searching movement rather than arrival or conclusion. "Westering Home" narrows down on the question of where "Ireland" and Irish landscape begin – and therefore ends up affirming the condition or experience of seeking home rather than finding a secure match between that experience and physical location. The poem looks, sounds and feels like a traditional short lyric, the speaker first encountering and then internalizing his surroundings, but does not speak in a first-person voice; instead, it's subject is the more colloquial, yet distancing and impersonal second person "you"; none of us could pinpoint that very thing that makes a landscape "Irish". No epiphany or final union between lyric voice and landscape follows as an answer to the poem's question.

Ailbhe Ní Bhriain's *Great Good Places III* (2011) accompanies "Westering Home" and frequently produces, the project website informs us, videos with "composite and constructed imagery to create scenes in which the dimensions of time and place are out-of-joint". The works included in the series *Great Good Places I* to *IV* are all constructed from scenes of computer generated or manipulated deserted spaces, with embedded screen views or windows breaking the illusion of realism. Sean O'Sullivan describes *Great Good Places* as follows:

[...] the camera takes a fixed interior view of a dilapidated cottage overlooking the ocean. The floors of this slack space are textured by the light of a false sun. A rectangular portal stands perfectly upright against the back wall, chopped into the scene to show the statues of a faraway museum. Inside there, Ní Bhriain variously animates a set of visual cues: a dead fox or a taxidermied crow, and striped barrier tape hanging in the air. Her rooms refer to one another recursively. (O'Sullivan 2012)



Fig. 2: From *Ailbhe Ní Bháin*: *Great Good Places III*.

While the landscape of *Great Good Places III* is filled with what could easily be recognised as signifiers of rural Irish landscape (the whitewashed cottage, the green mountains sloping into the sea), it also undermines the nostalgic aura that often marks these landscapes; rather than ancient ruins, we see traces of contemporary neglect and disrepair (see Figure 2). Signs of modernity, including windmills, electric lines and light poles are ill at ease with notions of untainted rural authenticity, and the foreground of flat grey concrete is dotted with rubbish, including broken plastic cups, paper, pieces of wood, torn wrappings, and so forth.

On the right hand side of the cottage, a screen window raised on boxes depicts an empty interior, with an image of an abandoned (or not yet finished) empty room with a window – possibly the inside of the cottage in the picture. This seems like an x-ray view through the wall, while also resembling a window on a computer screen. A strip of striped construction plastic ribbon slowly flows from outside this screen frame into the picture and then disappears behind the interior wall, thus crossing the border between the different framed images – from outdoor landscape to indoor space, and then through the interior wall. The “great good places” depicted here is a ruin, but too modern for nostalgic distance. Instead, the plastic waste, the exposed electricity lines and the chipped paint evoke

a very mundane and dreary sense of absence in the present. As the view changes, we see a field and a stone wall, with a fox carcass in the foreground; the dead animal seems forgotten, its death insignificant rather than tragic. The abandoned exterior and interior views of the video may invite a construction of narrative of what was (before the cottage became empty, before the items littering the spaces became mere rubbish) but offer little faith in what might yet be. The slow, minimalistic soundtrack similarly evokes a feeling of empty or vacated space.

The visual objects in the video – the cottage, the mountains, the stone walls, and the green fields – and the verbal imagery in the poem are in dialogue, yet it is only after reading the poem (the text only appears on screen after the video ends), and its explicit question of where the “feeling” or Ireland starts, that we are prompted to return to the video and search it for similar signs of culturally specific location. It is thus possible to understand the viewing experience of this poem video as an encounter with a series of overlapping or embedded frames, from the computer screen to the window of the project website, to the thumbnail view of the video, and finally to the frames within the video itself. The question of O’Donoghue’s poem (“exactly where” does Ireland begin?), informs the viewing-reading process: each framed view, whether the computer screen or (architectural or digital) window, illustrates the attempt to define an inside and outside. The deeper one progresses through these apertures, the more evident their own role in the construction of the view becomes. But when the videos of *Great Good Places* were exhibited in a gallery setting in Dublin’s O’Connell Street, the contexts of both O’Donoghue’s poem and *The Poetry Project* website were missing. *Great Good Places III* was placed alongside Ní Bhriain’s other video works, with little if any sense of an explicitly Irish context (see O’Sullivan, n. pag.). How we understand the landscape visible in the poem video is therefore to a great extent defined by the framework provided by its material presentational setting. While both the poem and the video, and the two in dialogue, are interrogating the concept of “Ireland” or the role of material location in the portrayal of landscapes, such a sense of indeterminacy of location is bracketed as the poem video is presented as a part of a “celebration” or Irish cultural production.

#### IV

Peter Fallon, perhaps better known as an editor and publisher than as a poet, is a writer whose work demonstrates, as Kelly Sullivan has observed, an “agrarian sensibility” (Sullivan 2014, 152). Fallon’s translation of Virgil’s *Georgics*, and several of his poems engage with the pastoral tradition, and frequently draw on landscapes in County Meath in Ireland. Yet his poems also manifest “the aesthetic necessity of remaining distanced from the subjects about which he writes” (ibid.). For Justin Quinn, the collection *The Company of Horses* (2007), in which “A Brighter Blue (Ballynahinch Postscript)” was first published, is characterized by “a lack of interest in the revelations and emotional shifts that might be going on in the lyric speaker” (Quinn 2013, 174). Any embeddedness in a familiar native terrain is moderated by the awareness of poetry’s own position, and a constant recalibration of the interrelationship between poetic voice in relation to the material environment.

“A Brighter Blue” opens in an almost exaggeratedly nostalgic mode, describing a rural vista of “home” and lulling the reader to the tempo of the poem’s sonic pattern and slow iambic sway. The first stanzas also depict a relatively conventional setting of an agrarian Irish landscape:

At home they’ve rowed the barley straw  
they’ll aim to bale today;  
so long now since  
green May.

For darkening days  
are here again,  
more than mist,  
not quite rain.

Like O’Donoghue, Fallon, too, directs his attention at the idea of “home”, which, however, is now positioned quite firmly at the poem’s centre. In the fourth stanza, we encounter a line that is also included in the video, and puts an abrupt end to the succession of images in the preceding lines: “But who lives in the real / world?” After this line, the poem’s register changes

to a poignantly self-aware mode, and a highlighting of the constructed and virtual aspects of any landscape accessed through memory, language or visual representation.

So quicken it anew.  
Return, replace, repair,  
reconstitute, renew.

Turn up the sun!  
And put the leaves back  
on the trees.

...Wash the sky  
a brighter blue.

The penultimate stanza again contains many phrases also included in Cunningham's video: "Resurrect, resuscitate. / Refresh and renovate. Retrieve, regain and re-install, / translate". From a description of landscape, the focus turns to its constant revision through memory; a landscape can only be accessed as a second-hand representation, through memory. The prefix "re-" overwhelms the latter half of the poem and undermines the intimate connection between landscape and lyric voice. That the leaves have to be put back in the trees and the sky painted with "a brighter blue" suggests an anxiety with fading, and reminds the reader that memory is always inseparable from forgetting. Richard Rankin Russel, in his review of *The Company of Horses*, notes how the verbs dominating the rhyming quatrains of "A Brighter Blue" "pile up", and that the sonic patterns of the poem recall "the alliterative and assonantal hopefulfulness of Philip Larkin's late environmental poetry" (Russel 2008, 155). But while Russel goes on to suggest that the poem's imperative verbs seek to "send us back into the abundant energies of spring and summer", he ends up reading the poem as an act of what Svetlana Boym has termed "restorative nostalgia". Verbs like "refresh" and "re-install" are less suggestive of joyful possibility of return than a manifested self-awareness of the re-constructive process of memory, mediated by poetic expression itself. They critique any naïve belief in our ability to repeat, to recall experience in its original fullness. For Boym, this



Fig. 3: From Padraig Cunningham: *A Brighter Blue*.

latter type of nostalgia is “reflective”, aware of its own incomplete returns to the past (Boym 2001, 41-56).

The Roscommon, Ireland based Padraig Cunningham’s video *A Brighter Blue* was specifically produced to respond to Fallon’s poem. It opens with a split screen view of a natural/rural landscape – the upper part of the screen lacks a frame other than that of the edge of the screen window itself, whereas the lower part also depicts the frame of the window through which the video is shot. Throughout the video, both views pan to the right. In the below view, the domestic interior soon reveals a man sitting by the window, quietly reading a newspaper. This initial slow pan is then cut with a close-up of a roadside electronic sign that fills the entire screen window, initially zoomed too close for a clear view, before the split screen view resumes again. Now, the bottom part of the screen shows photographs of a natural landscapes and close-ups, browsed by who we assume to be the man by the window in the preceding shot.

Cunningham’s video is almost like a videopoem in itself, as it incorporates written text within its visual representation. Eventually, the camera’s pan reaches the road sign in the top screen view, and we can now read the text “REAL WORLD” blinking on it (see Figure 3).

This is followed by the displayed text “BUT WHO LIVES IN THE”, a first part of the sentence “BUT WHO LIVES IN THE REAL WORLD?”



The split screen view of the natural landscape versus photographs on table continues, with the information board occasionally interrupting the view, with fragments of text: “RE TRIEVE”, “RE GAIN”, “RE INSTALL”, “TRANS LATE”, “RESTORE RESTORE”. The electronic board is a part of the landscape viewed through the camera lens, with people and cars occasionally walking past and behind it. Finally, both halves of the screen display landscape photographs on a table, though the views are not identical. This view again alternates with a full close-up of the blinking light, zoomed too close for the text to be readable. The poem’s concern with fading and forgetting is reiterated by how the framed landscapes of the video finally yield to the close-up of the electric screen. The vide may seem somewhat excessively keen to offer us one split or framed view after another, and to underline its point through the verbatim repetition of lines from the poem. But while lacking the subtlety of some of the other video works included in the project, it well exemplifies the visual aesthetic of multiplied frames and perspectives that Friedberg describes in her work.

In both Fallon’s poem and in the video, the reconstructive character of memory is communicated through the processes of remediation in verbal and audiovisual art. The poem moves from “restorative” to “reflective” memory, from a desire to access a past state of perfection to an awareness of its own limited, conditioned and constructed nature. Similarly, the videos commenting both poems underline the processes of restructuring, framing and selection, exclusion and inclusion, on which any representation of landscape depends. In the case of Fallon’s poem, its title does specify an Irish context in its use of the place name “Ballynahinch”, yet the poem is less focused on the essence of a specific physical location than its formation, as it engages with memory through the language of visual art and media technology. In short, the interrogative modes of the video and the poem focus on the act of discursive framing that constitutes, rather than reveals, a landscape. The specific question informing O’Donoghue’s poem and Ní Bháin’s video, of where (and if) a connection between cultural specificity and national, geographical terrain can be found, is in the latter poem video replaced by a temporal concern, of how landscape is an unstable dimension, imagined in the virtual domain of memory.

But in “Brighter Blue”, too, the figurative as well as literal re-framing of the poem video with the paratextual online elements of *The Poetry Pro-*

*ject* diminishes the self-aware bracketing of landscape as an embodiment of memory and nostalgia. The multiple and overlapping frames which often comment on each other make way to the neatly organized frames of the thumbnails, and the stated emphasis on a “celebration” of Irish poetry and art. In other words, the institutional framework is motivated by goals differing from the aesthetic ambitions in the verbal and visual works. While it would be misleading to suggest that the project would seek to offer nostalgic or romanticized views of Ireland and its landscape, the emphasis on the national and cultural context in itself invites the readers or viewers of the work to receive them as “Irish”, even if questions of cultural specificity might be of little interest to the participating writers and artists.

## V

In conclusion, there is a double impulse at play in *The Poetry Project*; a literary/artistic/aesthetic problematization of the landscape motif as a marker of cultural identity, and the making of its representations available to a global audience via digital online media within the framework endorsed and promoted by national, cultural institutions. Landscape as “an aesthetic experience of the environment”, and a marker of a specific cultural context, is thus at the same time questioned and legitimized by the project, as each embedded frame, or each presentational setting, creates a new context for reading and viewing. If, as Christopher Pinney has suggested, “the journey [in a virtual as well as material environment] frames the foreign or other scene for the traveler, who has seen it already constituted a picture or image before” (Morse 1996, 210), a number of the works included in *The Poetry Project*, including the landscapes portrayed in them, demonstrate the ways in which Irish landscape is framed as other, yet recognizable, in the age of global digital media. Understanding the works’ metaphorical as well as literal frames and borders as *parerga*, structuring devices that bring to being that which is framed, helps differentiate between the different, co-existing representations of landscape within the works.

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## Notes

- 1 I will here use the terms "works", "videos" and "poem videos" in discussing the weekly publications including poems and video works of *The Poetry Project*. According to Tipton, the project organisers only referred to "videos" (Tipton 2014);

“videopoem” would suggest a work composed specifically through the use of both media, and “collaboration” would have suggested a coordinated effort by poet and video artists. The works could also be read in the context of poetry films, and film poems, though genre borders are far from established. See e.g. Fil Leropoulos, “Poetry-Film & The Film Poem: Some Clarification”.

- 2 *Dinnseanchas* or *dinnshenchas* (there are several variations of the spelling) is the name for a Gaelic tradition of place name poetry, expressing, as Gerald Smyth has noted “the Gaelic relationship to landscape”: “This term describes both a general tendency in early Gaelic literature and (when prefixed with “the”) a body of Middle-Irish toponymic literature known as *Dinnshenchas Éirenn* assembled during the twelfth century. Roughly translating as “the traditional, legendary lore of notable places” [...] *dinnshenchas* developed from onomastic (placename traditions) and aetiological (origin legends) discourses derived from early Celtic culture” (Smyth 2001, 47).
- 3 The idea of introducing poetry or visual art to the public in such a manner is, of course, not unique. Poems have been placed on billboards, outdoor screens, underground cars and similar locations in a number of countries. See e.g. Taylor, “Programming video art for urban screens in public space” and the British Poetry Society’s *Poems on the Underground* project.
- 4 The term was first used in the context of Dutch painting, and the middle-Dutch word *landscap* “denotes a picture of natural scenery”. Its first recorded use in English is from 1598. See Lörzing (2001, 25-26).
- 5 Friedberg is well aware of the challenging of the unified visual perspective or viewpoint in the experiments of early 20<sup>th</sup> century modernist art and literature, including avant-garde poetry, Cubist painting and cinema; she does argue, however, that it is only the introduction of the personal computer and the graphical user interface that has made this aesthetic a part of the everyday personal and social environment from the late 20<sup>th</sup> century onwards.

# **FIRM GRIPS AND LIGHT TOUCHES**

## **An essay on things and halfthings in postwar German nature poetry**

MICHAEL KARLSSON PEDERSEN

### **Introduction: Reconsidering German nature poetry after 1945**

I would like in this essay to explore two types of things – things and halfthings – and how they to some extent determine an understanding of our relation to history. Presupposed in this interest is the connection between human existence and its need to confirm itself through externalization in something other than itself. The solidity of things offers itself to this urge to ground and inscribe history, securing it from disappearance and forgetting. I am however in this essay also going to consider another type of thing that is rarely seen in this context, that is, the halfthings (a term coined by the German new-phenomenologist Hermann Schmitz) such as wind and light and their far more fleeting and inconstant materiality, which discloses a different relation to history. What is crucial is that both things and halfthings have different modes of touching. Things perform firm grips, halfthings perform light touches. To understand the relation of human existence to these two types of things is also to consider the fine mutual intertwining of touches: we touch things, but by doing so, they touch us as well, and vice versa. This in return explicates a very concrete embodied relation to the things and halfthings and hence to history, as we shall see.

To understand the dynamics of things and halfthings in regard to their ability to grab or let go of history, I would like to turn the attention to the German nature poetry (“Naturlyrik”) that was highly dominant in the years after the Second World War. There is an uneasiness though with this kind of poetry and what it connotes, not least in Germany, which was expressed famously by Bertolt Brecht in his exile-poem “To the following generations” (“An die Nachgeborenen”, 1939):

What times are these, where  
A conversation about trees is almost a crime

Because it involves a silence about so many misdeeds!  
(Brecht 2008, 355, my trans.).

This claim is often associated with Th. W. Adorno's famous though often misunderstood and later revised 1949-dictum that it was barbaric to write poetry after Auschwitz, though he did not mention nature poetry as such (cf. Adorno 1984, 34). But Brecht – himself actually an excellent nature poet as can be seen in his *Buckower Elegien* – here not only expresses a critique of a lack of historical awareness in nature poems, but also, I think, a lament as to how it simply isn't possible anymore to write guilt free about nature, about trees, flowers and so on. What he and Adorno could be said to hint at is the poetry of the German poet Wilhelm Lehmann, who began his poetic praxis in the mid-1930's, which reached a highpoint in the 1950's, where afterwards he was almost forgotten.<sup>1</sup> Anyhow, Lehmann notoriously wrote nature poems stripped of people, ideology and history that eventually performed leaps into timeless myth. There is no doubt that nature here constitutes a redemptive alternative to the world of history, ideology and war. There were however a later opposition to Lehmann's mythic and timeless nature in the works of for instance Peter Huchel and Günter Eich, who both included politics and war experiences in their poetry. But Eich for instance still in 1955 wrote in the beginning of his poem "End of a summer" ("Ende eines Sommers") and almost like a comment to the Brecht-Adorno-unease: "Who wants to live without the consolation [Troost] of trees!" (Eich 2006, 127, my trans.).

This short sketch is how the history of nature poetry after 1945 is often told (cf. a representative account in Korte 1989, 30-44 or more recently in Lamping 2011, 138). It is basically a tale of an enduring conflict between nature and history, timeless myth and modern civilization. What seems to me to be neglected is the fact that this is a kind of poetry, where there may be a strong flirtation with Nature as a mythic almost metaphysical concept of unity (above all in Lehmann's poetry), but that many of the poems actually do not place their interest solely in this area of nature as such. Hence, the term 'nature poetry' is really quite misleading. Rather, the nature poems from Lehmann to Eich are very accurate depictions of specific phenomenal areas – I would say: of things and halfthings – that engage, ground and envelope human existence. It seems often to be taken

for granted that the natural world is just something ‘out there’, but the carefulness in taking it into the poem is really a whole different matter, one that requires embodied observation and precise language. Lehmann is then not just a representative of some escapist vision of a mythic Nature, but he has again and again in his poetry shown how a closeness to the phenomenal world is a prerequisite for not just nature poems, but for all poetry. As he writes in a late essay from 1967: “Should we not stop isolating the nature poem as a specific genre of poetry, is not every successful poem nature poetry?” (Lehmann 2006, 378, my trans.). Indeed, the poem feeds on its relation to the phenomena – to Lehmann the poem in the end saves the phenomena – which it brings into its sphere of language. So for Lehmann and the others the poem is not an escape from the world, but rather an opening and disclosing of it.

The question of the role of history in these poems is then also to be reconsidered. First of all the antagonism between history and nature must be toned down, if not abandoned all together. For what is at stake here is rather the question of how temporality is intrinsically bound together with materialities of specific things, that is, history is always grounded in the natural realm. And this leads me back to my initial interest: how things and halfthings constitute a material basis for our historical being in the world. This is to my mind the prime concern in these poems.

I have consequently chosen a thing-poem by Eich and a halfthing-poem by the German poet Karl Krolow. The latter is also a poet highly influenced by Lehmann and especially his affinity for lightness, but who more than any other of the nature poets after 1945 has engaged in the world of halfthings, of air, wind and light. These poems make it possible to show how the relation between (half)things, existence and history plays out and can eventually be understood. I will conclude this essay with the question of postwar temporality in the poems, set within the frame of Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht’s recent book *After 1945: Latency as Origin of the Present* (2013).

### **Things and firm grips**

A newborn child grabs the finger of one of its parents. It is not a tender grab, but rather a firm grip as if the child is not only holding on to the finger, but to its own self as well. I have made this observation several times. It does on a very small scale reveal a fundamental characteristic in human



nature: we grab onto things so as to affirm and reaffirm our own worldly existence. Indeed by grabbing things the things also grab us. Thus our worldly being is a mode of simultaneously grabbing and being grabbed. The adult may not need to grab a finger or a thing, he or she may feel the world is already secured by the predictable things of everydayness, but still in the most intimate situations, as when lovers hold hands, a memory of this first grip is perhaps present. In any case, being human means to grab, it means to bind oneself to the world through things. A thing is, as Martin Heidegger understands it in “The Thing” (1950), exactly that which gathers us and the world and discloses it to us, or as he puts it: “we are the bethinged [be-dingt]” (Heidegger 2001, 178-179). The things are not just there ‘outside’ us, something we can oppose neutrally, rather things are interrelating mediators that binds history and matter.

A clue to why there is this existential necessity of grabbing the thing-world and equally being grabbed can perhaps be found in Heidegger’s earlier work “What is Metaphysics?” (1929). Here being human is depicted as something that is always outside itself: “Da-sein means: being held out into the nothing. Holding itself out into the nothing, Dasein is in each case already beyond beings as a whole” (Heidegger 1977, 105). The fact that human beings can never be at one with its surroundings or with things, means that it is always beyond them and it is exactly this beyondness of being that constitutes what it means to be human. But at the center of the human condition is a state of “angst”, as Heidegger calls it, a state of hovering and floating in no-thing – “we ‘hover’ in anxiety” (ibid., 103) – where the apparent steady ground shows itself as an abyss. This fundamental description of being human, of Da-sein, also highlights why things and thereby grabbing are so very important: there is always the possibility of sinking, of gliding into a condition of hovering. Contrarily, things bind us to the world; they bind us to a ground. Robert Pogue Harrison confirm as much, when he in his books investigates “the humic foundations of our life worlds” (Harrison 2003, x)<sup>2</sup> and herein highlights that human history must always ground itself through acts such as marking (cf. ibid., 18), or in this case: grabbing.

So when the child grabs it performs a primordial act as it relates its own transcendence to the immanent world of earthbound things that is

to carry it throughout its life. It in other words attempts to ground itself through a grab that also inevitably leaves a mental mark on that which is grabbed – every parent remembers these first touches. If grabbing is human, losing the grip and disappearing is indeed in-human.

### **Günter Eich's "Inventory"**

There is in German poetry after 1945 a striking example of how things on a very basic level affirm our being in the world, a stressing of the relation between things and bare existence. Günter Eich wrote the poem "Inventory" ("Inventur", 1945-46) just after the Second World War, which is often seen as the most famous German postwar poem next to Paul Celan's "Deathfuge" ("Todesfuge", 1944-45) (cf. Neumann 1981, 59). The poem was published in the collection *Remote farms* (*Abgelegene Gehöfte*, 1948), which at the time was seen not as an example of a direct overcoming of the past (Vergangenheitsbewältigung), but in its attempt to come to terms with the new situation, it consequently worked against the highly dominant tendency of repression found in the postwar years (cf. Banchell 2013, 223). Eich's "Inventory" contains a highly laconic description of what is left, of what is now to be counted on. After the total collapse of war there are only few things left to affirm existence:

This is my cap,  
this is my jacket,  
here my shaving kit  
in a linen pouch.

[Dies ist meine Mütze,  
dies ist mein Mantel,  
hier mein Rasierzeug  
im Beutel aus Leinen.

Food cans:  
My plate, my cup,  
I have scratched  
the name in the tinplate.

Konservenbüchse:  
Mein Teller, mein Becher,  
ich hab in das Weißblech  
den Namen geritzt.

Scratched here with this  
precious nail,  
I hide from  
desirous eyes.

Geritzt hier mit diesem  
kostbaren Nagel,  
den vor begehrllichen  
Augen ich berge.

In the bread bag is  
a pair of wool socks  
and something that I  
never reveal to anyone,

so it serves as pillow  
under my head at night.  
The cardboard lies here  
between me and the earth.

The pencil  
I care for the most:  
By day it writes verses  
I conceived at night.

This is my notebook,  
this my tent square,  
this is my towel,  
this is my twine.

Im Brotbeutel sind  
ein Paar wollene Socken  
und einiges, was ich  
niemand verrate,

so dient es als Kissen  
nachts meinem Kopf.  
Die Pappe hier liegt  
Zwischen mir und der Erde.

Die Bleistiftmine  
lieb ich am meisten:  
Tags schreibt sie mir Verse,  
die nachts ich erdacht.

Dies ist mein Notizbuch,  
dies meine Zeltbahn,  
dies ist mein Handtuch,  
dies ist mein Zwirn.]  
(Eich 2006, 42-43, my trans.)

The simple listing of these things not only tells the tale of a soldier's life, but shows above all how things keep and secure human existence. There are here different modes of how the things are grabbed and hence how the lyrical I of the poem is grabbed by the things. First, the things are pointed at ("this is"), which both gives a distance, but also affirms their simple being 'there' – they are in fact still here, they didn't disappear through the war. By this pointing mode of touching the lyrical I also points at himself, he is also still here. Although the pointing has a distancing effect, it seems very much to have the function of a firm grip. The repeated "this is" throughout the poem really tightens the relation between man and things. Second, the things tend to carry him, shelter and secure him. The references to enclosed spaces underline this function: the linen pouch, the food cans, bread bag – and even a space that is so enclosed or perhaps interior that it is never revealed. Indeed, like the cardboard or the pillow, they

perform a kind of minimal sense of homeliness, giving him rest from the bare earth or the falling rain. The mode of touching is here one of comforting care and embrace, although again in a highly laconic pared down understanding of these feelings. Third and lastly, there is an intertwining of the highlighting of the most precious things – the nail and the pencil – with a very explicit confirmation of being through writing. They both perform a mode of touching that inscribes the lyrical I onto the things themselves, thereby bearing testimony to his existence. The poem itself seems also to have this function. The scratching is, I would argue, the exact, but artifactual equivalent to the firm grip: by way of writing the lyrical I not only grabs the things, but he alters or better marks them, making his history inextricably linked to the things themselves. Writing is the mode of grabbing with the highest endurance and hence the strongest ability to maintain and secure his existence.

Eich's poem has a fascinating blend of laconic listing and, I would say, a very strong urge to affirmation, to find in the concise simplicity a way of beginning life anew. The three modes of grabbing in the poem – pointing, sheltering and writing – all suggest that human existence in its most basic mode exists through things and a stronger and stronger urge to connect with them. If pointing is the most distanced, writing performs the most intimate gesture. Like the child that begins life with the firm grip of a finger, the soldier here must begin his life by grabbing what is in front of him, in an ever tightening grip. Behind this urge to affirmation is a sense of a void, a fear of disappearing, without leaving any mark.

### **Halfthings and light touches**

But what if another kind of thing was to be considered? Not the solidity of plate or cup, but the fleetingness of wind or light. How does the firm grip of existence place itself, when no such grip can be performed? You cannot write on the wind, nor grab the light. Where Heidegger's things and Eich's inventory are landbased in their depiction of how human existence secures itself and its history, they hardly give answers to how the things of the air – conceived as halfthings ("Halbdinge") by Schmitz – relate to our need to affirm our worldly existence. Heidegger for one thing thinks through architecture ("Building Dwelling Thinking", 1951) and sculpture ("Art and Space", 1969)<sup>3</sup>, whereas we rather need a thinking sensitive to for instance weather

and music. It is in this regard important to see the aerial realm as governed by a specific thingness, which also performs a specific mode of touching.

Schmitz describes two specific features that separate the halfthings from the things:

-- Things last constantly. When they appear at different times, it makes sense to ask, where they were in the meantime. With halfthings this makes no sense; they last inconstantly. A good example is the voice.

-- Things have three-part, mediated causality. Between the cause and the effect comes as intermediary the impact, for example in a mechanical instance: falling rock (cause), hit (impact), displacement or destruction of the hit thing (effect). Halfthings have two-part, unmediated causality: the cause coincides with the impact. (Schmitz 2003, 79, my trans.)<sup>4</sup>

What Schmitz makes obvious here is that halfthings are inconstant and unreliable and that their emergence equals their physical impact. Halfthings are what they appear. A good example is again the wind: when it blows, it does not really make sense to ask, where its source is, it is in its blowing, in the way it shows itself in the leaves for instance, that one can know the wind. This also means that it wouldn't make sense to understand the wind as for instance moved air, forcing it into a schema of causality. This would exactly transform the halfthing into a thing and hence thingify the precarious nature of the halfthing. Schmitz argues very strongly against the reduction of halfthings to things, as performed by the sciences, so as to make them reliable and objects for use. Indeed the urgency and intensity with which the halfthing presents itself must to Schmitz be preserved in its own right and against the forces of constancy that wants to bind it to things.

It seems that because the halfthings are so inconstant and unmediated in nature, they cannot form a basis for the maintaining and securing of human history. Eich's soldier could not have affirmed his existence through the wind. As a force of disappearance it is exactly the opposite kind of a thing that the soldier looks for. The mutual dynamic between thing and grabbing described above does not apply here. Rather human existence is touched by

the halfthings, though it cannot really grab them; the touch also marks its own disappearance. This shifts the focus from a world of things and human marks to a world of sudden impact and above all of Stimmung and atmosphere. This also means that there is a shift from the grab to the light touch. Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht has described Stimmung as having a specific material impact or presence: “The touches of sound and weather are the lightest, the least pressing, and yet are concrete encounters that our bodies can have with their material environment” (Gumbrecht 2008, 215).<sup>5</sup> The touch of the halfthing is a light, perhaps even the *lightest* one. The halfthing envelops human existence in an embrace that is both intoxicatingly light and unpressing, but at the same time futile and impossible to sustain.

The yearning for lightness and easiness is, I think, a very defining trait of the existential relation to the halfthing. Opposed to Eich’s soldier, who seems to want more and more, though very simple bindings, there is a whole other passion at stake here. The halfthing binds, like Heidegger’s thing, but in the way that it unbinds. This means that the way the halfthing relates to human existence is that of an unbinding binding: man is touched by the halfthing in the lightest way and the sudden event of this encounter is also the dissolution of it. If the firm grip of the things opened human existence as thoroughly worldly and historical, the light touch of the halfthings discloses human existence as fleeting, light and above all relieved from historical reality. This is indeed what the poems of Karl Krolow are all about and in being so they are in stark contrast to the poetry of the contemporary Eich.

### **Karl Krolow’s “Leaveslight”**

It is important to underline that Krolow’s turn to halfthings is also a way of coping with the Second World War. But instead of counting the things that remain, he wishes to relieve himself from history and in doing so he engages in landscapes of air, wind, light, warmth and sun. There is this basic, very powerful, but often implicit background in Krolow’s poems that the load is too heavy, the historical ballast too terrifying. Not the fear of disappearing without a mark (as in Eich’s poem, where history then is conceived as life), but the fear of not being able to release oneself from the firm grips of history; history is then in Krolow’s work rather conceived as death and stasis. The turn to halfthings is however not only an attempt to forget the past, as Neil H. Donahue has argued in his book *Karl Krolow*

*and the Poetics of Amnesia in Postwar Germany* (2002), but rather a probing of a lighter and levitated, not so dire relation to the past and its grip. According to Donahue, Krolow engaged in a poetics of forgetting, present throughout his poetic work. I have chosen to examine the light touch of light in the small poem “Leaveslight” (“Blätterlicht”, 1954), which was published in the collection *Days and Nights (Tage und Nächte, 1956)*. This poem is also a good example for Donahue as it “demonstrates that evacuation of depth, historical or otherwise, from the poem, which then appears purely as scintillating surface” (Donahue 2002, 131). Although Donahue very accurately points out that “Krolow does not seek a means to come to terms with the past through critical examination [...], but rather he openly seeks a mean of freeing himself atmospherically [...] from the oppressiveness of the past” (Donahue 2002, 129), I find it crucial not in the first place to stress and thereby demand an explicit and critical engagement with the past, but rather more closely examine how Krolow reflects a relation to history through the specific matter of atmospheric halfthings. In other words, Donahue’s historicizing approach subsumes the poetics of halfthings under a poetics of forgetting, that is, matter under history as if matter was only a passive vehicle of historical meaning. I would however like in the end of this essay to show how the specific aerial thingness in Krolow’s Leaveslight-poem grounds an understanding of history that cannot be captured in Donahue’s traditional historicist framework. To show this means first of all to pay attention to the concrete depictions of halfthings and their movements in Krolow’s poems, that is, to stay on the surface, not suspect or penetrate it.

I would then like to turn to the Leaveslight-poem, where Krolow not only depicts the halfthingness of the light, but above all the encounter between halfthing and thing, light and leaves on a tree.

Leaveslight, amalgam,  
Silver in green air!  
Gentle distance came  
To you and stayed as scent.

[Blätterlicht, Amalgam,  
Silber in grüner Luft!  
Zärtliche Ferne kam  
Zu dir und blieb als Duft.

Modelled to a figure:  
Shadow that stretches lightly,

Modelliert zur Figur:  
Schatten, der leicht sich dehnt

And with precise trail  
Wishes to escape the bower

Und mit genauer Spur  
Sich aus dem Laube sehnt

Out to a land, hot there  
– Serene Element –  
White cheek of wind  
Burns above the dust.

Hin in ein Land, drin heiß  
– Heiteres Element –  
Wange des Windes weiß  
Über dem Staub verbrennt.]  
(Krolow 1965, 125, my  
trans.)

Before I analyze the poem, it is important to point out that in contrast to Eich's poem, there is obviously no human agency in Krolow's poem; the touch is not enacted by a human hand, but by natural phenomena. This gives the poem a rather precarious status as it could be understood in the line of the Lehmann-tradition of subtracting human history from nature. I would however like in the following to read the poem as an allegory of the light touch, which should make it clear that Krolow's interest is not to single out nature, but rather to find and show through the phenomena of light how the relation to the heaviness of history can be thought anew.

The poem works as a kind of passageway for the light and captures it in different appearances on its way to a land beyond things, a land of light. The capturing or better grabbing of the light is performed by the leaves. It is the exchange between these two that sets the poem in motion. The elusive touch of light is then given three forms: first the leaveslight, then a scent and lastly the figure of a shadow. I will focus on the first and the third appearance. Every one of these forms perform on the leaves a very light touch, they don't change the leaves as such, but give them a different mode of appearance. What Krolow is after is the effect of the light falling into a bower full of leaves. It is here very clear that the light acts as a halfthing: it emerges through its impact on the leaves. What is thrilling about the poem is that the consequence of this impact of the light is a lending of its halfthingness to the leave-things, making them more shimmering and less solid. In a way Krolow shows that the world, even the thing-world, is actually much more related to the world of halfthings, a world of insecurity and aesthetic glimmer, than one might think.



This becomes evident already in the first two lines of the poem, where light meets leaves: the consequence of this encounter is the mutual transformation of the two into “leaveslight”. The light amalgamates the leaves, making their greenness light silvery, laying a kind of coating, which changes the material appearance of the bower. Thus two things happen simultaneously: the light is captured and held by the thingness of the leaves and the leaves are transformed into an “amalgam”. The key word “amalgam” is a surprising choice and to my mind gives the world of the poem its specific ambiguity of naturalness and artificiality. The touch of light on the one hand denaturalizes the bower, but this on the other hand makes it into a much more atmospheric, groundless and illuminated scene of nature. “Amalgam” captures this ambiguity as well. It is a solid, though very soft and manipulable substance and it is grounded on mixture. So as the impact of the light is seen in the formation of an amalgam, the effect is seen in the play of colors, of sparkling and shimmering silver.

The light is in fact captured or thingified now. Its third appearance is as a shadow. The shadow is an important theme in Krolow’s postwar poetry. One could perhaps call his poetic praxis a kind of “shadowfencing” (“Schattengefecht”) repeating the title of one of his poetological texts from 1964 (cf. Krolow 1964): a continuous probing of the balance between materiality and its aerialization and illumination. Or a probing of the question: what is the thingness of the halfthing? The shadow in this respect shows the very last, minimal materiality that stays behind, when every other solidity is on its way to becoming aerialized halfthings. In this case, the light becomes a figure that makes marks on the leaves, though not marks of endurance, but rather marks of flight. The shadow and hence the light touches the leaves ever so lightly and this is not a scratching, but a play on the surface. This is so to speak the last that is seen of the light, before it escapes the leaves entirely. What the light shows is the departure from the thing-world just as it enters it – it unbinds the very things that bind it. This is not a scene of founding a personal history, but the place where you leave it behind. Instead of Eich’s laconic realism, Krolow fills his poem with an elevated impressionism.

The bower of leaves is in the end an estranged place for the light and it apparently longs to escape from it. If it does so, it is actually not depicted in the poem, or it is not possible for the poem as a kind of

passageway to follow the light anymore. What is important is the fact that the light does belong to another land than the land of leaves. It is a space, where it can recapture its own full half-thingness in a land of light and wind, of whiteness, where even the earth has turned into weightless dust. This land is an open space fully dominated by the power of light and could be seen to oppose the enclosed spaces found in Eich's poem. There is no material resistance here, no things to grab or that grabs, only what Krolow calls "serene element [Heiteres Element]". Serenity or the German "Heiterkeit" is indeed a concept of an uplifted, open space of joy and it plays a key role in Krolow's postwar poetics (cf. his talk upon receiving the Georg Büchner Award in 1956 called "Intellectual Serenity [Intellektuelle Heiterkeit]", see Krolow 1973). In the end the poem points towards a land that has no sustained history, has no reliable human marks and can only be accessed by fleeting halfthings. It seems to be a desertlike no-thingness, a kind of beyond-things, beyond the grip, where the halfthings are preserved.

Krolow's poems often end with this gesture towards a land of serene lightness. He writes for instance in the end of "The curve of distance" ("Krümmung der Ferne, 1953) about a "land without winter":

Play of heat,  
Torsos in the bower,  
Bright, without age;  
While belief

Ascends in smoke:  
Innocence of floating,  
Out of air and grace a  
Loose web ...  
(Krolow 1965, 112, my trans.)

The loose web of air and grace is indeed very different from the scattered world of food cans and cardboards found in Eich's poem. But at stake here is not just an opposition of things and halfthings, making marks and eluding them, that is, in the end the difference between earth and air, but also between two modes of postwar temporality.

### **Conclusion: Postwar temporalities**

Different natural elements ground different modes of temporality. This means that there is an intrinsic correlation between materiality and time, things and history, which the two poems bear witness to. The question then remains: how do the poems each deliver an outline of a relation to history, that is, to past, present and future that makes certain kinds of postwar temporalities visible? I here lean on Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht's book *After 1945: Latency as Origin of the Present*, where he makes an impressive double move: both a disclosing of certain motifs or rather "topoi" (cf. Gumbrecht 2013, 35) in the immediate postwar era literature and a tentative description of a change of our construction of time from the historicist chronotope of linearity to the cronotope of the broad present, where the past doesn't get left behind, the future loses its openness and both emerge in an ever widening space of simultaneity (cf. *ibid.*, 199). Gumbrecht finds in other words that the postwar era, which according to him has not yet ended, is where temporality is dynamized and seen as active, rather than passive. I would like in these closing remarks to make the same connection between the thing/halfthing-motif and the question of temporality.

The temporality of Eich's poem could (not surprisingly) be named inventorial and the temporality of Krolow's poem could be called levitated. For Eich it is clear that what remains of the past is an existential prerequisite for having a future. The present is indeed the task for gathering the past so as to confirm that there will be a future, whereby the present itself becomes a minimal almost static field of surviving. Inventorial time is the urgent time of counting the past and securing a future. For Eich history is life. For Krolow the past must again and again be left behind and only this movement opens a future. It seems then that Krolow always tries to place the present in the future as if it is only there it can fully expand and come into its being. That is why there is a sense of passage in the poem: underway to a future that is beyond the past and is just about to enter into the present. Levitated time is not an urgent time, but rather a joyous time of being-underway, of gradual loss of past ballast and thereby an ever so gentle move into a weightless, freed future. For Krolow history is death. There is a kind of utopian moment in Krolow's levitated time; whereas Eich's inventorial time is rather like a reduced spot.

Turning to Gumbrecht, it is clear that the temporality of Eich's poem can be mirrored in the broad present-chronotope: the past is imposing it-

self as catastrophe and leftover and the future seems ever so decreased and reduced, so that the present is clogged up or frozen still, only counterbalanced by the single small things. Additionally, one of the motifs that Gumbrecht examines, that is, the container-motif in for instance Celan's work (cf. Gumbrecht 2013, 121-127), is also present in Eich's poem: the enclosed space. The inventorial time has then a spatial equivalent in the container: securing a future by listing the past is an act of sheltering, of setting new small scales to measure one's existence with and thereby confirming its locality and constancy. For Gumbrecht the container is a reaction to the overall "feeling of congestion and circularity" (ibid, 156) that prevails in the postwar era. Eich's poem does have a Stimmung of a petrified and static world, with little possibility to move and where only the simple act of counting small things or containers can open a minimal field of futurity. In other words, Eich's "Inventory" with its temporality, spatiality and Stimmung is part of Gumbrecht's postwar temporality.

Krolow's "Leaveslight" is however not really to be placed within this frame, as it basically opposes all the characteristics of the broad present-chronotope: it does in fact try to leave the past behind and it does entertain an idea of an open future. This specific temporal configuration is, I suspect, why the poem is taken to halfthings and light touches. They constitute a different temporality that can also be seen as a reaction to Gumbrecht's depiction of the postwar era as congested, circular and petrified. Indeed, petrification and circularity is what Krolow wants to escape the most, when he privileges aerial phenomena and passageway in his poem. But this is not to say that Krolow forgets or even represses history. Rather the levitated time is a time that makes it possible to experience history as light, as a shadowy present, not a full body that weights down, but something that makes marks without endurance: It is a time that unbinds as it binds, one could say it has aerial roots. So the spatial equivalent to this temporality is not a container, but the open land without obstacles, future without a dominating past – like the land of wind and light or the land without winter – and its Stimmung is not that of petrification, but precisely of Heiterkeit, uplifted joy. Krolow adds a reaction that depicts a mode of postwar temporality that is not fully to be subsumed under, but can still be understood through Gumbrecht's narrative of the broad present-chronotope. The search for precisely such a relation to history, that is, a levitated one, where history touch-

es lightly like the wind and shows itself like a shadow, is an important part of the cultural history of postwar temporality, I think. Krolow expresses the existential need for openness and lightness, so as to survive a war, where this possibility was ruled out.

In fact Krolow was not alone with this depiction of a levitated temporality. It can also be found in the German architecture, especially in Düsseldorf and what was later called “postwar modernity” (“Nachkriegsmoderne”) in architecture from 1945 to about 1970. This is the architecture of the high-rise and of apartment-blocks with glass, aluminum etc. I will here give two quotes that express the desire for lightness as well as a wish for a relief from the past – and which both contextualize and give a sense of what is at stake in Krolow’s poem. First in broad strokes: “In 1945 the Germans crawled scattered and numb out of basements, lightless bunkers, returned home from the trenches of war, in which they hardly could stand up. It is then no surprise that they marvel at and search for the clear width, the glassy, floating openness of the modern, inspired by those who returned from America” (Schreiber 2006, 153, my trans.). Second in regard to the Düsseldorf-architecture: “A modernity presents itself impressively in Düsseldorf, begins to breathe after a long pause. The examples become popular and also younger architects tries in their drafts to achieve the same effect of floating lightness as it were, with which the architecture of the early 1950s seeks to depart from the gravity of the ground [Bodenschwere] and the cult of stone in the building of *the Third Reich*” (Durth 1988, 306, my trans.). It is clear that it is here precisely the halfthings and their inability to hold history that become the guideline for imagining postwar living: overcoming the ground, seeking to ascend into open air, a future relieved of its past, just like in Krolow’s poem.

I have tried to show how things and halfthings both determine certain touches that again define a certain configuration of spatiality and temporality prevalent in the postwar era. I would however argue that both forms are very much to be found in our present day as well. It would be interesting to observe, how the way we disclose our relation to the world is governed by either firm grips or light touches. That is, either securing our future by collecting the past or clearing a future by levitating the past. In either case, the touch reveals it – scratching our name on a plate or stroking an iPad ever so lightly.

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## Notes

- 1 There is a curiosum here: Adorno did in fact praise Lehmann in his not often mentioned “Remarks Occasioned by Wilhelm Lehmann’s ‘Bemerkungen zur Kunst des Gedichts’”. It is Lehmann’s poetological essays and not his poems that are treated. Here Adorno highlights Lehmann’s understanding of poetic language that actually coincides with his own: “the rescuing that takes place in poetic language is always the rescuing of something possible, something that transcends mere existence” (Adorno 1992, 309). This certainly calls for a more complex understanding of Adorno and nature poetry, if these poems can indeed perform what he calls a negative dialectic, that is, a putting forth that which ideology cannot subsume.
- 2 Harrison has written a whole trilogy concerning the relation between earth and history, the humic and the temporal: *Forests: The Shadow of Civilization* (The University of Chicago Press 1992), *The Dominion of the Dead* (University of Chicago Press 2003) and *Gardens: An Essay on the Human Condition* (University of Chicago Press 2008).
- 3 An account of how Heidegger’s interest in sculpture increased in the 1950s and 1960s can be found in Andrew J. Mitchell’s book *Heidegger Among the Sculptors. Body, Space and the Art of Dwelling* (Stanford University Press 2010). As an interesting opposition to this emphasis on architecture and sculpture in Heidegger’s philosophy, that is, on dwelling and earth, Luce Irigaray has pointed out the *Forgetting of Air in Martin Heidegger* (University of Texas Press 1999, originally published in French 1983).
- 4 Schmitz first developed his phenomenology of halfthings in the third band, fifth part of his *System der Philosophie* (Bonn: Bouvier Verlag 1978, 116ff). It was later repeated and expanded upon in the book *Der unerschöpfliche Gegenstand* (Bonn: Bouvier 1990, 215ff) and in the articles „Die Luft und was wir als sie spüren“ (in *Luft. Elemente des Naturhaushalts IV*. Wiss. Red. von Bernd Busch. Köln 2003, 76–84)

and „Entseelung der Gefühle (in *Jenseits des Naturalismus*. Freiburg/München: Verlag Karl Alber 2010, 145-163).

- 5 Gumbrecht expands on his understanding of Stimmung through several readings in his book *Atmosphere, Mood, Stimmung: On a Hidden Potential of Literature* (Stanford University Press 2012).





# I AM A LITTLE BIT MORE DEPRESSED THAN YOU ARE

## Tao Lin as an example of a contemporary poetry of depression and other negative feelings

CASPAR ERIC CHRISTENSEN AND  
MIKKEL KRAUSE FRANTZEN

*Everything comes down  
to aesthetics and political economy*  
(Stéphane Mallarmé)

### **Welcome to the world's happiest nation – introduction**

If you travelled to Denmark in the fall of 2015, you were likely to be greeted by Carlsberg, not only welcoming you to Copenhagen Airport, but, indeed, to the world's happiest nation. Or so the commercial sign read: *Welcome to the world's happiest nation*. The statement is not supposed to be taken ironically, or doubted even. Actually, this is an objective fact since *The World Happiness Report* consistently ranks the Danes as one of the happiest people in the world. In their latest report, from April 2015, we find the following statement: "The traditional top country, Denmark, this year ranks third in a cluster of four European countries with statistically similar scores, led by Switzerland and including Iceland and Norway" (Helliwell et al. 2015, 34).

Yet, as the Danish Mental Health Fund makes clear, more and more Danes are being diagnosed with depression: At any given time, 4-5 % of the population is depressed, or, more accurately, diagnosed with depression.<sup>1</sup> Along those lines, the Danish Health Authority states that more than 450.000 Danes bought anti-depressants in 2011, a doubling during the last 10 years (Flachs et al. 2015, 163ff.).

This tendency can be observed all over the Western World. USA's National Institute of Mental Health estimates that 9.5 % of the adult American population – that is to say: 18.8 million people in the USA, which according to the happiness report ranks 15 in the world – suffer from depression. These numbers have led The World Health Organization to

conclude that depression is the leading mental disorder, the leading cause of disability and of suicide, affecting around 350 million people worldwide.<sup>2</sup> No wonder, then, that the sale of SSRI anti-depressants has gone through the roof: The sale now approaches 6 billion dollars annually (Ross 2006, 73).

This is only one side of the economy of depression: the profits to be made by the pharmaceutical industry. The other side is the economic burden to be carried by the nation states and the lost earnings caused by depression-related absenteeism. In no way does The Danish Health Authority hide the fact that depression – and thus: depressive people – costs a lot of money due to a loss in productivity: To be accurate 3.11 billion Danish *kroner* (Flachs et al., 163). Similarly, leading scientist Paul E. Greenberg has claimed that depression alone costs the American society \$210 billion per year (Greenberg 2015, unpaginated).<sup>3</sup>

These numbers and facts seem to speak for themselves and tell a story of their own, and yet it is clear, for instance, that the sale of anti-depressants does not stand in a 1-1 relationship with the occurrences of depression, as the SSRIs are not exclusively used for treating depression, but sold and bought to treat a range of other mental illnesses as well. Furthermore, we have to remember that diagnosis does not necessarily equal reality, and thus ask ourselves if the increase in depression diagnoses testifies to a growing number of depressives or, rather, to an escalating tendency to pathologize common and ‘normal’ affects such as sadness, translating them into the diagnostic category of ‘depression’.<sup>4</sup>

Regardless, it seems clear that depression has developed into a paradigm and remains the prevalent psychopathology of our time with all the moral, economic and political implications that entails.<sup>5</sup> Today, Christine Ross writes, depression is “one of the privileged categories through which the contemporary subject is being defined and designated, made and unmade, biologized and psychologized” (Ross 2006, xvii). Or, as Allan V. Horwitz and Jerome C. Wakefield write in *The Loss of Sadness*: “Depression has gained an iconic status in both the contemporary mental health professions and the culture at large” (Horwitz & Wakefield 2007, 25). We see it in TV-shows such as *Sopranos* (1999-2007) and *Happyish* (2015), movies like *Melancholia* (2011), the interactive computer game *Depression Quest* (2013), in contemporary art exhibitions such as *Depres-*

sion (2009, Marres, Maastricht, Holland) and *Unendlicher Spass* (2014, Schirn, Frankfurt, Germany), in a documentary film like *The Dark Gene* (2015) and in book publications ranging from the nonfiction work *The Noonday Demon: An Atlas of Depression* by Andrew Solomon (2001), to the short novel *Suicide* by Édouard Levé (2008), to well-known novels by Michel Houellebecq and David Foster Wallace.

For that reason alone, it seems relevant to examine the relation between depression and contemporary literature, arts, movies, and “culture at large”. This is what we intend to do here, using contemporary American poet Tao Lin and his work *you are a little bit happier than i am* (2006) as an exemplary case.

Let us be absolutely clear to avoid any misunderstandings and gain some clarification from the outset: It is not a matter of analyzing (in a psychological or psychoanalytical sense) Tao Lin or the speaking I of his poems. We are not concerned with delivering a clinical diagnosis, nor are we particularly preoccupied by the question of *what depression is*. Methodologically, we are much more focused on *how* depression works, what does it *do*?<sup>6</sup> In any case we don't think we find a major depressive disorder or clinical or melancholic depression in the poetry of Tao Lin. But we wish to emphasize the depression at work in *you are a little bit happier than i am* as some kind of *mood disorder* or, to put it another way, a feeling, an affect. This does not mean that depression is situated solely in the mind or brain. We maintain that depression is simultaneously a mental *and* a bodily condition, an individual *and* social phenomenon. As Edward Shorter writes: “We see ourselves as having a mood disorder situated solely in the brain and mind that antidepressants can correct. But this is not science; it is pharmaceutical advertising” (Shorter 2013, 4-5). The category of depression is, however, also a negotiable category that, as a certain mode of perception, critically challenges our concepts of normality and happiness as such, e.g. a dis-ordering or a de-stabilizing of otherwise agreed upon norms in contemporary society. Here, we differ from much psychiatric discourse as well as from the discourse of pharmaceutical industry (which all too often amounts to one and the same thing).<sup>7</sup>

The article is structured around two main problems to which we think that Tao Lin's poetic practice responds. They can be classified as *a problem of morality/normativity* and *a problem of mediality/technology*. The

latter entails an underlying (third) problem of intersubjectivity and of poetic communication as such. Here, depression as a series of pertinent *political* problems turns into an immanent *aesthetic* problem; a problem of how even to establish a poetic address, not to mention *whom* to address.

Overall, we want to argue that a critical project of legitimacy lies at the core of Tao Lin's depressive poetry. Lin seems to insist on expounding and exposing the feeling of depression in order to call fundamental fantasies and normative values such as 'the good life' and 'happiness' into question. Thus, in conclusion, we would like to place the work of Tao Lin in a broader context of contemporary poetry that seeks to depathologize negative feelings of sadness and unhappiness and granting questions like "How do I feel?" or "How does capitalism feel?" a real legitimacy (Cvetkovich 2012, 3).

First, however, some general remarks and analytical observations with regards to Tao Lin and his book *you are a little bit happier than i am*.

### **Part I: A little bit about the book and the author**

Tao Lin is one of the stars of a generation of younger poets working on and with pop culture and the internet in a certain deadpan style, that have come to be known as "alt. lit." Furthermore, Lin founded Muumuu House in 2008, which led to an exchange with a Norwegian literary scene concentrated around Flamme Forlag and Audun Mortensen, and in Denmark his influence has also been increasing over the last couple of years. Some examples would be *Guld* (2014) by Victor Boy Lindholm and *7/11* (2014) by one of the writers of this present article, Caspar Eric.

*you are a little bit happier than i am* is Tao Lin's debut. It came out back in 2006 and since then he has, among other things, written *Shoplifting from American Apparel* (2009) and the novel *Taipei* (2013). *you are a little bit happier than i am* is a groundbreaking alt. lit. book with regards to its theme as well as its dry, yet sentimental, deadpan style, its unironic or postironic yet strangely comical tone, its sincere stream of self-consciousness etc.<sup>8</sup>, almost programmatically presented in the poem "my favorite book of poetry right now":

"i want every poem to be weary with itself and afraid of the world  
i want all the line breaks to be where you naturally pause

i want every last stanza to not be there  
and i don't want any happy poems for variety  
because that is selling out  
i don't care how little money you make  
because selling out is a figure of speech  
and i don't think you should lie to me with any nature poems  
because you know you don't think sand is beautiful  
unless you're in a good mood; which you never are  
and i don't want any acknowledgement page because you don't have  
any friends.”

The book consists of 47 poems. They are predominantly, but not consistently, following a kind of Bauhaus-lowercase aesthetic and seem to be arranged by a logic of breaking the lines where one would “naturally pause”. In that way, a graphical mimesis appears to be operative, resembling blog- or chat-style text, which is, as is the case with the book, often set in the Helvetica font. The poems manifest a very outspoken non-allegiance to any specific kind of length or structuring principle, title- or text-wise (leading at one point to a title which takes up the space of a couple of pages). At the same time a lot of the poems come across as a sort of documentation or representation of chat-conversations, lists of “hopes and dreams” or texts that seem to re-play concrete situations in a cinematic style.

At first glance, the “i” of the poems *seems* to have every reason to *be* happy: He is a poet, he lives in New York, he eats organic, sometimes even vegan food, he has friends, girlfriends and, most importantly, he has a MacBook. But he is sad, bored, alienated, tired of life. He is unable to process information, his mind is gradually becoming more and more mechanical, leading to a robotic state in which he starts to perceive the reality as nothing but a distant memory. It is as if his concrete existence is taking place somewhere else, on another plan, another planet. What we have here is a distortion of consciousness, a distortion of his “ongoing sensory perception of concrete reality”, as it is formulated in Tao Lin’s novel *Taipei* (Lin 2013, 76).

First and foremost, though, *you are a little bit happier than i am* is a thoroughly depressed piece of art. There is little doubt that the book displays a series of the depressive symptoms that are listed in the *Diagnos-*

*tic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM). Tiredness, fatigue, boredom, insomnia, suicide thoughts and so on. Let us present some brief and hasty examples from the book, a mosaic of depression, as it were:

”and after a while you will be beautiful and alone inside of your coffin  
and i’ll be cold and alone inside of my coffin”

(from the poem “some of my happiest moments in life occur on AOL  
instant messenger”)

”and i go to the strand, buy three of the most depressing books i can find  
which i know i’ll never finish because they won’t be depressing enough”  
(from “spring break”)

”i am biting my fingernails in bed  
i am fucked existentially  
i am not an okay person  
i am nervous in my bed alone in my room  
i am fucked existentially  
i am just a normal person  
i am fucked existentially  
i am fucked existentially  
i am fucked existentially  
i am fucked existentially  
i am fucked existentially  
i am fucked existentially  
please keep reading  
i am fucked existentially  
i am fucked existentially  
i am fucked existentially  
...”  
 (“4:30 am”)

And on it goes, for another 50 (!) lines, repeating the words “i am fucked existentially“, until the poem ends with a laconic “thank you for reading my poem.”

In the poem, we witness at least three important things in relation to the *style* of Tao Lin. First, we see that the writing of Tao Lin is affected

even when or rather especially when it is un-affected, emotionless, lacking in feeling. The lack of feeling is in itself a feeling. Or, put in another way: More than the feeling of sadness, depression is the inability to feel.<sup>10</sup> Second, we can't help but notice the repetitive, exhaustive and monotonous style. These two dimensions are intricately connected in the sense that the second point immediately follows from the first. This depressive discourse, the somewhat mechanical and rudimentary poetry, the bored and exhausted and over-simplified syntax – all this characterizes a depressed literary style. And, third, this is in fact what generates a great deal of comedy: A dark and absurd laughter in the thick of deep despair. Which is not all that surprising given that, as Søren Kierkegaard emphatically phrased it in *Either/Or*, “the melancholy have the best sense of the comic” (Kierkegaard 1987, 20-21). Or, to quote Beckett: “Nothing is funnier than unhappiness” (Beckett 2006, 101).<sup>11</sup>

In his very style, Tao Lin unfolds what we propose to call his *project of legitimacy*: This feeling of unhappiness is legitimate; he has the right to be unhappy, he is not immature (one of the titles precisely reads: “i hate the world and i'm not immature”). This is not, strictly speaking, a personal project. It goes beyond a purely individual level and relates to a broader political and socioeconomic context in which feelings are modulated and distributed differentially – to speak in the vein of Judith Butler (Butler 2010). From a moral perspective, some feelings are more acceptable and legitimate than others. This is the *problem of normativity/morality*. With this mean that depression seems to flourish in a society where the idea or fantasy of the good and happy life has transformed into a normative imperative, simultaneously institutionalized at the societal level and internalized at the individual ditto. All notions of happiness and health, as is well known, have value judgments within them.<sup>12</sup>

## **Part II: The problem of normativity and morality**

*Happiness is not a matter of science, but of ideology.*

*This is how it should be addressed.*

(Franco ‘Bifo’ Berardi)

Now, “Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness” is a well-known phrase in the United States Declaration of Independence. Several thinkers have



picked up that phrase in various critical analyses of contemporary society. A groundbreaking work is Sara Ahmed's *The Promise of Happiness*<sup>13</sup>, but the book we want to highlight and draw on here is *Perpetual Euphoria: On the Duty to Be Happy*, by French philosopher Pascal Bruckner. In the very beginning of this book, Bruckner writes that: "Unhappiness is not only unhappiness; it is, worse yet, a failure to be happy." (Bruckner 2010, 5). Throughout this book, Bruckner details how happiness has developed into an ideology, so that being unhappy is immoral. Happiness is not only "the biggest industry of the age; it is also and very precisely the new moral order, and that is why depression is spreading..." (Bruckner 2010, 50).

This cruel logic is precisely what Tao Lin captures in *you are a little bit happier than i am* when he oscillates between statements such as: "so happy/very happy/not to be interpreted as having only a happy facade/i am not to be interpreted as being delusional or stupid or on drugs/i am aware of death, loneliness, that time only goes in one direction;/still i am happy/i am not on drugs/i am really happy and this is the truth/ do believe me/you don't believe me/but i am" (from the poem "my brother is vacationing on a mountain with his girlfriend and i found out from my dad"). And, on the other hand, statements such as: "at work i wonder/if i should take anti-depressant medicine//finally, i decide, no, i shouldn't//later i am feeling really depressed/do it, i say, take anti-depressant medicine//still later i feel better/anti-depressant medicine, i say, ha, ha/ha, ha, ha, ha, ha, ha, ha, ha, // an hour later i catch myself thinking extremely hard/about a bright green apple being where my heart should" ("it'll get different").

It would perhaps be problematic to claim that the contemporary culture of performance and self-realization forces people into depression; on the other hand, it is most certainly not the best of times for people to be depressed in. The depressed person is evidently not *evaluated* highly within the present (moral) order. So what is changing is perhaps not so much the amount of pain as the social status of pain – and the way in which such a pain is frowned upon, or deemed 'emo' and 'whiney', if one was to talk about it outside the domain of poetry.<sup>14</sup>

This is one aspect of reading Tao Lin's depressive poetry. Another is that his poetry so to speak responds to or is saturated by a problem of media and technology. The Internet, for example, creates new forms of sensibilities and affects, including, of course, those of loneliness, aliena-

tion, and depression. As Franco ‘Bifo’ Berardi, who has written extensively on the relation between technology and social psychopathologies, states in *After the Future*: “A particular aspect and an important consequence of this nervous hypermobilization is the rarity of bodily contact, the physical and psychical solitude of the infospheric individual” (Berardi 2011, 62). In this context, it is of vital importance that the first problem – the normative one – is proliferated and intensified by the second one – the technological – inasmuch as social media push the normative demands of society to the extreme in terms of maintaining a 24/7 interface,<sup>15</sup> making it possible to be online nonstop while being almost compelled to perpetually demonstrate in the virtual domain that you are indeed having the time of your life *in real life*.

Tao Lin’s poetry seems to be informed by such a context, and not only by the demand and promise of happiness. The possibility of artistically making apparent an authentic depressed state of mind is bound up with the same incoherence between media and ‘real life’. This is why he is not able to make “none of his made up characters feel exactly like he does” and why they are always “a little bit happier than he is”. In this sense, a depressed literature such as Tao Lin’s may also denote the inability to accurately express such a condition, therefore creating a type of distrust of language in the style of a melancholic irony (since “loneliness is just a word”). And thus, authentic feelings become inadvertently entangled in the inauthentic and negotiable domain of fiction from the moment they are used in poetry. Again, very much like the condition of telling one’s story on the Internet.

### **Part III: The problem of mediality and technology**

*today there is not even a single instant in which  
the life of individuals is not modeled, contaminated,  
or controlled by some apparatus.*

(Giorgio Agamben)

Obviously, Tao Lin is a blogger, present online, writing on the Internet etc., but that is not what we have in mind when we are addressing the issue of technology and media. Rather, we would claim, the Internet is an unavoidable condition for any contemporary experience. Tao Lin’s endless

references to Gmail, Facebook, MacBook are *not* just something that can be dismissed as an irrelevant and youthful piece of coyness, even though these accusations are often advanced. It is, quite simply, rather the “texture” of the world we live in today, as David Foster Wallace once pointed out in an interview:

“I have always thought of myself as a realist... The whole way the world acts on my nerve endings is bound up with stuff that the guys with leather patches on their elbows would consider pop or trivial or ephemeral. I use a fair amount of pop stuff in my fiction, but what I mean by it is nothing different than what other people mean in writing about trees and parks and having to walk to the river to get water a 100 years ago. It’s just the texture of the world I live in.” (Wallace 2012, 9)

In 1993, Wallace, who remains a great inspiration to Tao Lin, even wrote an essay called “E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction” in which he felt the need to further justify his use of “pop stuff”. Here Wallace also claimed that television has become our interior in such a way that it is basically hard to find a single human being whose attention, consciousness, sensibility, desire, perception and affectivity has not been constructed, if not captured, by the technological apparatus of television: “Television has become able not only to ensure that we watch but somehow to inform our deepest responses to what’s watched” (Wallace 1997, 40).<sup>16</sup> What is being fabricated here is a ‘machinic’ form of subjectivity – at the level of consciousness, desire, fantasy, affect.

In many ways, Tao Lin picks up the thread from Wallace. Hence, it is no coincidence that both authors display an overwhelming concern with drugs and here we do not only mean drugs like heroin, marihuana, cocaine etc. “We must begin by enlarging the definition of drugs. In my view, all the mechanisms producing a ‘machinic’ subjectivity, everything that contributes to provide a sensation of belonging to something, of being somewhere, along with the sensation of forgetting oneself, are ‘drugs’” (Guattari 2009, 158).

If we adhere to this illuminating definition of drugs delivered by Félix Guattari, we are able to pinpoint how subjectivity in the whole of Tao Lin’s

body of work is a matter of machines: From *you are a little bit happier than i am* (“i try not to think of myself as a person / but as a metal object, built suddenly by machines in complete darkness”) through *Eeeee Eee Eeee* (“We fill the universe with microprocessors and match the expansion of the universe with the expansion of our microprocessors”) to *Taipei* (“I was like a bored robot”).<sup>17</sup>

With regards to the relation between Wallace and Lin they certainly share a concern with an overload of information and the affective or pathological consequences of this overload. But there is of course one huge (generational) difference: TV is what Wallace himself calls “one-way watching” (Wallace 1997, 22) – some are inside the TV, acting, while others are outside, watching. This is absolutely not the case with WWW: everybody is on the Internet, no one is outside, it is two-way or thousand-way communication, which gives rise to a completely different form of (‘machinic’) subjectivity, or rather intersubjectivity, since the issue here is the relation between subjects, between the I and the You. This is the point at which the political problems of technology ricochet and become a poetical problem.

#### **Part IV: The problem of intersubjectivity and of poetic communication (I am ‘you’ to you)**

*i am ‘you’ to you*  
(Tao Lin)

The specific historical shift from the screen as a window to the screen as a mirror implies a shift in the relation between I and you, which can be said to be the stuff that most poetry is made of, not least the poetry of Tao Lin. Already in *you are a little bit happier than i am* he is well aware of all this: There is no you in television but there is, literally as well as metaphorically speaking, a you in YouTube.

Instead of one-way watching, we are facing a situation where everybody has to be some body, people are expected to tell a story about themselves, or, even better yet, the story of themselves. Most of the time this is perceived, especially in a context of literary history, as an infantile narcissism, incarnated quite well by the “i” of Tao Lin’s poetry. But that is of course a value judgment, the logic of which is exactly what Tao Lin seeks to expose and put into question.

In a conversation held in Trondheim in 2013, Ariana Reines, whose work resonates with that of Tao Lin, said:

“These blogs [with poems about what you read, eat and do during the day – MKF & CEC] came at a time when Bush was president. That period gave us a whole new insight into how that freedom of speech, that we so whole-heartedly insist upon in the U.S., wasn’t worth anything. People didn’t say anything particularly important on these blogs, but I’m not sure whether I myself would have known how to have said anything more.” (Kleiva 2013, 128)<sup>18</sup>

The poetic style of Tao Lin must be regarded as a socio-political and aesthetic choice. A choice that is rooted in the context described here by Ariana Reines, a choice that has to do with the increasing problem of how to describe the world in a sincere manner, without subscribing to longstanding *aesthetic* ideals of beauty and relevance and without reproducing a *political* rhetoric whose cynical and absolute narratives have been revealed as bogus and fiction. Hence, the style of much contemporary poetry does not just resemble a style of writing that we usually come across on the Internet; the resemblance is not a purely mimetic gesture: what we are witnessing is not just ‘the Internet’ starting to spill over into poetic language.

It is on this basis that we may begin to explain and understand the self-absorbed and depressive narcissism of Tao Lin: That the ‘fictions’ of real-life have radically altered, if not overthrown, both the public and the private sphere. This pertains not only to how we value feelings; it also makes apparent that an I is never just an I, but will always be enclosed in specific narratives of society, in relation to which it has no or very little control. Here we see the problem of intersubjectivity and also the problem of poetic communication, two problems that converge in a poem from *you are a little bit happier than i am* with the significant title “i am ‘you’ to you”:

“i believe that coffee can solve many of my problems

i do not really exist because i live vicariously through myself because i  
experience my own life through you through me and also because my

experience of art is through what i imagine your experience of  
art is and  
art is life vicarious and life is void vicarious”  
 (“i am ‘you’ to you”)

The subject is also an object: “i experience my own life through you through me”. This is the Internet-experience in a nutshell, also constituting the crucial difference from television. In her essay “The Allegory and the Archive”, the conceptual poet Vanessa Place coins the concept of *the Subject*: “The witness that witnesses something it is witnessed by” (Place 2010, unpaginated). The I (as a subject) seeing the You seeing the I (as an object). This is not sheer sophistry. What is at stake here is nothing less than poetic communication as such. In *Giving an Account of Oneself*, Judith Butler writes that “the possibility of the “I”, of speaking and knowing the “I”, resides in a perspective that dislocates the first-person perspective whose very condition it supplies.” (Butler 2005, 21). And, moreover, that: “I am not, as it were, an interior subject, closed upon myself, solipsistic, posing questions on myself alone. I exist in an important sense for you, and by virtue of you. If I have lost the conditions of address, if I have no “you” to address, then I have lost “myself”” (Butler, 32).<sup>19</sup>

To Butler, it is absolutely fundamental that it is the address, the call upon and the appeal to the Other, that makes the I possible as an I in the first place. And that this dislocates the first-person perspective in a very basic and even brutal way. It is an I subjected to the demand of being a witness. One could just think of the Facebook demand, “what’s on your mind”, as an entry-fee for existence as such, or even better the French imperative of “ex-primez-vous”. Informed by this, one could return to the poetry of Tao Lin, which often seems to manifest itself in a distanced third-person perspective, even if written in first person. The interrelatedness and interwovenness that Butler brings to the fore is therefore also relevant in relation to Tao Lin’s poetry. His poetry so to speak shows us the dark side or flipside of this basic condition. What the I of the poem has often lost is exactly what Butler calls the feeling that “I exist in an important sense for you.” The loss of this feeling entails another feeling, namely depression. Thus, Tao Lin is constantly struggling with repairing or reestablishing “the conditions of address”, a struggle with simultaneous aesthetic/poetic *and* ethical/existential implications.

### Concluding remarks and a contextualizing perspective

*I am sad, I cry, but it's ok to be sad, it's ok not to be happy all the time.*  
(Robert Fitterman)

The situation of Tao Lin's poetry is similar to that of Ariana Reines' self-proclaimed 'poetic I' in the long poem *Coeur de Lion* (2011): "[I] know where I am/ This second lost without you" (Reines 2011, 79). Fundamentally, the feeling of this particular situation is that the you is lost, yet absolutely omnipresent in its very absence and loss. Our claim in this article has been that this feeling is a *contemporary feeling*, it expresses a thoroughly post-modern condition and hence a concrete historical experience, pertaining to a problem of morality and normativity on the one hand and to a problem of technology and media on the other. It is this feeling of depression, which Tao Lin gives an account of in *you are a little bit happier than i am* (and in all his subsequent works for that matter), almost clinging to his right to be unhappy in order to challenge the prevalent ideology of positive thinking and mandatory, even cruel, optimism.<sup>20</sup>

In this endeavor, though, Tao Lin is far from alone. In her recent work *Okay Okay*, the poet Diana Hamilton, following in the footsteps of *flarf* and *google poetry*, found and collected a wide array of statements relating to different forms of negative feelings and fears. The shame of crying at work, for instance. Some of her material apparently comes from management handbooks on how to handle emotional workers and modulate their respective affects, but also consists of personal accounts made by the employees themselves: "I go to the bathroom and sit alone on the toilet – nearly broke a leg racing to the restroom. I let my hair fall over my face and I look away. I got sacked from a job after 2 months because I cried nearly every day – so how can I make the deep breathing and counting work for me? Also, I cried when I worked for babies R us..." (Hamilton 2012, 14). Crying when on the subway, crying when having sex: "We have sex at least 4 times a week. During the climax, my wife cries and shouts a bit. I am afraid whether she is in pain. When I enquired after some time, she tells me that she had thoroughly enjoyed the session. This is happening in almost all of the sessions. Is she hiding her pain. Please advice" (Hamilton, 41).

The poet Robert Fitterman has summed up Hamilton's strategy quite cogently: the poet as an assembler of feelings. In a talk he gave at the po-

etry festival *Reverse* in Copenhagen in 2015, Fitterman stated that Hamilton's book offers "new ways to think about subjectivity in relationship to the language-based technologies that shape our everyday lives" (Fitterman 2014b, unpaginated). He even suggested that what this work reached for was a *zeitgeist of affect* in the sense that "Hamilton constructs a collective pool of *subjective, personal utterances* that reflects a specifically contemporary arena of "feelings"" (ibid.).

It is not a coincidence that Fitterman chose to speak about Hamilton, since there is a poetic resonance or affinity in terms of conceptual and affective strategy between his poetry and Hamilton's. In his book *No, Wait. Yep. Definitely Still Hate Myself*, Fitterman has collected public articulations of loneliness from online message boards. The traces of many different voices and identities collapse into one by letting every voice speak in the first person. Through the poem's avatar voice, every line speaks of loneliness, sadness and depression. Some of these relate to drugs and addiction, some relate to the problem of *communication* and the problem of precisely losing the "condition of address" that Butler referred to. It may sound like this:

...And here's another really  
sad factor: I'm totally imagining who this "you" might be;  
I guess one could say it's a fantasy because I'm not really talking to  
anyone, I'm not really relating to anyone, and it's not  
Like I'm going out and meeting anyone, so when I'm saying "you",  
I really don't know who I am addressing...  
And isn't that even doubly sad and pathetic? Of course, "you" don't  
have to answer that because there really isn't a "you"  
And I don't even know who that "you" would be if there were one.  
This just adds another level to my pain and desolation  
(Fitterman 2014a, 69).

Others relate to the problem of *technology*: "...I am pretty sure that a lot/ of loneliness today is a result of/Modern technology. I feel that is what I am dealing with. Society has taught me to hate myself./It's not about forcing happiness – it's about letting sadness/win. The saddest kind of sad/ Is when tears can't even drop and you feel nothing." (20)<sup>21</sup> While others again relate to the feeling of nothing: "You don't feel sad or happy, you feel



nothing: you feel numb, uninspired/And empty – it can't get any worse. I tried so hard,/I got so far, but in the end/It didn't even matter" (13).

In their surprising, but subtle, quoting of a piece of song lyrics from the American rock band Linkin Park ("I tried so hard,/I got so far, but in the end/It didn't even matter"), these last lines also make manifest the sense of absurd or dark comedy pervading Fitterman's book. So, the catalogue of negative feelings, these contemporary archives of tears, these collective and collected confessions, entail an undercurrent of comedy but also of criticism. Even though Hamilton and Fitterman evidently work in a far more conceptual register than does Tao Lin, they all seem to navigate from a forced position of an *avatar*, forced upon them in the sense that the condition of address is one in which the I is never able to be an I only and in which their own stories, let alone their feelings, are never exclusively their own.<sup>22</sup> And from this radical sense of loss they share and draw a critical impulse: Depression or alternative accounts of what gets called depression or overlapping phenomena with depression can thus be understood as a way of rendering and questioning the current state of "happiness" in affective and poetics terms.<sup>23</sup>

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## Notes

- 1 Cf. <http://www.psykiatrifonden.dk/viden/diagnoser/depression/depression.aspx>. See also: <http://www.psykiatrifonden.dk/media/639428/tal-til-psyken.pdf>.
- 2 Cf. <http://www.who.int/mediacentre/factsheets/fs369/en/>.
- 3 Greenberg goes on to explain: "Depression in America costs society \$210 billion per year, according to the newest data available, yet only 40 percent of this sum is associated with depression itself. My colleagues and I have found that most of the costs of depression are for related mental illnesses, such as anxiety and post-traumatic stress disorder, as well as for physical illnesses, such as back disorders, sleep disorders and migraines. In fact, for every dollar spent treating depression, an additional \$4.70 is spent on direct and indirect costs of related illnesses, and another \$1.90 is spent on a combination of reduced workplace productivity and the economic costs associated with suicide directly linked to depression."
- 4 Cf. Horwitz and Wakefield 2007.
- 5 "We live in an age of melancholy", Dan G. Blazer writes (Blazer 2005, 3), and Alan Horwitz has written an article simply called: "How an Age of Anxiety Became an Age of Depression" (Horwitz 2010). Among sociologists a consensus has arisen around the concept of social pathology (Honneth 2001; Willig & Østergaard 2005; Keohane & Petersen 2013; Rosa 2013), the seminal work being Alain Ehrenberg's book *The Weariness of the Self. Diagnosing the History of Depression in the Contemporary Age* (Ehrenberg 2010). While acknowledging the importance of this critical and conceptual endeavor, we, as will be clear later on, nevertheless remain more inspired and informed by Franco 'Bifo' Berardi's continuous work on depres-

- sion as a psychopathology in the sense that depression is understood in a complex context of an overload of digital information and sensory stimuli, a general condition of competitiveness, precarity and entrepreneurship, and a loss of solidarity or the dispersion of the community's immediacy (see Berardi 2009; Berardi 2011). As he states in an interview: "There are new forms of pathology that are emerging from the acceleration of the technological rhythm of information and the separation of the body from the social process" (Hugill & Thoburn 2012, unpaginated).
- 6 This is in fact a proper deleuzian methodology. Whether he worked on desire with Félix Guattari or studying literature by himself, the only real question to Deleuze was: How does it work, what does it do (and not: what is it, what does it mean)? Thus, in *Anti-Oedipus*: "The unconscious poses no problem of meaning, solely problems of use. The question posed by desire is not 'What does it mean?' but rather 'How does it work?'" (Deleuze and Guattari 1984, 109; see also Deleuze's *Letter to a harsh critic* (Deleuze 1995, 8)). This *modus operandi* also defines Bifo's work, and implicitly Sara Ahmed subscribes to the very same train of thought in her book *The Promise of Happiness*: "The question that guides the book is thus not so much 'what is happiness?' but rather 'what does happiness do?'" (Ahmed 2010, 2).
- 7 The *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, for instance, defines depression as a mood or an affective disorder, and we agree with the wording of the definition but not with its content. We do not subscribe to the reductive and rather old-fashioned understanding of mood and affect informing the DSM: The tendency to de-contextualize moods and affects, to rely on the ancient dualism of body and mind/brain, and to pathologize certain emotional responses etc.. Theoretically, this article is congruent with recent affect theory, whose insights and attainments are overall able to nuance, supplement and complicate the definition of depression as a mood or affect disorder presented in the DSM. One of the cornerstones within affect theory, taken somewhat misleadingly as a whole, is, firstly, that feelings and affects must be taken seriously, and, secondly, that affects are just as collective, social and political as they are psychological, private and individual. Crucial reference points in this regard are: Cvetkovich 2012; Butler 2010; Berlant 2011; Ahmed 2010.
- 8 Now is not the time nor the place to situate Tao Lin's work in relation to some of the most recent (conceptual) developments within literature (and literary theory), including postirony, new sincerity, post-postmodernism or metamodernism. Despite the ungraceful conceptualizations, these attempts do indicate *that something new is indeed going on*.

- 9 The book is unpaginated, so references to this work will consist of the poem's titles only.
- 10 Cf. Shorter (2013, 2).
- 11 In its totality, the quote from *Endgame* reads: "Nothing is funnier than unhappiness, I grant you that... Yes, yes, it's the most comical thing in the world. And we laugh, we laugh, with a will, in the beginning. But it's always the same thing. Yes, it's like the funny story we have heard too often, we still find it funny, but we don't laugh any more" (Beckett 2006, 101).
- 12 Cf. Ghaemi (2013, 155).
- 13 At one point, Ahmed writes: "I am simply suggesting that we need to think about unhappiness *as more than a feeling that should be overcome*." (Ahmed 2010, 217) – thus indicating the project of legitimacy which we'll develop and detail below.
- 14 We are thinking here of the (Facebook) culture of 'liking', as opposed to 'disliking', and our own attitudes towards, say, someone proclaiming "my life sucks". It appears that social media reveal a kind of well-meaning censorship of feelings, which may also imply or lead to an internalized skepticism towards one's own feelings: Who am I to feel sad, when I am constantly confronted with digital images of 'real suffering'?
- 15 Cf. Crary 2013.
- 16 See also: Wallace (1997, 21ff).
- 17 This general point as well as the first two examples are 'stolen' from Frank Guan's essay on Tao Lin: "Nobody's Protest Novel". In an excellent passage that seems to mirror that of Guattari, Guan writes: "Human beings become accessible only insofar as they are experienced through the mediation of drugs (all of Paul's extra-familial relationships are based on sharing drugs), and meaningful only insofar as registered as electronic data; technology, in turn, becomes a metaphor for everything it does not encompass. Paul envisions his spatial memory as a ZIP file, *Taipei's* blinking electronic signboards as repeating GIFs, a nocturnal building bordering the Vegas desert as a frozen cursor in a word-processing document. The precision and relentlessness of such references alone might suffice to render *Taipei* to the internet what *White Noise* (also a drugged and death-haunted novel, and one of Lin's formative influences) was to television: the first novel to successfully assimilate to literary art the mutant sensibility of a new mass medium" (Guan 2014, unpaginated).
- 18 The transcription of this conversation, which we have translated into English for our present purposes, appeared in the Norwegian journal Beijing TRH #1, 2013.

- 19 A striking number of passages in Robert Fitterman's work *No, Wait. Yep. Definitely Still Hate Myself*. (to which we will turn shortly) also echo these thoughts: "Who am I going to/Talk to about all this? Obviously, no one" (Fitterman 2014, 58-9).
- 20 Cf. Berlant 2011. Although here, one might be tempted to ask Tao Lin a question that was originally posed to Sara Ahmed in a review of her book *The Promise of Happiness*: Is Tao Lin maybe also "defending a negative teleology of unhappiness that nevertheless carries the seeds of new forms of unexpected happiness?" (Power 2010, 54).
- 21 Some even relate to the problem of technology as it relates to the problem of communication: "All these methods of communication and yet nobody's communicating with me" (49). And: "In the modern world, where technology connects us to people we will never meet,/ Who may not even exist, it's easy to feel alone." (46) – this is the paradox of maximal community and minimal communication which 'Bifo' is also addressing in his theoretical work.
- 22 This, too, explains the specific and unconventional mode of *confession* (an issue we unfortunately have had to leave out of our equation), a confessional mode whose foundation is the formation of a single speaking subject at the juncture of mediality, sociality and normativity. Or, to put it another way: the particular and individual confessions governing each of the three works of which we are speaking are filtered or mediated through various media platforms (from which they have been picked out and harvested in the case of Hamilton and Fitterman), thus creating a subject that is no longer a subject, strictly speaking. There is, as Hamilton writes in *her* review of Fitterman's book, no single subject to which these statements or affects could be attributed – an attribution which inescapably takes place nonetheless (Hamilton 2014). The same is true of the poetry of Tao Lin, even though he obviously has written the texts more or less on his own in the most trivial and literal sense.
- 23 Cf. Cvetkovich (2012, 11).

# #.PLS. .SELECT. .UR. .CHAR[R(I)ED.H]AC(K)TOR.# Agency, interpellation and address in digital poetry

METTE-MARIE ZACHER SØRENSEN

This article will examine a poem by an Australian code poet called mez. The poem has a title that I can't say out loud. I can't remember it, either. I have to highlight, copy and paste it into my document. Here it is: *\_cross.ova.ing* ][4rm.blog.2.log 07/08 XXtracts\_.

And here is a screenshot of part of the poem:

```
! cvs -d :codependentserver:internaltripwiring@cvs-mirror.abortive.org:/cvsroot login
(Logging in to internaltripwiring@cvs-mirror.abortive.org)
Cvs password: (internaltripwiring)
!
! cvs -z3 -d :codependentserver:internaltripwiring@cvs-mirror.abortive.org:/cvsroot co SCAP
cvs server: Updating abortive/directory/SCAP
Ur abortive/directory/SCAP/NO.pla
Ur abortive/directory/SCAP/YEB.dmg
Ur abortive/directory/SCAP/ChangeRealityLog
--
#There are currently 6 SocialConnection release_valves available.
#Use the main s[ti]d[ist]y_loading trunk:
#Release-1_0: 1st attempt at SCAP. Tremory_+_shuddery.
#Release-1_2: 1st attempt at the 2nd release. Thick_womb_music_cables
#sunc[re]lling unstable_conversation_w[ig]it[re] ][pp[ill]ing.
#Release-1_2_2: The final[ity] + most stab[b]ling_with_ur_g[old]athering_eyes]]e
#release in the 1.2 series.
#Release-1_3: 1st 1.3 release with [g]host_grain_spas[onic]s[ush]s.
#Release-1_3_2: Latest release with some s[pidery]tone_lizard_clubbed2deathness.
#Release-1_3_3: Latest release with some s[tp]arched_s_w[|t]ollen_body_w[|]ords
#drenched chemically. Tearn_f[|]ingers_cup_sh[|]immer_throats.
--
2. bet[t]e[living.thru.brutal_ness]
11:21am 29/04/2008
Congratulations!!
You have been selected for early beta access to [ x[|]butter|snotch.h[|]read[oux]=milk-mannessess ].
As a user, you will have an opportunity to use [ xash.hu[|k]ffing =f[|]lick[er]ing.(co)gentle.tonguesse ] before the rest of the world, as well as shaping the
[ x(t)railing.print(debauch)ed.f[|]l[|]ngerax ].
```

Fig. 1: Extract from *\_cross.ova.ing* ][4rm.blog.2.log 07/08 XXtracts\_, 2011

The word “XXtracts” in the title refers to the fact that the poem is an extract from a larger project. Over two decades, mez has produced (often collective) projects on e-mail lists, blogs and websites.<sup>1</sup> The most significant aspect of her digital poetic process is a spelling method she calls *mezangelle*. This is a “digital creole” that mixes English and phonetically ingenious spellings with “fragments” from programming language. This constellation gives the works an explicit digital look by means of characters such as underscore and square brackets that are specifically linked to



the use of a computer. The square brackets are essential to the ability of *mezangelle* to create multiwords. An example of these can be found in the title of one of *mez'* other works: “mo[ve.men]tion”, which at one and the same time contains the words *move*, *motion*, *moment*, *movement*, *mention*, etc.

It is impossible to capture all of her works. She often uses different signatures and projects are built up with link structures into a rambling text corpus, where you never know whether you have reached the end. The poem on which I focus below is an extract, as stated, but has been published as part of *Electronic Literature Collection Vol. 2*. This publication platform is the most significant curated collection of electronic literature, which is a genre in which words are mixed with images and sounds, and movement and interaction can be incorporated into the works. The poem *\_cross.ova.ing*][4*rm.blog.2.log 07/08 XXtracts\_* consists of black type in a Courier font on a white background. There are no images, sound or movement, and no opportunities for interaction. In principle, the work can be printed and

```
3. _trEm[d]o[lls]r_
05:29pm 26/04/2008

doll_tre[ru]mor[s] = <<TREMORS
<tremor name='the_5th_world'>
  <fracture>
    <fracture name='post2charinscription'>
      <polymers>
        <polymer var='user' val='YourDollUserName' />
        <polymer var='3rdperson' val='Your3rdPerson' />
        <polymer var='location' val='YourSoddenSelf' />
        <polymer var='spikey' val='YourSpiKeySelf' />
      </polymers>
    </fracture>
    <fracture name='post2skin'>
      <polymers>
        <polymer var='user' val='YourPolyannaUserName' />
        <polymer var='msg' val='YourPleading' />
        <polymer var='lastword' val='YourLastword' />
      </polymers>
    </fracture>
  </fractures>
</tremor>"
TREMOR

--
```

Fig. 2: *\_cross.ova.ing*][4*rm.blog.2.log 07/08 XXtracts\_*, section 3

then appears generally equivalent to the version on the screen. It is also, as stated in *Electronic Literature Collection Vol. 2*'s introduction, a production of "writing never entirely separating itself from the protocols<sup>2</sup> that govern the transportation and presentation of words and images",<sup>3</sup> among other things because it overtypes and borrows from protocols and code language structures. The work consists of ten sections, which are consecutively marked with the numbers 1 to 10. In visual terms, the text is set in various layouts. At some points, the text spreads across the entire width of the page, while at others the body text forms precise squares. Section 3 is set up as indented lines, so that the gap to the left forms white vertical wings, or handwritten M's, and even resembles a pair of breasts.

Describing the figure which the text layout represents is just as associative as in a Rorschach test: a minimalistic computer game protagonist fighting, a wolf's leering head, the outline of an advanced machine gun, or flowing, draped curtains. This is a very delicate iconicity, but it is there. On scanning down the pages of the work, this visual formation contributes to the signalling of an intention and an interpretation potential. The soft white arches (wings? M's? breasts?) left by the indented text appear atypically well-formed in this context. In a work with a highly trash code-like typography and an introduction with many protocol-like words, they create attention and signal intentionality, due to their lack of function. We understand that this is more and something other than appropriated trash code. This is probably also why we start reading it. Starting from the top, the first word is "SocialConnectionAccessProtocol" and with words such as "ControlVersioningSystem", "codependentserver", "Logging", "Updating", etc., we feel that we are part of a system structure that we do not have to read. We get the sense of a machine voice that is getting ready for something: "check this and that"; "do this and that". These are words that quickly run through a system, as checkpoints for access control and approval and performative orders. And then suddenly it says: "ChangeReality" – just do that ...

Here, the mezangelle starts, with its square-bracket based wordplay that provokes a very special reading mode. We have access to "SocialConnection" and it says "Use the main an[ti]xiety\_loading trunk:". We read more closely, inwards, in strata through the words because there is more than one word in each place, which prevents a linear reading method at

sentence level. Our experience of the word meanings, as we push through these clusters of words, is best described as paraphrase: There are Tremory and Shuddery, unstable conversation, Thick womb music cables, s[pidery] tone\_lizard, g(old)athering\_eyes, spas[onic]m[ush]s, st[p]arched+\_sw[[t]ollen\_body and body\_w[l]ords and sh[gl]immer\_throats.

The image of a starched and swollen body is unpleasant and is something that stays rooted in the mind while reading the text, and in this way it is possible to make out some apparent meaning at dramatic high points in the text, although it is difficult to crack the code. Yet the first half of this amputated mez work gives the experience of a leap from “codependent-server” in a machine voice to types of words like “gold eyes” and “glimmer throats”. Its poetics is hidden in what resembles trash code. The leap from protocol language to expressive poetry takes place within a section without ‘warning’, that is without altering the visual expression of words. This contributes to the sense of strata, rather than linearity. We have delved into something, and when we come out again, it is strange to see that it still has the same surface, now that we know what it actually says. At the start of such a section, there is a sense the text addressing someone other than you. But the text is slowly processed and transformed until addressing you with the strength of spit in your face. This movement runs parallel with the disappearance of the sense of listening to a machine voice. It would not be able to pronounce “[g]host\_groin\_spas[onic]m[ush]s”. There is also a strong emphasis on written text rather than a communicative “I” at play in these words, because connections at a material textual level pull the text in a particular direction when words are put together and also because they resemble each other (“ghost” and “host”, for example). The fact that these words can be combined with each other and other words allows for the word-linking structure by means of square brackets.

This differentiation between sensing the appropriated and the intentional, can be seen in many of the work’s other sections, and the question of access and communication exists at several different levels, since it may often be argued here who and what is communicating with whom and what. Such questions concerning the sense of (lacking) address and (lacking) access in the work’s communication will be raised below, among other things with the help of the French technology philosopher Bernard Stiegler’s theory on relations between media senders and recipients, which I will introduce briefly below.

### **Communicative short-circuiting**

In Bernard Stiegler's article "Teleologics of the Snail: The Errant Self Wired to a WiMax Network", he summarises several points from his previous publications and takes as the starting point for his theoretical discussion a (relatively) concrete example, which is the continuous opportunity to be on the Internet at any time (from e.g. a mobile phone) (Stiegler 2009, 33). The article considers the relations between 1) new technologies; 2) our psyche and individual and collective development (what Stiegler with the French philosopher Gilbert Simondon calls *individuation*); and 3) shared culture and symbols, e.g. language.

Stiegler is interested in the interaction between these three *milieus* (the technical milieu, the psychical milieu and the symbolic milieu). He examines how contemporary media and technologies change the psychical and symbolic milieus, and his particular focus in the article is on the use of communication technologies. How do they determine our opportunity to communicate something, and what do they communicate to us? Do we know how the technologies function, and are we able to involve ourselves in developing and changing them?

Stiegler explains how he as a starting point considers language to be a symbolic associated milieu. It is symbolic because it is an overarching common theme which transcends physical limits, like being French or Spanish. He writes that interlocution is the life of language. The person spoken to must also be able to answer (ibid. 37). The point is that, for instance, audiovisual mass media (TV and radio) spoil this interlocution because they are symbolic industrial milieus and produce a dissociation process in which I am spoken to (addressed) without being able to speak myself. Therefore, I do not take part in the collective individuation (ibid. 38), i.e. the ongoing transformation of both the milieu and myself, and, according to Stiegler, this is detrimental to democracy and political life.

In Stiegler's theoretical universe, humankind is in constant development, and the psychical and collective individuation is changing. Being an individual is to transform oneself, but this opportunity for transformation is spoilt by what he, without further specification, calls the *service industries*. Before, technical innovations were socially appropriated, but this opportunity is short-circuited by the service industries. The consequence is that we see our existence being transformed without ourselves being able

to take part in this development process. The individual is thereby deprived of the opportunity to influence the milieu that she is part of, which is only possible in associated milieus in which she as speaker (addresser) can influence the transformation of the milieu (ibid. 39).

So, overall, Stiegler argues that we have undergone a (positive) development from radio and TV's reduction of the recipient to a mere recipient of communication, to the Internet's designation of us as both senders and receivers. However, he also argues that language (communication) is substantially dialogical, so that a problem arises when the entity you are communicating with is an algorithm whose language you do not speak, and whose development you cannot influence. This concerns technologies that communicate to us and through which we communicate without understanding how they are composed, and how we in this way take part in symbolic milieus that develop us as individuals, while barring us from contributing to their development.

I will use these differentiations between communicative short-circuiting and agency in the communication (I have called them communicative economies) as the main perspective in my analysis of *mez'* [\\_cross.oiva.ing](#) [[4rm.blog.2.log 07/08 XXtracts\\_](#)]. I am thus inspired by Stiegler's differentiations concerning agency in communication. [\\_cross.oiva.ing](#) [[4rm.blog.2.log 07/08 XXtracts\\_](#)] exhibits questions of agency and communicative economies by setting frameworks for the negotiation of questions concerning who is communicating and with whom: Who has agency to communicate, and who has agency to understand what and how communication takes place, and with whom?

I do *not* use Stiegler's reflections and differentiations regarding communication and agency as a valid characteristic of new media and I do not intend to use *mez'* work as an illustrative example of such new media. Instead, I see the work as a place where, for example, Stiegler's questions concerning communication and agency can be asked. The analysis also has a cultural theoretical dimension. I will discuss, via Judith Butler's reading of Louis Althusser's concept of interpellation, the ways in which programming and various address forms on the Internet can be said to exercise a form of interpellation. What does it entail that today's technologies have the ability to communicate to us while we communicate through them?

## Metalanguage

Section 4 of *\_cross.ova.ing ][4rm.blog.2.log 07/08 XXtracts\_* consists of short phrases from which one can derive such expressions as “embryotic narcotic”, “adrenaline drones” and “sergent corporality”. “(photos)” appears between each phrase. Does this mean that the text derives from a metalanguage description of how between the words there is (or should be, or has been) a photo? Or is the text a description of what a photo shows? And, in such case, how does “smells.of.r[a]op[e]ing.burns\_” look? The smell of abuse? And is there a photograph of “than[atos]kfully”? In Greek mythology, Thanatos is the personification of death who comes flying to people on black wings, to take their lives. Together with the name Eros, which one also finds in the text, we have the psychoanalytical terms for the instinct for life (Eros) and the urge for death (Thanatos). These are elements, which also include for example “genetically” and “virtual lust”, which cannot be pasted into a photo album. Albeit there are also image-creating words such as “booty” and “bullet” and “breast”.

4. In this album:

09:58am 01/04/2008

```
_bee.st[h]jung.in.[se(a)rgent]corporality_(photos),_cob.webbing.vs.brick+batbones_(photos),_t[oon]a[i]rred.brush[er]ings_(photos),_scaling.d[rag+
(o)n+drop]own[ed]_(photos),_eng[ame.adrenal]ine.drones[+ser0000hs]_(photos),_Bi[|]ut[er]Rings_pia[ ]_(photos),_smells.of.r[a]op[e]ing.burns_(photos),
_booty+*.teh.+bullet.b[r]east_(photos),_embryotic:narc[otic]_(photos),_real.in[state.b]ase+run+ba[ck]_(photos),_smells.of.r[a]op[e]ing.burns_(photos),
_ashed+shaved.danger[in]jous[is.ova.here.genetically?](photos),_body_m[virtual.lust.y]ode[s_p]ia_(photos),_c[visual.anims.tv]rittering.just.here...
(photos),_salt[+er]ate[c]lick_tangs_(photos),_crowd.down+prey.2.ur.interrrrphaseplacement.gawds_(photos),
_uber[na(cur>acent+con.my.shimmer.finger)]wings_(photos),_m.b[|]p[ur]ring.eyes_(photos),_inse[|hu]rt.ur.gau[s]ies[ty.pres[ci]ence_here_(photos),
_sliding.on.Erosity,than[atos]kfully_(photos)
```

Fig. 3: *\_cross.ova.ing ][4rm.blog.2.log 07/08 XXtracts\_*, section 4

The text’s rhythmic repetition of the word “photos” conveys the sense of a communication, which was not originally intended for us readers, but has become so, and this conveys a sense of displacement. At the same time, the words, even when they are impossible to reproduce visually, are inventive structures which establish a type of impossible, colourful and protruding plateau in the conscious mind. Precisely because they are mixed with trash words and trash code, when expressive and inventive strings of words appear, they stand out sharply like a sculptural, although impossible, plateau. Such poetic plateaus continue their presence down through the next sections with structures that can be read as approximations toward terms such as: blind body, amber kernels, snipped genital puppets, dna paper cut and geisha aphasia.

The repeated use of the word “photo” in section 4 can be read as metalanguage, since it marks that something is a photo, which is a semantically understandable word addressed to the reader, and habitually associated with the metalevel. Elsewhere in the work, there is metalanguage in a more programming-related sense, where the words in principle (originally) are not for meant for readers at all. The previously discussed section 3 (where the layout resembles M’s, or breasts, a wolf or curtains) contains words that are surrounded by metaword symbols, such as the word: “<fracture>”. As described by computer scientist John McCormick, these arrow symbols are used as conventional characters (in HTML) to indicate metadata. These symbols thus differ from the normal words on a website (MacCormick 2012, 19). The American digital poet and theoretician Loss Pequeño Glazier explains that metadata (also called tags) describes how text will look, or where it is placed on the page. As he demonstrates: “For example, <i> will begin a section of italics and </i> will end it” (Glazier 2001, 14-15). In this way, metadata can be used when a website is coded and the title has to be in a particular font size, thickness, colour and typography, where this can be marked with the help of words before and after the title, for example (as described by McCormick): “<TitleStart>”, and after the title word(s) “<TitleEnd>”. The code and the text to appear on the website are written as one text, but not all of it will be read as text. Part of the point in my reading of *mez’* text is that I as a reader do not understand everything in it, since in principle parts of it are not addressed to me as a reader; or rather, they were not, before *mez* chose to make them part of her text. The words used as metadata are performative words in the most concrete sense. They make things happen, but we are not intended to see them. They are, thus, to be read as words containing a special effect; words that enclose other words and make them stand out in a particular way. Yet, they would normally not be addressed to a person, but to a machine. On the other hand, there must be model readers (i.e. users who themselves programme in the same language) for the programming language, who almost synaesthetically see the result as soon as they see the code. This can be compared to being very good at reading music scores and not being able to stop oneself from transforming the visual score into music heard by the inner ear. The experiences can naturally vary, according to whether or not one masters a type of notation.

With Stiegler’s various different communicative registers, we can characterize the work by how, at one and the same time, it has a passive recipient mode (because I cannot answer), while also problematizing the fact that I will not necessarily be able to respond to the text in the same language as I am addressed in. The metalanguage elements of the work have various different model readers, but even if we do not understand the metalanguage, there is still a potential for recognizing that we now see what is normally hidden away. The text opens our eyes to our blindness, so to speak.

If “<fracture>” is thus a metaword, how should we read it in the context? A visual set-up in itself is a (potential) metalanguage for another visual set-up. How “fractures” will now look is another question, but we may remember that the work itself has a source code which differs from the code we can see on the screen. Some of the words in the work are thus words that have performed or would be able to perform in the most concrete sense. What about the rest? The metalanguage words can get the computer to do the things requested by the programmer. But what do the words otherwise ask for in the work? Who do they address, and in which ways, and what happens when the words seek to get other entities to do something? The human being and his or her body, for example?

### Droning imperatives

Section 10 of mez’ work called “Sel[f]e[le]ct>Proc.ess>[1st]S.kin”, addresses us directly. The section consists of schematic lists of imperatives which all begin with the word “Select”, followed by, for example: “Self\_in\_fect.organelles formed by the sub\_ego\_organs of the first chavatar, if any” or “Traverse order.in.the.organs formed by the remaining chavatars in the egoplateau, if any”.

```
10. Sel[f]e[le]ct>Proc.ess>[1st]S.kin
```

```
09:02am 01/12/2007
```

1. Select
  1. Self\_in\_fect.organelles formed by the sub\_ego\_organs of the first chavatar, if any.
  2. Visit the psychatomy of the 1st\_chavatar.
  3. Traverse order.in.the.organs formed by the remaining chavatars in the egoplateau, if any.
2. Select>Process
  1. Assess the st[e]ruc[ture] of the 1st chavatar.
  2. Formulate consciousness\_blocks formed by the sub\_organs of the 1st chavatar in the thoughtplateau, if any.
  3. Reverse the cohesion\_order of the remaining chavatars formed by the remaining organs in the egoplateau, if any.
3. Select>Process>Skin
  1. Wireframe orders formed by the sub\_ego.ruptures of the 1st chavatar, if any.
  2. Render adoptive\_ordering of the remaining chavatars in the egoplateau, if any.
  3. Visit the ego of the 1st Skin.

Fig. 4: *\_cross.ova.ing][4rm.blog.2.log 07/08 XXtracts\_, section 10*



The text structure consists of consequence causalities: if not – then. Like computer protocols’ branched language of opportunity. These are structures with all possible complex outcomes. If this, do that – otherwise this, etc. “Assess the st[e]ruc[[p]ture of the 1st chavatar.”, it says. This means that we must assess the first “chavatar’s” structure/fracture/ stage. What is a chavatar? (And “charvatar” elsewhere in the text). This of course is a play on avatar, which by definition is a role, a mask, a performance. The addition of “ch” in “chavatar” furthermore gives it a charming sound. “Visit the psychatomy of the 1st\_chavatar”, it says and “Visit the ego of the 1st Skin”, “ Traverse order.in.the.organs”, “Formulate consciousness\_blocks” from them. The organs are formed in something called an “egoplateau”. The text presents the idea of extremely sculptural, but also completely physically impossible bodies that can be modelled. These are organ building blocks, a set of bricks that can be rotated and assembled as required. The organs can be assembled into chavatars, which can then be organized, but also vice versa, so that organs are built up from chavatars, after which these can be organized.

The droning select!-manual is written on protocols: “Select this, if that!” it is said, but also “Decide for yourself!”. There is thus tension between agency and imperative. However, no matter which self-infected organelles or chavatars we choose, this is no more than a surreal tower, or rather a pile of organs, egoplateaus and consciousness blocks. Chavatars have bodies with organs that can be switched, consciousness blocks can be formulated by their sub-organs, and no matter which choice I make my body cannot put itself in the chavatar’s non-body place.

### **Words that give orders**

It makes sense to compare the droning performativity-encouraging imperatives in mez’ work with the Danish artist Amitai Romm’s work *Body Double* which was exhibited at the Copenhagen gallery *BKS Garage* in the autumn of 2011. This piece also encouraged the spectator to do things. With the help of two projectors, sentences were displayed on the wall, at knee height, with such texts as: “come closer”, “breathe – be aware of how it feels”, “rotating body parts”, “eyes and skin open”, “inhale and bend your elbows”. These were often things that you could not help doing because very simple bodily functions were addressed directly, such as: “clench



Fig. 5: Amitai Romm, *Body Double*, 2011. Photo: Emil Rønn Andersen

your hand into a fist”. You take a deep breath and are aware that this is what you are doing, or you discreetly clench your fist.

Yet the phrases in Amitai Romm’s text installation work also comprise the challenging or impossible: “veins collapse”, “release a fold of skin”, “turn into a doll made of wood”. In 2001, the English artist Tim Etchell created the project *Surrender Control*. Here, participants had to state their telephone numbers, after which they received text messages with orders to do various things. Small, simple things at the beginning, which one can hardly help doing: close your eyes, “change location”, call a family member, take your own pulse, etc. But the project developed so that at one point people were asked to steal an object or to call and harass other people. Orders can thus develop from being so directly and easily responded to that you almost do not register your subsequent affirmative reaction, to challenges that you quite intuitively refuse to meet and feel alienated from, either because they cross boundaries or are impossible to handle in real life. Just like the introduction to mez’ work that I cited, where it seems as though the request that otherwise appears to be made to a program suddenly becomes another kind of communication (“Change Reality”) directed at... well, at whom?

Mez’ text and the works I have compared it to demonstrate different modes of address with various forms of embedded recipients. We saw how the machine programming must have these consequential causality chains: if this, or that, then this. But we also found that the human body finds it difficult not to notice its own breathing, its hand, when these are addressed directly. In the communication with the work, there is a reason to acknowledge or reject oneself as potential recipient, and this clarification process is often exhibited or challenged in mez’ text, when it can be asked, at several different levels, to whom this is an address. The same is at play in the section that I will examine below.

### Am I the one hailed here?

In section 2 of *\_cross.ova.ing* [*4rm.blog.2.log 07/08 XXtracts*, the title “bet[t]a[living.thru.brutal\_ness]” establishes a bitter ambiguity. The Greek letter “beta”, which is the first word in the title, is used for one of the various different stages of software development. This is the last phase before software is sent into the market and is typically released to a test group that can adjust/comment on the final details, which will then be included in the final version. In this context, “beta-living” seems like a strange, quantitative evaluation – life in an almost final version. When reading the text with the extra “t”, a phonetic transition occurs, where a voice, with exaggerated diction, says “better living through brutality” – a sadistic or maverick statement.

```
2. bet[t]a[living.thru.brutal_ness]
11:21am 29/04/2008

Congratulations!!

You have been selected for early beta access to [ x(butter)scotch.h(r)ead(sux)=milken-meannesesx ].
As a user, you will have an opportunity to use [ xash.ha(1k)ffing *(f)lick(er)ing.(co)gentle.tonguesx ] before the rest of the world, as well as shaping the
[ x(t)railing.print(debauch)ed.(f)l)ngersx ].

[ xf(t)awn(y).skinned+arcing.(/w)ho(?)rmonal.mea(s)tagex ] is the first [ xcarbon.scr(e)l)atching.on.my.evolut(ddi)t(e)ionary.back(page)x ] which allows
you to view all of your [ xbrittle.word.(f)l)asesx ] in a single secure place.

Thanks and welcome to the [ xf(d)e(Sire)athering.ur.caballed.(n)ESTx ] community!

The [ xTrickling.D(C)l)o(F)wn(ed).Ur.Marketing.Facex ]Team
www.Trickling.D(C)l)o(F)wn(ed).Ur.Marketing.Facex .com
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Fig. 6: *\_cross.ova.ing* [*4rm.blog.2.log 07/08 XXtracts*, section 2

The actual text commences with the exclamation of “Congratulations!!”, which quickly provokes associations with the unsolicited Internet pop-up windows that congratulate and urge us to take part in competitions, or

invite us to view the images on a particular page. “You have been selected” are the first words here. This is a special “you” – the “you” of the pop-up ad, which we all know is not really us. Even though we receive the message directly on our own PC. So what is the text saying that “you” have been selected for? “early beta access to [ x(butter) scotch.h(r)ead (sux) + milken-meannessesx ]”. This can be rewritten as “early beta access to butterscotch head-sucking milken-meanness sex”. The next sequence is “[ xash.hu(lk)ffing +(f)lick(er)ing.(co)gentle.tonguesx ] before the rest of the world”. What we have is quantification, hierarchies and winner rhetoric mixed with desire and evil fantasies – elements of which there should be enough for everyone. It is hard to win a fantasy. The text is poetical and ugly at the same time, and the sense of a borrowed discourse strengthens the feeling of dealing with hybrid address forms. The text concludes by saying thanks and welcome to the community. A community that you have clearly not asked to be part of.

We can examine how these structures of communication are organized in mez’ work. The “Congratulations!!” introduction signals spam, but as soon as we can see that square brackets and small words have been inserted, we know that this is mezangelle. As we experienced, the language itself may seem to address us autonomously, as in the examples where the multi-layers of meaning provided via the mezangelle’s square brackets allow the words’ similarity with each other (down/clown, beta/better, finger/flinger, etc.) to (co)determine what is communicated. When we describe these aspects of dominance within the address form, it is not about whether mez and, in turn, the text are in control, but rather that we can refer to a difference in individual experience regarding who or what is perceived to be ‘speaking’. In the overall experience of section 2 of the poem, it is thus the mezangelle’s structure that, with the help of spelling similarities, reconstructs and diverts the mood of the already comical pop-up ad text.

Which possible positions are embedded in the work when we experience it? There is the sense of a sketch, by which is meant a fragmented reconstruction of found text and its mode of address. The text can be described as vulgar in the dual sense, due to the explicit sexual content, but also because its ‘you’ is the pop-up ad’s “you”. It is not the conceptualized ‘you’ of, for instance, the letter, a conversation or a literary text, but a shotgun ‘you’ of which the openness must be regulated so that it is possible to

capture a ‘proper you’, i.e. an empirical person, but also preferably more than one.<sup>4</sup> The direct spam-like address or the pop-up window’s temporality means that such addresses should in principle seem to be singular and addressed, but in most of the given contexts they have become so internalized as a genre that the request is rejected as spam, because I never think that “you” must be me. This is why this type of address is vulgar in the sense of ‘too much’. However, the recontextualisation of such a pop-up ad text in *mez*’ work exploits the framework-setting function of literature and art to establish the sense that this material wishes to engage us, even if this engagement is to highlight something noisy and vulgar. The *mez*’s mode of function establishes a sense of: “see what I can do; see what the text can do using its similarities and rhymes”; and also of a potential complicity between work and recipient, because the work calls for the reader to register the redundant form of address (the pop-up ad) embedded in the text. However, one does not have to relate to it in the same way as one would (or would not) in the original context because we know, the text and I, that the work is a display of this form of address.

The work thus stages the process whereby we ask ourselves: “Is it me that is being addressed here?” As such it can therefore be relevant to contextualize this addressment with the Marxist theoretician Louis Althusser’s concept of ‘interpellation’. This term conceptualizes the action in which the subject is constituted as a subject by the act of addressing (or calling); by being described “as something”; and most importantly: by recognising this description and accepting it. Althusser’s famous example of interpellation describes an individual who, when a police officer shouts out “Hey, you there!”, turns around and, with this bodily movement as a gesture, acknowledges herself to be someone that a police officer would shout at, but thereby also a subject. As Judith Butler explains the process, being called a name (being described as something) is also the actual condition for the opportunity of identity: “[I]t is by being interpellated within the terms of language that a certain social existence of the body first becomes possible [...] One comes to ‘exist’ by virtue of this fundamental dependency on the address of the Other” (Butler 1997, 5). Butler’s revised version of Althusser’s concept points out that this does not necessarily have to concern a single call, but rather a reciprocal process in which the subject that is constituted with the help of the address of the Other becomes a subject that is

able to address others (ibid. 26). In this sense, we are mutually dependent on each other. Yet, Butler also remarks that you do not necessarily have to turn around and actively assume a name to be constituted as the subject (ibid. 31). With *hatespeech* as an example, Butler argues that being hurt by language can be compared to physical pain. We can compare this with my example from Amitai Romm's installation, where I argued that you cannot help clenching your fist when this is what it tells you to do. In a *hatespeech* context, you cannot help reacting to (cringing in reaction to) violent words. These two situations are naturally also boundlessly different when it comes to situation, willingness, respect, power balance, etc.

Butler's further development of Althusser's theory of interpellation furthermore consists of the thesis that the discourse which is introduced for subjects does not have to be a concrete voice: "[T]he interpellative name may arrive without a speaker" (ibid. 34), Butler writes, citing such examples as bureaucratic forms, census surveys, adoption papers, etc.

The sociologist Chris Brickell has examined how Internet dating sites, for example, interpellate with their pre-set interface where you can enter "I am", "I am looking for" or "I like/dislike", and when someone is looking for something specific, you have to ask yourself "Is this me?". As Brickell words it: "Am I the one hailed here?"

### **My name is [H]aus[Fr]a[(f)u]g[u]e\_**

The questions of "seeing yourself" and communicating within a given framework are considered in a mischievous way in section 8 of mez' work. This begins with the title "#.Pls. .Select. .ur. .CHar[r(i)ed.H]Ac(k)tor.#" followed by a form with completed categories such as name, race, hair colour, etc. under *Toon 1* and *Toon 2, respectively* (Next page).

Together with the title, which says that you must select a charred hacker and actor, it is made clear that a form of masked identity (such as avatars for a game) is to be selected. This also sets the stage for a playful universe in which we do not expect descriptions of "real" people, but cartoon figures with weird hair and supernatural characteristics. Nonetheless, the predication of having to complete a form with personal characteristics entails a humoristic decompilation of the categories. The two cartoon characters' names are *\_DisC[o]ursive\_* and *\_SillyS[H]aus[Fr]a[(f)u]g[u]e\_*, respectively, and their races are fawn and raven. The first has tinted

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8. #.Pls. .Select. .ur. .CHAr[r(i)ed.H]Ac(k)tor.#
01:32pm 13/01/2008
Toon1:
Name: _DisC[o]ursive_
Class: [B]Ovi[d]ne
Race: Fawn[y+Like]
Hair Colour: Str[L]eaked.Apathy.Brown
Eye Colour: Tinted.Victim.Bl[H]ue[s]
Description: Moves.Heav[y.Txt.S(ubjects)Oil]e(d)n.
.....Is.Obs[ (b)e(autiful)quious]cenely.Serene.
.....Promises.Plasti[cine(ma{sk}es)]ques.

```

Fig. 7: *\_cross.ova.ing ][4rm.blog.2.log 07/08 XXtracts\_, section 2*

victim blue eyes and apathy brown hair, and moves heavily soiled text subjects – and heaven. *\_DisC[o]ursive\_* is also beautiful and obsequious and “Promises.Plasti[cine(ma{sk}es)]ques”. The silly hausfrau fugue has indignant red eyes and a hair colour described as “Saffron.Spew[Au]tum[nal]”. She is also described as crushing earthiness in small bloody piles and running in tiny rictus circuses.

The section is a humorous display of what we, with Butler, can call the interpellation of the form. We are forced to make selections within a specific framework; to call oneself something, so to speak. It is easy to compare these forms with computer protocols’ logics. Alexander R. Galloway gives the following pedagogical description of how we can understand the latter:

To help understand the concept of computer protocols, consider the analogy of the highway system. Many different combinations of roads are available to a person driving from point A to point B. However, en route one is compelled to stop at red lights, stay between the white lines, follow a reasonably direct path, and so on. These conventional rules that govern the set of possible behavior patterns within a heterogeneous system are what computer scientists call protocol. Thus, protocol is a technique for achieving voluntary regulations within a contingent environment. (Galloway 2004, 7)

We can thus see protocols as regulators in the same way as a highway system. A similar relation between the regulation of conditions for opportu-

nities and freedom can be said to be present in the very basic form in *mez'* text, where we, for example, have to state our race.<sup>5</sup> Yet her interventions insist on shifting the balance between the regulatory control of conditions for opportunities and freedom: *mez* makes the characters into animal or bird species, instead of choosing a human race for them, and what might otherwise be objective descriptions of external characteristics (hair and eye colour) are sarcastically linked to temperaments (indignation, apathy) and external processes, so that blue eyes are not just something you are born with, but also something a victim develops (in different hues). There is a resistance towards succumbing to the form's logic and towards committing to a name and an identity (when *Toon 1* is asked for a name, it dismissively replies “\_DisC[o]ursive\_”). In this section of the work too, “found” text is exhibited in which it seems as though something has “first” communicated something to the embedded sender. The sender has then considered this communication and thereafter further communicated within the framework, but seeking to extend the limits of what is possible within that. The sarcastic manner of responding seems to hold a claim that there is continuity between physical appearance and temperament.

What the work displays is a staged enunciation of a communicative relation to an instance that is both sender and recipient. This is an instance of address that is addressed by the form “before”<sup>6</sup> it addresses us, and it is clear from its address to us that it cheekily sneers at the conditions for communication that were imposed on it. The work thus asks “who has the agency here?” In its communication, the text signals that in its own communicative economy it has embedded a communication to... well, to whom, we may ask ourselves, since no “I” occurs in the text at any time. Perhaps one might say that the communication entails an embedded actor, who will have to choose a way of describing herself during the text.

Parts of *mez'* work thus help us to zoom into the process in which one is interpellated by the function with which one is communicating. One specifically communicates *with* it, in the sense that, as Butler points out, this is a dialogical process. Yet this process may be more or less regulated, since the framework that communicates to us may be determined and perhaps (cf. Stiegler) formulated in a character system that lies beyond our control.

There are good reasons to raise questions concerning identity and communication on the Internet. These questions are also raised in Bernard



Stiegler's theory at ontological levels. As I described, Stiegler establishes a difference between a communication mode in which the recipient has no chance of being also the sender, and a communicative cycle in which the recipient is always also the sender, and where the psychical milieu is so closely related to the symbolic and the technical that they cannot be separated; where one does not know what one wishes to communicate before one has already done so. These variations in communicative differentiations are productive elements in understanding the individual work.

### **The organic versus the organized**

An important question of *mez'* work is the nature of the entity being communicated with. Do we sense a human agent? In another digital poem, *Sooth*, by the Canadian digital poet David Jhave Johnston, from 2005,<sup>7</sup> words, video, movement and sound are linked in such a way that the user clicks on the screen to view the words, and these points are "read" by the video, which adjusts its movements to them. The sentences "read" the video's movements and adjust their movements to it, while the sound "reads" the sentences' movements and size and allows the level of the music to be governed by them. This has led the American media and literature theoretician Rita Raley to describe the work as a place where both human and non-human "cog-



Fig. 8: David Jhave Johnston, *Sooth*, 2005, Screenshot

nizers” are at play. She points out how any identification of a cohesive “I” in the poem is, of necessity, complicated by the unpredictable behaviour of the algorithmically animated text (Raley 2011, 898).

Raley describes how *Sooth* establishes a medial ecology, in the metaphorical sense that it is an independent system that regulates itself as a video file, but also because it combines alphabetical and organic forms. She believes that Jhave Johnston’s poetical technique expresses and originates from an organic sensibility which embraces animism, relativism and non-human things (ibid. 890). The organic must not be construed as being in opposition to the digital, yet Raley writes that it is a contrast to self-reflexive digital poetry that relates to the media’s protocols – a classification that absolutely applies to mez’ work. In this sense, Jhave Johnston’s work is also a type of work that has completely “given up” exhibiting the programming mechanisms that helps to determine the communication in the work. As he describes it himself, he uses a programming language that permits him to combine spontaneous fragments (ibid. 891). It all seems very intuitive when he works with what he calls animated interfaces. In this sense, at a microlevel, this concerns what I, via Stiegler, call a communicative short-circuiting, due to working with elements whose communication neither Jhave Johnston nor the rest of us understand nor are able to influence. This is a language that we will never ourselves be able to speak. Yet it is also intuitive and undelimitable. It can thus be read as an acceptance that there are digital elements which creates an intuitive and organic surface, but which we will never come to understand. It can, however, also be read as an attempt to draw attention to this and to the problems it comprises. The point is that *Sooth*, in contrast to mez’ work, seems to have given up exhibiting the levels in its own programming and communicative mechanisms. In mez’ work, I examined its distribution of agency and what I have called its communicative economies, but in a work like Jhave Johnston’s, this is rather a situation in which exchanges of agencies and communications are so undecidable and microstructural that it can metaphorically be described as a communicative ecology.

## Conclusions

In my reading of *\_cross.o.va.ing* [*4rm.blog.2.log 07/08 XXtracts\_*], I have focused on how the sender instance is also a recipient of communication. I have examined what I call the distribution of agency and raised the ques-

tion of which constituents of identity are made possible. In my use of Butler's concept of interpellation in conjunction with the reading of mez' work, an 'address' can almost be understood as an 'assault', or at any rate as a provocative examination of the question of agency and power relations. My reading of the "form section", "#.Pls. .Select. .ur. .CHar[r(i)ed.H]Ac(k) tor.#" in mez' work displays an enunciation structure in which such power relations are exhibited: including questions of how an I or/and a sender instance may be able to characterize itself.

The boundaries for when and what something communicates to us as we communicate ourselves has been one of the fundamental questions of my reading of mez' work. The interesting aspect is, as we have seen, when it is thematized in the work's overall communication that there is a relation between senders and recipients internally, or contextually, within the work, and when we ask how these relations are negotiated.

We may ask whether allowing everything a form of communicative agency expresses a type of animistic thought? Should we save this concept on agency for questions concerning a programming's "free will"? I do not think so. In "agency-interested" readings, we must instead investigate specific poems and (digital) artworks in the broader sense, as well as their various different communicative situations, negotiations, potentials and problems; also in studies of, for example, digital phenomena that are not art and which therefore cannot use art's framework-setting function to point to these negotiations. Hence, I hope that my reading of communication, agency and interpellation in the poem have indicated how a linguistic, medial analysis and critique of contemporary digital phenomena is also a cultural critique.

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## Notes

- 1 Many of the projects are found here: <http://www.hotkey.net.au/~netwurker/>.
- 2 I generally understand protocols to be the rules which specify how (computer) elements can communicate with each other. I will briefly return to the question of these regulating structures later in this paper.
- 3 [http://collection.eliterature.org/2/works/mez\\_crossovaing.html](http://collection.eliterature.org/2/works/mez_crossovaing.html).
- 4 The questions concerning the “you” of the ad are complicated by the contemporary trend for more and more targeted ads, based on monitoring of our Internet browsing history.
- 5 I remember that when I began subscribing for the American streaming service *Netflix*, I had to enter my race, and among other options I could choose “Caucasian”. It was not possible, though, to submit a mix of several different races.
- 6 There is not necessarily any temporal hierarchy in this relation.
- 7 [http://collection.eliterature.org/2/works/johnston\\_sooth.html](http://collection.eliterature.org/2/works/johnston_sooth.html).



# CONTEMPORARY POETRY AND THE QUESTION OF GENRE

## With a Special View to a Danish Context

LOUISE MØNSTER

### I

If you ask the average reader what poetry is, a common answer will be that it is a literary short-form in verse that describes the experiences, thoughts or feelings of a subject.<sup>1</sup> Although this is a very widespread understanding of poetry, it is also open to question, and it fails to match the actual ways in which the genre unfolds. Naturally, this is not to be understood as if collections of poems are no longer published with short versified texts centred on the speech of a single subject; this kind of traditional poetry is far from extinct. Nonetheless, it is obvious that there has been a significant increase in new types of text that avoid these features and still call themselves poems, lyric or poetry.

In *Drømme og dialoger* (2009, *Dreams and Dialogues*), Peter Stein Larsen has examined the encounter that occurred in Danish literature around the year 2000 between the more romantic poetic norm of *centrallyrik* and a persistent avant-garde called *interaktionslyrik*. The latter is characterized by a stylistically heterogeneous, polyphonic and dialogical expression, and it therefore stands in opposition to the established comprehension of the poem as an autonomous entity with a monologic mode of enunciation, with stylistic homogeneity and with the speaking subject as the unequivocal centre of the poetic universe. However, in addition to the changes within written poetry, poetry has been liberated from the medium of the book. Contemporary poetry is not only to be found on book pages: it occurs in different digital formats, it manifests itself as book-objects in galleries, it captures public space, and it is performed and sung. In other words, contemporary poetry expresses itself in many ways and crosses numerous borders, from mode to mode and from media to media.

This change can be seen as a testimony to poetry's vitality and ability to change, but it also creates new challenges. These challenges are not only connected to mapping the expanding field of contemporary poetry; they

are also more fundamental. Much trendsetting literature today eschews a fixed relation to art forms, media and genres; instead, it turns up in the most surprising places. One can therefore ask whether the concept of genre has lost its significance, and, consequently, whether it is still relevant to sustain the old concept of poetry. *Is* poetry a definable genre, or is it more like a changeable field with flexible and frayed borders? And last but not least, why is it important to address these questions? Which role does genre play in the acquisition of a work? These are some of the main themes of this article, where I will discuss the question of genre in relation to contemporary poetry and with a special view to the ways in which poetry unfolds in a Danish context.

## II

Raising the question of genre is like opening a more than two thousand years old closet from which the skeletons fall in large numbers. The question of the classification of literary forms is among the main issues of the science of literature, and since Plato and Aristotle's day, a great number of suggestions have been made about how to systematize the different genres. For many years, the classical classification of literature into the main genres of epic, lyric and drama constituted a standard model, which an ingenious genre system was able to elaborate in even more detailed ways. However, in his "Introduction à l'architext" (1979) Gérard Genette argued that, in reality, this genre model derives from a series of dubious interpretations of the statements of the two antique philosophers. The status of genres has varied, and more recent genre theory outlines a contrast between an achronic and a diachronic approach: between, on the one hand, an essentialistic and transhistorical conception of genres, and, on the other hand, a historical approach that rejects the idea of generic fixity.

When it comes to poetry more specifically, this tension can be formulated as a question of whether we need fixed defined characteristics to identify something as poetry, or, on the contrary, whether poetry is a genre whose defining elements change with time. While classicist periods made a virtue of meeting predefined genre expectations, since the advent of romanticism the value of an artist has primarily been judged according to the level of originality, including the genre potential of his text. Friedrich Schlegel attacked the rule-based aesthetics of classicism and defended a progressive,

genre-mixing universal poetry, and, in a similar manner, the history of modernism from the mid-18th century to the end of the 20th century can be seen as a break with the established forms and traditional understandings of genres. For instance, the rise of free verse and prose poems represents a break with the poetic convention of fixed stanzas, metrics and end rhymes. Similarly, the avant-garde stepped up the breach of norms in its attempt to reconcile life and art, and in a revolt against the art institution itself. As Tzvetan Todorov writes in “L’origine des genres” (1978): “the very sign of the authentically modern writer” has often been seen as “one who no longer respects the separation of genres” (Todorov 1976, 159).

It seems unwise to maintain an essentialist conception of genre in the light of the history of modern literature; we need a more historical and pragmatic approach. However, the fact that genres have always been subject to change may also give rise to more serious generic scruples, not only in relation to the shift from an achronic conception of genre to one that is diachronic, but also in relation to the concept of genre itself and whether it might be an outworn concept. As Peter Stein Larsen explains in the introductory chapter on genres in *Drømme og dialoger*, Benedetto Croce’s *Estetica* (1902) and Maurice Blanchot’s *Le livre à venir* (1959) can be considered pioneering expressions of these views. Later, these opinions became more common in various post structural theories. For instance, this is the case in works by deconstructive thinkers such as Jacques Derrida and Paul de Man. They both reject the notion that genres can be deduced on the basis of structural similarities between texts. Quite the contrary, they comprehend genres as related to contexts and to the expectations of the reader (Larsen 2009, 22ff).<sup>2</sup> This point of view is expressed more radically by Stanley Fish. In “How to Recognize a Poem When You See One” (1980), Fish argues that the interpretative community is the genre constitutive factor; it is the community that decides to read something as a poem and therefore interprets a text in accordance with the conventions of reading poetry. In Fish’s words, “Interpreters do not decode poems; they make them” (Fish 1980, 327).

These reservations about the relevance of the genre concept are of fundamental importance. Nonetheless, they seem to be more compelling in relation to some genres than others, and they seem particularly urgent when contemporary poetry is in focus. Contemporary poetry appears to



be an amorphous field where texts evolve in many new ways and in interaction with different media; if poetry does not look like what we normally understand to be poetry and does not 'behave like poetry', do we still need the genre concept itself? Does it make any difference if what we read, hear or experience calls itself poetry or is understood as poetry?

### III

Yes, it actually does make a difference: it is of great importance to maintain concepts of genres, even when facing experimental and genre-crossing literary forms. This is the short version of my answer, which will be elaborated below. Since insisting on the relevance of the concept of genre is not identical with a refusal to reform, modify and supplement former understandings of genres, I will ask how we can work meaningfully with concepts of genres in addressing contemporary poetry. Does it call for a distinction between poetry and lyric? Or do we need to vary between the use of the concepts of genre and modus? I will return to these matters later, but first, on a more general level, we will be examining the function of genre in relation to the acquisition of a literary work, drawing on Alastair Fowler's *Kinds of Literature: An Introduction to the Theory of Genres and Modes* (1982).

As soon as we have a book in our hands, we experience genres as something other than superfluous constructs and pure concepts for classification intended for librarians who need to choose the appropriate shelf for a specific book or for publishers categorizing a text on their home page. We are not just standing with a stack of papers filled with letters and words. On the contrary, we are holding a literary work with a unity of some sort. We have certain expectations of that unity and form specific pre-understandings to engage in it. In this connection, it is obvious that genre expectations play a crucial role. It is not for nothing that most works of fiction display the genre on their front pages.<sup>3</sup> Genres play an important part in the literary network connecting authors, publishers, distributors and readers. One of the first questions we ask of a literary work concerns what kind it is, and genre is one of the basic categories of orientation when we are entering the universe of a book.

Our experience tells us that genre matters. For example, it makes a major difference whether we expect to read crime fiction, fairy-tales or a collection of poems: we prepare our ways of perception differently, and

we read the texts in different ways, with an eye for different features and with the anticipation of different kinds of experiences.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, the more books we read, the more we may develop our sensitivity to genres, so that we not only register the main genres (prose, poetry and drama) and a diversity of sub genres, but also genre mix, genre developments, and genre inventions. At one and the same time, genres are a basic tool for orientation which children acquire at school *and* a tool that is optimized by experience. Fowler writes that “Acquisition of generic competence appears to be a complicated and lengthy process” (Fowler 1985, 45). An experienced reader is what is needed when it comes to sensing the specific ways in which a text deals with the issue of genre. The reader must know the norm to know when the norm is broken; it is only when readers know the tradition that they know when something differs and takes a new direction.

This does not just apply to the reader; the literature that intends to break decorum and create something new is the literature that is most dependent on tradition. Negation and transgression call for regulation and retention of a kind. As Fowler says, “the writer who cares most about originality has the keenest interest in genre. Only by knowing the beaten track, after all, can he be sure of leaving it” (ibid. 32). Similarly, Todorov writes:

The fact that a work ‘disobeys’ its genre does not make the latter nonexistent; it is tempting to say that quite the contrary is true. And for a twofold reason. First, because transgression, in order to exist as such, requires a law that will, of course, be transgressed. One could go further: the norm becomes visible – lives only – by its transgressions. (Todorov 1976, 160)

Hence, instead of taking the current situation with its great genetic complexity as an opportunity to declare genre irrelevant, I will advocate retaining its importance. This is due not only to the general terms of aesthetic reception and to the vital role of ‘genre anticipation’ in our encounter with a literary work; it is also due to the fact that the specific way in which a literary work relates to the question of genre and genre expectations is a key part of its enunciation. An important point in Fowler’s work is that genres are far from being effective only as classification tools. On the contrary, they are primarily of importance in relation to interpretation, and

therefore the way in which a work expresses its genre greatly affects our understanding of the work. This becomes obvious in an examination of Danish contemporary poetic practices that are genre challenging. For instance, Lars Skinnebach's *Enhver betydning er også en mislyd* (2009), Christina Hagen's *White Girl* (2012), Amalie Smith's *I civil* (2012), and Pablo Llambias' trilogy *Monte Lema* (2011), *Hundstein* (2013), and *Sex Rouge* (2013) are classified as poems by Gyldendal, their publisher, yet they all challenge the poetic genre. On the front page, Hagen's book presents itself as "Digte" [Poems] but when you open the book, it says it contains "fictionalisations of post cards", and when you read the 'poems', they give the impression of short prose. Similarly, the texts in Llambiás' book are written as sonnets, still on the back side of the cover, the book describes itself as a "narration". However, it is not to determine whether it *really is* poetry that it is essential to mobilize the question of genre in relation to such works, but rather in order to examine what relationship each of them has with the genre, how each interacts with genre, and what implications this has for the overall position of the literary work in question.

Following Ludwig Wittgenstein's notion of *family resemblance* as "a complicated network of similarities overlapping and criss-crossing" (Fowler 1985, 41), Fowler also refuses to see genres as distinct classes. On the contrary, he suggests, we comprehend genres as historically changeable entities that are actively modeled by the texts that belong to them (ibid. 20). Jean-Marie Schaeffer adopts a similar dynamic approach to the genre question; his concept of *genericity* emphasizes that rather than *belonging* to a particular genre, a text is involved in a productive and transformative dialogue with the genre (Schaeffer 1997, 291). Furthermore, one can argue that it is precisely the unexpected and surprising that attracts the most attention, and therefore it is only logical that the works that break with our genre expectations are those for which the discussion of genre is most urgent. From this perspective, genre fractures do not reduce the importance of genre; rather they create increased sensitivity to it. As a counter to the argument that we should stop talking of genres in relation to contemporary poetry – for example on the grounds that many contemporary lyric practices not only oppose genre norms but are also so diverse that it makes no sense to subsume them under a unified perspective – one can argue that this relationship revitalizes the genre issue and underlines its relevance.

#### IV

As we move on to focus more specifically on lyric as a genre, it is time to recall that this article began with the statement that most people in our cultural circles conceive of the lyric as a short literary form that expresses the experiences, thoughts or feelings of a subject. It is precisely in relation to this conception that much new poetry seems to be an experiment in genre. How has this norm survived relatively intact? Why do we feel it so keenly when genres are broken?

Virginia Jackson offers a possible answer. In *Dickinson's Misery. A theory of lyric reading* (2005), 'Who reads poetry' (2008) and 'Lyric' in *The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics* (2012), Jackson argues that Romanticism marks the establishment of a particularly tenacious lyrical standard which has since gone on to influence our understanding of the nature of poetry. Jackson thus lends support to Gérard Genette's general account of the history of genres. Genette's essential point is that an understanding of the main genres of poetry, prose and drama as virtually natural categories is a Romantic construction with little historical evidence to support it. Jackson builds upon Genette's view that we are still stuck in a narrow and vulgarized conception which, ironically, understands poetry to be precisely the kind of lyrical poetry that Aristotle left out of his poetics.<sup>5</sup>

More specifically, Jackson states that while poetry had previously barely been seen as a genre and had certainly not been understood in terms of the narrow norms ruling lyrical poetry, the shift that began in the 18th century saw the word 'lyric' change from its earlier usage as an adjective to its new status as a noun, and from having been a quality of poetry to being perceived as a category and an aesthetic ideal that seemed to encompass any verse form. Poetry is simply seen as lyric, understood as a form of text that expresses personal feelings in a concentrated and harmonically organized form and that indirectly addresses the private reader (Jackson 2012, 826). This entails a narrowing of the broader concept of poetry; to employ Jackson's term, it has been *lyricized*. One of the central reasons for the major impact of this 'process of lyricization' is that it was reinforced by its close alliance in the 19th and 20th centuries with literary criticism and methods of analysis (Jackson 2005, 8). In this connection, Jackson ascribes a vital role to New Criticism, which she regards as having created a model of all poetry as essentially lyrical. The model had an educational point of

departure, but it developed into a reading practice and influenced the ways in which poetry was written (Jackson 2012, 833).

This is still 'the normative model for production and reception of most poetry' (ibid.). The identification of poetry with the short, personal and expressive form of the lyric still acts as the norm against which we perceive many contemporary lyrical works as genre experiments. It is in the context of this argument that Stefan Kjerkegaard adopts Jackson's distinction between poetry and lyric in his articles on genre fragmentation in contemporary Danish autobiographical poetry ('Genreopbrud i 00'ernes danske poesi. Det selvbiografiske digt' 2010) and on lyric, mediatization and poetry ('Lyrik, medialisering, poesi' 2013). As well as adopting the distinction between poetry and lyric, Kjerkegaard advocates the rehabilitation of a broader concept of poetry to embrace contemporary poetic practices. While Jackson wanted to challenge the lyricized concept of poetry, Kjerkegaard proposes to introduce a distinction in the application of the concepts. This is a distinction that might be useful in terms of education, but still it seems somewhat counter-intuitive in the Danish context. Here it is *poetry* that is the term with grandiose romantic associations, while the term 'lyric' acts as a more neutral technical term – insofar as such a thing really exists.<sup>6</sup>

## V

Jackson may have explained the origins of a lyrical norm that is so tenacious that we still react to works that depart from it, but Jackson's solution seems to invite another question: is it possible for the history of modern poetry to be described *both* as a tradition of new departures (Todorov) *and* as the history of the institution of a narrower lyrical norm (Jackson)? Are these not incompatible points of view? I believe that this incompatibility is only apparent, and to explain why, the question of canonisation must be brought into play.

While the modern history of poetry is bound up with the effort to create ever-new and aesthetically contemporary forms of expression, many of the new departures in poetry have still occurred within the basic framework of the poetic genre as a short literary form which is often in verse and which mainly revolves around the subject's experiences, feelings or thoughts. This is the case, at least, when we retrace the line from Romanticism through Symbolism to the various phases of Modernism. Poetic

practices where this has proved impossible have long occupied a more peripheral position, especially radical avant-garde forms. Of course, this does not mean that genre-related experimental forms have been ignored; rather, they have not been canonized and institutionalized to the same degree as lyric poetry, which has had a more classical form of expression and has remained within the format stipulated by the pages of the book.

However, the new situation seems to involve a reversal of the balance of power between what might be called classical modernist practice and avant-garde poetic practice. The avant-garde is not just asking politely, once again, to join the company of the established: it is practically kicking the door down. As mentioned earlier, in Denmark this is not only true of the rapidly emerging *interaktionslyrik* described in Peter Stein Larsen's thesis, but also in relation to the many ways in which poetry is present in a variety of forms of art and media and the way in which it is strengthening its material and performative dimensions. These contemporary poetic forms can be seen as an extension of earlier manifestations of the avant-garde and its experimental and boundary crossing drive.<sup>7</sup>

The current tendency of lyric to appear across the media, to break down the borders between forms of art and to seek alternative paths of development can be traced back to the beginning of the 20th century when the 'historical' avant-garde established itself in forms such as expressionism, surrealism and futurism. Similarly, but to varying degrees, the avant-garde affected the concept of art throughout the 20th century.

In Denmark, the resumption and revitalization of the avant-garde tradition began in the late 1960s with the unfolding of a major experimental endeavour. In literature, this resulted in play with the materiality of the book, in 'Jazz'n'Poetry', in performance art, and in the subversion of the borders between popular culture and art. In other words, artists and authors including Jørgen Leth, Hans-Jørgen Nielsen, Dan Turèll, Per Kirkeby, Henrik Have and Peter Laugesen comprised a group that broke with the established artistic norms and forms of expression within the medium of the book and across a variety of art forms. It is precisely these authors who were 're-canonised' in connection with an increased interest in the open field of literature around the year 2000. Experimental literature had previously had underground status, but now it became more established and was complemented by foreign sources of inspiration, especially

from the USA.<sup>8</sup> At the same time, a number of significant new voices emerged and, given their specific place in history, they continued working within what I have called the *ever expanding field* ('det stadigt udvidende felt' Mønster 2013) – a term inspired by the American art critic Rosalind Krauss's concept of the *expanded field*.<sup>9</sup>

With reference to this line of development in literary history, it might be said that there is nothing fundamentally new or surprising about the contemporary expansion, breaching and questioning of literary genres, including poetry. It has long been avant-garde practice. Although the trend is not new, what *is* remarkable is the ingenuity, variety, originality and richness of these experiments. It is striking that so many of the interesting works produced in recent years challenge our established understanding of poetry. Now, perhaps more than ever, experiments with genre are being carried out to an extent and with a power that calls for attention and which can hardly be ignored.<sup>10</sup>

## VI

This situation leads us to ask whether more general aspects of contemporary life might have put pressure on the established concept of poetry and have contributed to the emergence of alternative forms. With no illusions about being able to provide a full explanation, I shall point out four factors which I believe play an important role: mediatization, literary culture, forms of publication and increased politicization. It is certainly possible to distinguish between these factors, but they are also closely interconnected.

For the first time since printing became widespread, the supremacy of the medium of the book is genuinely challenged. The digital media pervade our reality, and even though the book is still a privileged literary medium, its power is no longer as exclusive as it was. Poetry is on the internet, it is written on blogs, it takes the form of mobile text messages, and it can be experienced on the iPad. It is not just that familiar forms appear on the new media platforms; the mode of operation of the media influences the poetic genre and provides new aesthetic possibilities. This is apparent when one compares poetical works that have been published in print and have been remediated as internet poetry. It is obvious that internet poetry is often more complex in terms of genre, in that it creates a flexible text which can, for example, be combined with pictures and sound. Moreover,

internet poetry employs a more open way of working, and it involves readers to a greater degree in acquiring the work.<sup>11</sup> As Hans Kristian Rustad puts it, in digital poetry the work changes from stable object to sensory event (Rustad 2012, 78).

While some authors of poetic works have sought out and studied the new possibilities offered by the electronic media, mediatization has also brought renewed attention to the printed book as a medium. Awareness has increased regarding the mediality of various media, including the book, and instead of appearing to be a transparent medium for a text that must carry the meaning alone, material aspects of the book are increasingly incorporated in the production of meaning. The range extends from works that consciously play on their choice of paper quality and colour, to those whose idea and content cannot be separated from their format, including the materials upon which they are printed.<sup>12</sup> In the form of book-objects, poetry has thus entered the gallery that had previously been reserved for painting and sculpture. Referring to Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, Krista S. G. Rasmussen writes that a new material wave has emerged, and that this wave reflects a longing for the analogue and for physical objects. This longing is a reaction to the transience of the digital (Rasmussen 2013, 44).

The second point is related to literary culture. While the production and consumption of poetic works used to be sedentary and compartmentalised activities, literature is increasingly socially involved. We are living in an experience culture, a culture of events; recent years have seen a significant increase in the number of locations for the performance and dissemination of poetry. Literary cafés, festivals and stages now play a vital role in the meeting between author and audience. While the importance of such physical locations has grown, more and more participants have explored and exploited the possibilities of live performance. If the classic form of poetry reading has not been replaced, it is now complemented by various forms of poetry performance in which extant works are not merely disseminated, but in which their realization constitutes a literary work in itself. In particular, there has been a significant increase in the number of poets who have ventured into the field between sound'n'poetry.<sup>13</sup> The oral dimension of poetry has been boosted in a broad range of forms extending from spoken word and poetry slam through rap and pop forms and on to rock, avant-garde and psychedelic forms. It seems to be the rule rather



than the exception that young poets incorporate their works in a variety of performative and artistic contexts.

As has already been suggested, this trend towards more experience-oriented poetical contexts has resulted in more dynamic author and reader roles. Their co-presence allows immediate response and various degrees of interaction. Moreover, the establishment of a shared field is not limited to live arrangements. It also exists on the internet, which acts as a locus for documentation, discussion and advertising. In Denmark, Authors' blogs, YouTube, Bogtube [BookTube], Forfatterstemmer [Authors' Voices] and Fieldsarkivet [The Fields Archive] are important places when it comes to experiencing readings, poetry performance, video poetry, and so on. Even libraries have had to rethink the way that they function to accommodate the new forms of literature.<sup>14</sup>

Changes in connection with publishing constitute the third factor which has had a decisive influence on the upheavals affecting poetry. A complex interaction of economic crisis and new publishing channels has led to a situation in which Gyldendal is really the only remaining large publisher in Denmark with space for poetry. The other actors constitute a plethora of small presses of various standing. Some of these enterprises have a long but tumultuous history; others act more like briefly opened channels. When we look at the growth of small presses, it appears that what began as a necessity produced by crisis has become an advantage – at least when it comes to experimental literature, including poetry. Without the control exerted by the desire to earn large amounts of money or to achieve success with a wide audience, these small enterprises have created a niche for poetry which offers the right conditions for poetry to develop in new directions.<sup>15</sup> In addition, the advent of various new channels for electronic publication has made it cheaper and far less complicated to publish poetry. These channels include internet publishers, texting publishers, electronic periodicals and online poetry sites, while many poets publish on their own blogs and social media. As mentioned in connection with mediatization, the use of these platforms has helped to increase the diversity of poetry.

The fourth and final factor might be termed 'politicization'. Politicization may indeed be relevant to the difference between large and small publishers, but my main point here is that whatever the publication channel, it seems that in comparison with the 1980s and 1990s, there is a tendency

for Danish poetry – as well as Western poetry in general – in the new millennium to engage with topical issues such as the climate, capitalism, power relations, race, colour and gender. Instead of a genre that was primarily aesthetically and existentially oriented and centred on the writing subject, poetry has increasingly become worldly and subversive since 2000 and has thus developed a more heterogeneous, discursive and impure character. The break with the established norms and predefined systems is not just a question of content; it demands a change of expression. Consequently, contemporary poetry is neither neat nor orderly in terms of form and genre.

In pointing out the influence of mediatization, literary culture, publication forms and increased politicization, I do not pretend to have provided an exhaustive explanation of why it is precisely now that there seems to be a fertile basis for a paradigm shift in our notions of poetry as a genre. I do believe, however, that these factors have made a decisive contribution, and that their interaction has meant that the present situation is significantly different from the past. It could be said that the developments that we are currently experiencing in poetry are not new, insofar as the roots are to be found in literary history where they are particularly related to the various forms of the avant-garde. Nevertheless, the particular conditions and the specific technological possibilities that are characteristic of the present day mean that the new departures within poetry as a genre have taken a new direction and have greater impact than they had previously. Even though something is not *essentially* new, it can still be new.

## VII

As a final step in the discussion of contemporary poetry and the question of genre, I will provide some concrete examples of the ways in which contemporary poetry interacts with genre. Before proceeding, however, a short summary seems appropriate.

The starting point of this article was the observation that there is a mismatch between the general understanding of poetry and the actual ways in which poetry unfolds. By way of contrast with the common understanding of poetry as a literary short form in verse that revolves around a subject's experiences, feelings and reflections, much contemporary poetry appears to challenge genre so strongly that one is led to ask whether it is worthwhile to maintain the label 'poetry', or whether the concept of

genre has lost its relevance. At first, this led me to discuss general issues regarding genres, and, drawing on the views of Alastair Fowler, I argued that genres play a vital role in our acquisition of a text and that their importance is not diminished when they are challenged. I moved on to look more specifically at the field of poetry, and the work of Virginia Jackson helped to explain how the identification of poetry with lyric had become dominant. I also discussed how, although this understanding of poetry had not gone unchallenged over the years, the more radical poetic experiments of the avant-garde had not previously been canonized to the same degree as lyrical poetry. However, it seems that this situation is about to change right now, and I suggested that this change could be due to four distinctive factors: Mediatization, literary culture, forms of publication, and increased politicization. Factors, which together may have contributed to a paradigm shift in poetry, where the classical lyrical conception of poetry is challenged by more experimental forms that sets new standards for what poetry is and can be. But how is it that these new and fast-growing forms interact more specifically with the common notion of poetry? And what are the consequences in relation to our way of working with the poetic genre? These are the last questions, I will investigate with a special view to Danish literature.

I have already mentioned that contemporary poetry has increasingly joined an alliance with other art forms; that it has approached its sister arts and not only works with musical and pictorial elements on the conditions of the written text itself, but has made the move into the areas of visual art and music in much more concrete ways. Not to say that it has been orientated towards performance; towards the way it *acts* instead of how it *is*. This expansion of the field of poetry also means, however, that the interpreter must navigate in a broader interartial field and be able to evaluate poetry by other standards than the purely textual. In other words, the interpreter must take into account parameters of materiality, physicality, gesture, voice, tone, and a variety of other factors exceeding the framework of the written work.

With text as its chief characteristic, however, poetry has raised the question of genre and broken with the romantic understanding of poetry in various ways. One of these ways involves the remix, sampling and recycling of genre forms and specific literary texts alike. Simon Grottrian (e.g.

*Risperdalsonetterne*, 2000), Rasmus Nikolajsen (e.g. *Socialdemokratisk digt*, 2010), Mette Østergaard Henriksen (*Stikkervin jeg fucker dig*, 2011), and Pablo Llambías (*Monte Lema* (2011), *Hundstein* (2013), and *Sex Rouge* (2013)) and Peter Adolphsen and Ejler Nyhavn (*Katalognien*, 2009), have all published works that are characterized either by the investigation of classical poetic genres or by the transport of well-known texts into new and surprising contexts. Similarly, Olga Ravn (*Jeg æder mig selv som lyng*, 2012) and Christina Hagen (*White Girl*, 2012) have published collections of poems that have concrete texts as their starting point. Montages, readymades, conceptual poetry and post-productive poetry are in vogue, as is evident in the work of authors such as Martin Larsen (*Monogrammer*, 2007), Christian Yde Frostholm (*Afrevne ord*, 2004), Martin Glaz Serup (*Ja, jeg smager månedens kunstnervin!*, 2010) and Chresten Forsom (*Manhattan*, 2011). While some recent works have distanced themselves from the classical romantic conception of poetry as a stronghold of the experiences and reflections of a subject, there is also a reverse tendency in the form of works that draw so heavily on real experiences that they destabilize the usual distinctions between the author and the lyrical I and between fact and fiction. This biographical tendency is evident in the aforementioned trilogy by Pablo Llambias, as well as in works by Maja Lee Langvad (*Find Holger Danske*, 2006), Lone Hørslev (*Jeg ved ikke om den slags tanker er normale*, 2009), Eva Tind Kristensen (*eva+adolf*, 2011), Asta Olivia Nordenhof (*Det nemme og det ensomme*, 2013), Julie Sten-Knudsen (*Atlantehavet vokser*, 2013) and Yahya Hassan (*Yahya Hassan*, 2013). While an autonomous reading practice was highly esteemed in New Criticism and deconstruction, it often makes no sense to insist on the self-reliant character of today's lyrical work. A key point here is the play between reality and fiction. This also applies when contemporary poetry engages in political matters and addresses issues such as the climate crisis, the welfare system, consumerism and equality at a global, economic and gender-political level. Ursula Andkjær Olsen, Mette Moestrup, Lars Skinnebach and Nikolaj Zeuthen are among those to be mentioned in this respect.

A final significant way in which contemporary poetry encourages a discussion of genre is the relatively large number of works that invent new poetic forms and distinctive genres. In addition to some of the aforementioned titles, this can be exemplified by Mikkel Thykier's *.katalog.* (2001),

Lars Skinnebach's *Post it* (2009), Asta Olivia Nordenhof's *Et ansigt til Emily* (2011) and Amalie Smith's *I Civil* (2012). Similarly, Gerd Laugesen's *Har du set min kjole?* (2011) and *Lommetørklædesamlinger* (2012) and Morten Søndergaard's *Ordapotek* (2010) represent new genre-mixing and cross-media poetical forms. A characteristic of many current publications is that they insist on being poetical in their own specific way, and therefore one does not only experience great diversity in terms of the appearance of the works, but also in terms of the ways in which they relate to being poems, lyrics or poetry. To return to one of the questions raised earlier, it seems relevant to distinguish between genre and mode in relation to some of these works: of some, it is more accurate to say that they are poetical than to say that they are poetry.

## VIII

To look at the huge range of contemporary poetry is to see that it makes no sense to maintain an unequivocal definition of poetry. It is much more appropriate to understand poetry as a dynamic and ever-expanding field that interacts with other genres and art forms and which has proved to be extremely flexible and adaptable.<sup>16</sup> Obviously, we are at a stage in literary and cultural history where poets feel the need to open the floodgates and 'flow out'. Maybe there will come a time when poetry will once again try to unify and draw clearer boundaries around its field, just as some Danish poetry of the 1980s reacted against what was seen as a dilution of poetry in the 1970s.

However, not being able to give an exact definition of the genre or not being willing to do so is not the same as denying that genre awareness is there and that it plays a central role at various levels of the circuit of literary production. The features that define membership of the poetic genre may vary from text to text, yet there is a certain intersection from which these features stem. These features include brevity, the typographical arrangement of stanzas and verses, the density of meaning, figurative language, expression rather than report, the lyrical I, visuality and musicality. Fowler's development of Wittgenstein's concept of family resemblance creates the space for a dynamic genre approach that can accommodate the many forms and multilateral interactions of poetry.<sup>17</sup>

The concept of family resemblance prompts further reflection. Although every human being demands to be seen in her own right, the ways

in which an individual has become what she is becomes clearer when we see her origins and the circumstances under which she has grown up. In this manner, people and texts are comparable. On the one hand, they are both fundamentally alone and entirely their own, and on the other hand they are the exact opposite: they are embroiled in a multitude of relationships and are the result of a wide variety of developments, processes of influence, connections etc. Certain works of literature resemble each other more than others. The concept of genre is far from the only way to make these groups, but it is one of the most fundamental systems of categorization, and not merely for the sake of the grouping itself; genres serve as a way to understand individual works and the dialogues they encourage.

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## Notes

- 1 In *An Introduction to Poetry* (2005), editors X.J. Kennedy and Dana Gioia similarly writes with respect to lyric poetry: "Here is a rough definition of a lyric as it is written today: a short poem expressing the thoughts and feelings of a single speaker". (Kennedy 2005, 10)
- 2 In the introduction to the anthology *Genre* (2009), editors Jørgen Dines Johansen and Marie Lund Klujeff similarly write that modern genre theory shows a genre critical and genre positive trend respectively. They mention Derrida as an example of the critical tendency, and with reference to his "La loi du genre" (2003) they write that "In Derrida the genre critical tendency develops into a proper deconstruction of the concept" (Johansen 2009, 29, my translation).

- 3 Gérard Genette has pointed out that when works do not state a genre name this can also be seen as a genre announcement (Genette 1997, 200).
- 4 Fowler writes, "In literary communication, genres are functional: they actively form the experience of each work of literature. If we see *The Jew of Malta* as a savage farce, our response will not be the same as if we saw it as a tragedy. When we try to decide the genre of a work, then, our aim is to discover its meaning. Generic statements are instrumentally critical" (Fowler 1985, 38).
- 5 Genette writes, "But what do we mean today – that is, once again, after Romanticism – actually by poetry? Most often, I think, what the Pre Romantics meant by poetry [...] Or to put it in another way: For more than a century, we perceive as 'more eminently and peculiarly poetry' ... exactly the kind of poetry that Aristotle excluded from *Poetics*." (Genette 1997, 185f, my translation)
- 6 One finds a good example of the concept of poetry being understood as more pompous and idealistic in Klaus Rifbjerg's program poem "Terminologi" (Terminology) from *Konfrontation* (1960) (*Confrontation*). Here poetry is compared with a disease, while the lyric is perceived as a springboard for a new, more realistic poetic practice. Today, however, there is a tendency for a number of poets to react against writing poems; they prefer to call it poetry. Thus in an interview, for example, Lyn Hejinian, who has been an important source of inspiration for several of the poets from Forfatterskolen (The Danish School of Writers), said that she wanted to "try out a gesture that could support my own preoccupation with not writing poems, but writing poetry" (Frank 2001, 126). Similarly, Martin Glaz Serup has said that his texts neither intend to be 'poem-like' nor imitate poems (Larsen 2009, 26).
- 7 In *21st-Century Modernism. The 'new' poetics* (2002) Marjorie Perloff similarly writes: "Far from being irrelevant and obsolete, the aesthetic of early modernism has provided the seeds of the materialist poetic which is increasingly our own – a poetic that seems much more attuned to the ready-mades, the 'delays' in glass and verbal enigmas of Marcel Duchamp, to the non-generic, non-representational texts of Gertrude Stein, and to the sound and visual poems, the poem-manifestos and artist's book of Velimir Khlebnikov than to the authenticity model – the 'true voice of feeling' or 'natural speech' paradigm" (Perloff 2002, 3f.).
- 8 In the Danish School of Writers journal *LEGENDA* no. 2 entitled *Nye sætninger* (*New Sentences*) from 2001, one finds an introduction to some of the most influential L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poets, whose poetic practice has influenced several younger Danish writers.



- 9 Referring to the new art forms of the 1960s and 1970s in her influential essay, “Sculpture in the Expanded Field” (1979), Krauss argues that the new art exceeds the modernist paradigm and should be seen in an enlarged, postmodern field.
- 10 Naturally, this does not mean that genre experiments are restricted to avant-garde practices alone. Previously, I have mentioned Schlegel and the genre transgression of Universal poetry, and, of course, generic experiments have roots even further back in the history of literature. However, with reference to Alastair Fowler, Katja Teilmann argues that past genre mixtures are often overlooked, and, for example, that the medieval genre experiments did not receive attention until recent times (Teilmann 2004, 33).
- 11 See, for example, Morten Søndergaard: *Landskaber omkring digtet Kompas* (2001), which refers to the poem “Kompas” from *Bier dør sovende* (1998), Christian Yde Frostholm: *Afrevne ord*, which, in 2004, was released both as a collection of poems and as internet poetry, as well as Cia Rinne: *archive zaroum* (2008), which is a remediating of the poem collection *Zaroum* from 2001. All these digital works can be found on the internet platform *Afsnit P*.
- 12 See, for example, Mette Moestrup: *DØ LØGN DØ* (2012) using different paper qualities in a wide range of light nuances; Gerd Laugesen’s use of delicate, half transparent paper in *Har du set min kjole* (2011); the long poem by Søren R. Fauth *Universet er slidt* (2013) that takes the form of an 13,5 meter long, collapsible poem, and Martin Larsen’s *Svanesøsonetterne* (2004) and Morten Søndergaard’s *Ordapotek* (2010), which both can be characterized as book-objects.
- 13 For a broad spectrum of the different practices in sound’n’poetry, see, for example, Mouritz/Hørslev Projektet, Schweppenhäuser/Thomsen and Morten Søndergaard, Klimakrisen, Skammens vogn, and Stemmejernet.
- 14 A good example is The Library in Åbyhøj in Århus, where a special place has been created for communicating alternative literary forms. See <https://www.aakb.dk/facilitet/litteraturstedet>.
- 15 See my article “Samtidslyrikkens tværmediale liv. Et rids over en genre i forandring” (2012) for an expanded notion on *small press* and alternative publication.
- 16 The same characteristics are mentioned by Hans Kristian Rustad in the book *Digital litteratur* (2012). He continues: “The dominance of poetry among the art forms of digital literature makes it appropriate to ask whether the character of the digital media is particularly well suited for the production of poetic expression, or whether poetry as an art form is easily customized to various media” (Rustad 2012, 73, my translation).

- 17 A similar dynamic approach can be seen in Christian Janss' and Christian Refsum's *Lyrikkens liv* (2010) (*The Life of the Lyric*), which does not operate with definitive claims about what is needed when speaking about lyrics or poetry. In contrast, they describe a number of features which usually characterize the genre, but each one does not need to be represented in the individual works. The fact that a text is lyrical, therefore, does not necessarily mean that it is purely lyrical, but that its lyrical or poetic features are dominant (Janss 2010, 30). According to Janss and Refsum, these features are 1) musicality and visuality, 2) proximity between the speaker and what is spoken about, 3) the density of meaning, 4) self-reflexivity and 5) shortness (ibid., 16).



«BARE LERKENE KAN LESE MORGENEN / DEN  
BLÅ BOKSTAVEN / I EN ALTFOR STOR RESEPT»  
Norwegian poetry 2000 – 2012 from a form perspective

OLE KARLSEN

Scandinavian literary review articles of a certain age were often titled "Wanderings in ...". [*Vandring i ...*]. The itinerant metaphor may seem appropriate in an article which is topographically and hodologically oriented. The landscape of my wanderings is recent Norwegian poetry, consisting as it does of all poetry collections shortlisted for the State Purchasing Programme for Contemporary Norwegian Fiction and Non-Fiction in the period 2000-2012. Naturally all these books - 882 in total - cannot be discussed singly. Continuing with the itinerant metaphor, I will through three tours (it is tempting to use the term bike rides, given that it is both quicker and also a well-known term in Norwegian poetry criticism) point out some trends and distinguishing features of contemporary Norwegian poetry. The optics and focus will change from each tour, but on the whole the landscape will be subject to a formalist scrutiny. Many will recognise the main features in this landscape. It will become apparent - both explicitly and implicitly - that Norwegian postmillennial poetry does not represent a shift from the poetry of the last century, at least not if a line is drawn in the mid-1960s when the still active *Profil* Generation emerged as a rejuvenating force in Norwegian poetry. And given that most Norwegian historical and critical poetry studies centre around *the lyric poem*, this form of poetry with its well-known characteristics will also here be the point of departure and continuously returned to in this article.

**Route 1: The traditional perception of poetry,  
the lyric poem and the long poems**

From the Romantic period and the age of modern artistic conception the poem has never really been *just* quite as we later have learnt that it should be from the textbooks of the educational system, syllabi, anthologies, etc. For the poem has not always been *just* short; it is not *just* a conjuration and retention of *one* moment, *one* state of mind, *one* thought, or *one* realisation

in *one* here-and-now experience, as a contrast with the time span of epic literature or the dialogic or scenic form of representation of drama. The poem has never really been just “*eine monologische Aussage eines Ichs*” with a *lyrical I* who speaks in a near and emotional voice to or about its object in a linguistic format that has proven to be highly anthologisable and anthology-friendly. One should therefore not be astonished to discover that an anthologist in the 1990s complained about the difficulty of finding anthologisable poems in contemporary poetry. It is perhaps more curious that such a complaint had not been issued at an earlier stage, e.g. the 1970s – or the 1960s, for that matter. When I include a line from Georg Johannesen’s *Ars moriendi eller de syv dødsmåter* (1965) in the title of this article, it is in part due to such poetic and structural considerations. As such, I could have inserted a carefully chosen line from Georg Johannesen’s antistrophic equivalent of *Ars moriendi* from 1999 in the title, i.e. from *Ars vivendi eller de syv levemåter*, and thus moved closer both to the decade that will be discussed here but also the roughly 30 years encompassed by the generation thinking. The path to one of literary historiography’s most important measures with the idea of the author generation as a constituent tool is then short. One could make a justified claim that it is Georg Johannesen’s closest successors in the previously mentioned *Profil* circle who dominate the Norwegian poetry scene in the 2000s, poets like Jan Erik Vold with his *Dream Maker* trilogy, Einar Økland with yet another three poetry books, Eldrid Lunden with three poetry collections and Paal-Helge Haugen who returned to poetry in 2009 with four books of poetry entitled *Kvartett* – and hereafter the long poem *Kyst. Sør* (2009) and *Uncommon Deities* (together with Nils Christian Moe-Repstad, 2011).<sup>1</sup> Cecilie Løveid, who made her mark with several acclaimed poetry collections in the noughties, was also part of the *Profil* movement,<sup>2</sup> and beyond the *Profile* circle we can easily add the working-class poet Bjørn Aamodt’s two formidable volumes *Atom* (2002) and *Arbeidsstykker og atten tauverk* (2004) and the moving *Avskjed*, released posthumously in 2010. Then there is also Stein Mehren, the lyrical antipode of Johannesen, who in the new millennium has released six poetry collections, many of them as potent as in the previous decade.<sup>3</sup> And in this way we could continue adding more names of poets. But rather than losing ourselves in generation thinking, we will, as mentioned, focus on the questions of genre and form and

how these lines, be they artistic long compositions, conceptual thinking, seriality, dialogicity, use of own name and biography, epic representation, interaction with other art forms, etc. are prolonged from the 1960s and 70s into the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

«*Bare lerkene kan lese morgenen / den blå bokstaven / i en altfor stor resept*», writes Georg Johannesen in the Friday poem “Våkeuke” in *Ars moriendi* (Johannesen 1995, 53). The larks, as we know, *hev det so* (transl. have it thus) that they do not just belong in nature, but very much in the romantic poetry as central metapoetic emblems, a romantic affiliation which is also expressed in the imaging: the larks can *read*. And what do they read? Well, they read “*morgenen / den blå bokstaven*” [transl. the morning / the blue letter] – still romantic blue – until it is punctured in “*resept*” [transl. prescription], a word from science and medicine; it does not fit into the romantic, subjectivised, traditional lyric poetry tradition, but more in objectivised poetics with a more detached perception of the I. As we also know from Georg Johannesen in another metaphor-suspicious, anti-lyric, laconic and ironic poem, the very introduction to his poetic authorship in 1959: “*Når du som åpner mitt hjerte / med en kniv / ikke kan finne annet enn blod / skyldes det kniven*”. [transl. When you who open my heart / with a knife / cannot find other than blood / it is due to the knife] (Johannesen 1995, 9).

Sometime in the mid-1960s, almost at the same time as Johannesen makes his surgical incision in the heart/pain line, or as Jan Erik Vold says: the sigh/moan line, in Norwegian poetry, Olav H. Hauge has put “*dei store stormane attum seg*” [transl. the great storms behind him] and reached the conclusion that “*det gjeng an å leva i kvardagen òg*” [transl. everyday life is worth living too] (Hauge 1993, 188). Lines like these, composed by influential poets, naturally leave their mark on the writings of later generations. Admittedly, Hauge is not as strict or murderous as Johannesen, and the final word “*òg*” [transl. and] right at the end tells us that different, partly contrastive poetological ways of relating are simultaneously possible.<sup>4</sup> Hauge was right. Both a poetology with clear echoes from the Romantic age and a modernism closer to everyday life are, as we shall see, highly present in contemporary or current poetry. However, the Johannesian poetology also marks a watershed in a different sense. More than just being a one-poem book *Ars Moriendi eller de syv dødsmåter* is a work of poetry, a critique of civilisation; a book of the dead for Western culture. For look-

ing at the original, we do not find - at least not at first glance - any poem titled “Oppslag i en Obos-blokk”, to use Johannesen’s most anthologised poem as an example. It is tempting to say the same about “Oppslag i en Obos-blokk” as the American poetry scholar Joseph M. Conte says about William Carlos Williams’ famous “The Red Wheelbarrow” or “To Elise” from the poetry collection *Spring and All* (1923): The poems in this volume “have been so frequently excerpted, with the addition of individual titles, that I would venture to say that very few readers recognize ‘The Red Wheelbarrow’ (XXI) or ‘To Elsie’ (XVIII) as parts of a larger, more complex work” (Conte 1991, 20). For above this text in *Ars moriendi*, to which the title “Oppslag i en Obos-blokk” has been ascribed, it reads in the book itself just “Tirsdag”. The title we only find in the index as text no. 2 in the sequence “Arbeidsuke”, where the cause of death is “Fråtseri”. Like many other poems of the genre it takes part in, *Ars Moriendi* imitates another genre, namely the Egyptian Book of the Dead. Georg Johannesen creates unity and wholeness in his work, letting the individual part be in opposition to the whole, in a strictly Classicist and systematic manner: The poetry collection consists of 49 poems divided into seven weeks with one poem for each day of the week and one of the deadly sins/causes of death (frivolity, gluttony, wrath, greed, etc.) linked to each of the weeks. Each poem consists of three stanzas of three lines in each, 441 lines in total. Johannesen is not “in- and -out of control”, something which, according to the poetry scholar and poet Rachel Blau DuPlessis, characterises the genre, i.e. the long poem, he is “in control” all the time. (Blau DuPlessis 2009, 2). With a holistic content concept, coupled with a systemic form Georg Johannesen resolves his “obligation towards the difficult whole” – to use the title of Brian McHale’s celebrated long poem study. This discussion of form is also something I will return to later.

A striking feature of literature and the review of recent Norwegian poetry is that *form* simply is not a high frequency word. Terms like style of writing and mode of expression are used – or certain features of form such as imagery, metaphors, metonymy, etc. are addressed. When the word *form* is applied, it is most often in juxtaposition with “traditional forms”, like for example Erik Lodén who in his review of 2008 in poetry in *Norsk litterær årbok* cannot hide his delight at seeing traditional forms making a return to Norwegian poetry; Øyvind Rimbereid’s *Herbarium* (2008) being

used as an example (Lodén 2009, 28). Our Norwegian fear of touching the word *form*, whose deep roots stretch back to the 1950s and the heated debate on speaking in tongues, if not even further, may seem peculiar in our neoformalist age, both from a poetic and literary theoretical perspective. The Danish literature scholar Anne Marie Mai divides Danish poetry in the 20<sup>th</sup> and the 21<sup>st</sup> century into two periods in “Den nye litteraturs utfordringer”: The period from 1870 to 1970 she famously calls “det moderne gennembrudd”, while the period from 1970 to 2010 is labelled “det formelle gennembrudd” (Mai 2010, 88).

The formal breakthrough

(...) denotes how literature’s nature of being form, i.e. a linguistic and aesthetic balance between the reader, the writer and the world, in this period is starting to be thematised in new ways. The concept of form as aesthetic balance does not only refer to the reader as a participant in a co-composing activity in the sense of reader-response theory in which the reader fills in blank spaces or gaps in the text. The text as an aesthetic form and visually shaped makes it possible for the reader to switch between empathising with, distancing oneself from, and co-composingly relating to the existential modes that the text articulates. The concept of form implies that the creative work of the author leads to reflections on the possible readings of the text itself and that the relationship to the outside world is subject to a constant reflection and textual examination. (Mai 2010, 88)

Mai moves the concept of form, so to speak, out of the text, making it a balance in the triangular relationship between reader, writer and the outside world in an exteriorising movement. The concept of form is relational; the work is non-autonomous, yet at the same time the text is self-reflective, possessing features and readings which prevent it from being left to extremist reader-response interpretations. For contemporary poetry an increasingly textual examination of the relationship to the outside world and the relational aspect of the concept of form is key. The former can, for example, result in historicising texts like Paal-Helge Haugen, Jan Erik Vold, Jo Eggen,



Øyvind Rimbereid and Erlend O. Nøtvedt, etc. or in extensive use of autobiographical material like in Vold's *Mor Godhjertas glade versjon. Ja* (1968), in Økland's radical self-representation form in *Amatør-album* (1969), in Nils Øyvind Hågensen's Vold-inspired speech-like poetry in a number of volumes in the 2000s (e.g. *23 dikt om kvinner og menn og en desperat forklaring, 2002, Adressebøkene, 2005, Møt meg, møt meg, møt meg, 2006, Haruki og jeg, 2010*), in Lina Mariussen Undrum's *Finne deg der inne og hente deg ut* (2011), in Thomas Marco Blatt's *1920 Sørumsand* (2012) and many more.<sup>5</sup> The relational aspect manifests itself in different ways, like for example as different cooperative projects with other forms of art, especially music.<sup>6</sup> Many poets like for example, Kjersti Bronken Senderud and Kristine Næss, have over the last few years released their poetry collections with an accompanying CD inlaid, and a remarkable number of poets have ongoing collaborative projects with musicians from different backgrounds. The poetry may appear to be taken out of the book – even though it is still far too early to repeat Kjartan Fløgstad's words from several decades ago that the poetry book is dead. The poets relate to and address their readers in a different way than before. Considering the many poetry festivals and events held up and down the country, one could almost equate reader with listener, something which in turn hits back at poetry itself. Surprisingly many books from the last decade are rendered in a language close to dialect and everyday speech while some poets have hinted at the need for poetry to be more accessible, more straightforward, more identifiable without the complexity and density of meaning that perhaps have been modern poetry's foremost standard of artistic quality.

Another critic who puts the f-word in his mouth is Atle Kittang. While Mai's concept of form is linked to prose as much as poetry, Kittang discusses his concept of form in relation to lyric poetry in his latest book, *Poesiens hemmelige liv* (2012). Kittang's view on form can be characterised as text-based and formalist, but nonetheless inviting too to the world that surrounds the poem and of which the poem is reflective in some way or other. A starting point for Kittang is the classicist perception of form, linked to the etymology of the word: form means mould. Into a formwork, for example around the two main wings of sonnetry, the grout is emptied. When it is hardened, the formwork is removed, revealing the sculpture of the sonnet in all its shining glory. In short, this is the classicist, rule-governed poetics. But the sonnet, as we know, does have its Procrustes prob-

lem, for should the grout start expanding, the formwork will start bulging, or a new mould must be selected. John Donne was forced to transform the Shakespearean sonnet, as shown by Kittang (Kittang 2012, 25 – 26). Olav H. Hauge, our great sonneteer, combined variations of English, French and Italian sonnet traditions and/or displacing the volta, thereby creating new space in the architecture of the sonnet. In other words: *Form is also form-giving, transforming*. The rigidly structured sonnet of which, as we will later see, there are only a few and sporadic examples from Norwegian poetry of the 21st century, is well suited to illustrate the conflicting relationship between outer (formwork) and inner formal requirements, between control and freedom, between Dionysian and Apollonian forces, between rule-governed poetry and individual works of art.

Such a tension between an outer and inner form is also central in Kittang's thinking, not least in his poetry readings in *Poesiens hemmelige liv*. He does, however, treat the problem of inner form quite summarily in his introduction. This is perhaps not so surprising given that a central aim of the introduction is to discuss the poem's relation to the outside world in light of Adorno's form and content thinking and dual – social and aesthetic – autonomy concept (Kittang 2012, 30). The question of inner form is reactualised and becomes particularly acute in the Romantic period, often explained through or in organic metaphors. “*Nun müssen dafür Worte, wie Blumen, entstehen*”; this Hölderlinian dictum has been thoroughly analysed in the history of criticism, and if we turn to the English Romantics, it is similarly known (in Coleridge) that the poem starts as “germ” or “seed” in the imagination of the poet, whereupon the poetic plant will unfold, take up and acquire nutrients before it springs out in full bloom with all its constituents incorporated into an entity, a wholeness; everything – even the form – is laid down in the seed from the beginning. Much of the explanation for the lyric poem becoming a norm for our understanding of what the whole genre lyric poetry is can be found in such and adjoining romantic poetologies, and this understanding is further consolidated when the organic metaphors is replaced by structuralist metaphors during the scientification of literary studies in the 1900s. In a Norwegian context, the lyric poem has further strengthened its position since the legacy of 19<sup>th</sup> century lyric history is of a song lyric kind, with the penchant of this tradition for the lyrically, short and singable poem.

But let us return to the poetic plant, and to inner, organic and to outer form, the latter referred to by Coleridge as “mechanical form”. The former comes from within, the latter from outside; the former grows out of the material, the latter does not necessarily itself have anything to do with the material, the former is strong and vital, the latter weak and superficial. In organic thinking the unity and entity of the poem are shaped from within, with the outer form reflecting/resembling the inner. Or as Roland Barthes says about such a symbolic mode: “form resembles the content, *as if* it were actually produced by it” (Conte 1991, 28). However, in Romanticism, again in Coleridge, we find a somewhat different alignment in the relationship between the organic and the mechanical, an alignment without organism and mechanical metaphors and subsequently with a different level of abstraction. In “Poesy and Art” he uses the term “form as proceeding” for the first and “form as superimposed” for the second (Conte 1991, 28). While “form as superimposed” denotes a more closed poetology bound by the patterns of genre-based and established forms, “form as proceeding” suggests quite literally that the poetic form comes into being as one moves forward. This implies an open and investigative poetology, necessarily so that in the advancing movement are embedded certain opinions about the relationship between language and the world, nature and poetry, poetic innovation, genre theory and genre participation, etc. Charles Olson’s “Projective Verse” (presented in Norwegian in the mid-1980s in the journal *Poesi* edited by Torleiv Grue and Jon Sveinbjørn Jonsson) is clearly marked by “form as proceeding”: “the principle, the law which presides conspicuously over such composition, and when obeyed, is the reason why a projective poem can come into being. It is this: FORM IS NEVER MORE THAN AN EXTENSION OF CONTENT” (Conte 1991, 29). Olson attributes this law to Robert Creeley, a poet who has influenced the still very much active *Profil* Generation of Norwegian poetry, in particular Jan Erik Vold. The projective verse is clearly related to the field composition as applied by William Carlos Williams, for example in the long poem about his hometown *Paterson* (1946 – 58). Here it is possible to draw lines not just to the poets of the *Profil* Generation in general, but also to the literary and literary-historical mapping of Western Norway of recent years. The line from the portrayal of the change in Norwegian society in the 1950s in Paal Helge Haugen’s *Steingjerde* (1979) to *Øyvind*

Rimbered's *Jimmen* (2011), describing the societal changes in Norway two decades later – in the 1970s – is also evident. In such a form thinking lies an exteriorising movement which is in contrast with the interiorising motions as represented by the lyric poem within the tradition of organism thinking. My concern is not to bring all the poetic form debates back to the Romantic thinkers and artistic innovators. Rather, my point is to point out certain blind spots in our understanding of poetry, blind spots that have prevented and still prevent the criticism, herein also the academic, from reaching the standards of the poetic practice. The interiorising trait of certain aspects of the romantic poetic conception which has given the lyric poem its dominant role in all our understanding of poetry, is most clearly marked in what has been called the tyranny of the lyrical I. It is a long time since Rimbaud declared “JE est un autre”, and almost equally long since T.S. Eliot predicted his impersonality theories. Thus it is a long time since the poets themselves attempted to evade the tyranny of the lyrical I, and even if we as readers no longer believe that the modern poem is just an expression of the sensitive poet's mind, we still continue with a reading and interpreting practice where we look at the lyrical I as a guarantor for continuity between poet and poem. Despite ingenious debates about the lyrical I, the consequences have, as Peter Baker says, been that “the lyric speaker is still assumed to be a consistent integrated ego with discernible thoughts and emotions” (Baker 1991, 1). The lyric poem has such an important place in our tradition or consciousness that we struggle to see that the modernist poem, even long and big compositions, can originate elsewhere, like in essayistics, in the novel, in the epic poem, in topographic literature, historical literature, in prose, non-fiction, etc. Like the larks in Georg Johannesen we are perfectly able to read “morgen / den blå bokstaven”, i.e. relating to the lyrical poem, but also reading the whole prescription to which the lyrically-marked verse is part of, meaning the whole work, is too unfamiliar and problematic.

### **Route 2: Verse forms and main genres**

Poetry goes in many cycles; locally, regionally, nationally, internationally – within and outside the poetry book. Nobody knows how much poetry is produced in Norway, and hardly anyone knows how many books of poetry are published. In his famous review of Norwegian poetry in *Basar*

(4/1979), what would lead to the so-called “Borum debate” in Norwegian poetry history, Poul Borum looked at 150 Norwegian poetry collections, and the sheer amount of annual publications, with high a number of poor poems and collections, was one of the reasons for the “Syndrome debate”, induced by a series of articles by Jan Erik Vold in *Dagbladet* the following year.<sup>7</sup> What we do know when it comes to annual publications, is how many poetry books are entered and assessed for the State Purchasing Programme for Contemporary Norwegian Fiction and Non-Fiction.

The table below gives an overview of the number of books in the period 2000 – 2012. The number of “pure” poetry books is listed in the right column, while the figures for the total number of poetry books, including anthologies, reinterpretations are listed in the centre column.<sup>8</sup>

Year	Prose	All poetry	Anthologies and reinterpretations	Poetry books
2000	149	88	12	76
2001	123	52	15	37
2002		55	12	43
2003	140	68	13	55
2004	143	74	19	55
2005	139	59	12	47
2006	169	61	9	52
2007	155	67	14	53
2008	182	83	20	63
2009		66	18	48
2010	200	67	10	57
2011		75	12	63
2012		67	9	58
Sum		882	175	707

On average a number of 58 poetry books have been released annually in Norway for the last 12 years, and the number seems relatively stable after having reached a peak at the turn of the millennium. As regards the problems of form, particularly the poems' outer formation, it is possible to quickly draw some overriding conclusions when browsing through the 12 editions. *The first conclusion may sound something like this*: Free verse completely dominates contemporary poetry, while the traditionally rhyming, strophic poems, at least in a written poetic context, may seem to lie on their sickbeds. In the 2011 edition, to use an example, two out of 63 poetry books are rendered in traditional, metric, end-rhyming form. This applies to *Vintersang* by the Northern Norwegian poet Helge Stangnes, and the refreshing, speech-based *Leve gammeldansen* by Rebecca Kjelland. Admittedly, the impression one gets when looking the whole 12-year period is a more nuanced one. For poets like Cornelis Jakhelln og Håvard Rem the traditional forms dominate, and looking at a poet like, for example, Stein Mehren these forms are surprisingly often in use, especially in his three latest books, and in particular in his more political poems. As mentioned before, Erik Lodén, himself one of the retrogardists,<sup>9</sup> expressed in his article about the poems of 2008 his joy at seeing the return of the traditional forms in poetry, but perhaps his house of fun is built on sandy ground and on a particularly thin textual foundation. From this it also becomes clear that the traditional lyric subgenres and poetry forms – sonnets, villanelles, ottava rima, etc. – are quite marginal in contemporary poetry. For example, Louise Mønster has written an article on what she calls the resurgence of the sonnet in the latest Nordic poetry.<sup>10</sup> From the Norwegian scene she mentions Cornelius Jakhelln's *Fagernorn* (2006), Jan Jakob Tønseth's *Fromme vers for enkle sjeler* (2008) and Åsmund Bjørnstad's *Kvit stein* (2009). If the article had been written a couple of years later, Håvard Rem's sonnets in *30 – 40 – 50* (2012) would probably have been included. But rather than resurgence, it is probably more correct to talk about a fading, at least in a Norwegian context. Although it should be pointed out that there are some sonnetian gems hidden in the new poetry as well. Examples of this are Inger Elisabeth Hansen and Jo Eggen who challenge the formal requirements in a challenging style, Hanne Bramness who adapts the elegy in *Revolusjonselegier* (1996) or Rimbereid who adjusts the ode to his flower archive *Herbarium* (2008).

“*Det formelle opprøret tek til å bli gammalt no,*” [translation: The formal revolt is ageing] Olav H. Hauge used to say, pointing out that Henrik Wergeland would use free verse. So it should not come as a surprise that the so-called free verse dominates and has done so for many decades. More surprising is perhaps the fact that the prose poem, easily recognisable by its rectangular appearance, plays a more modest part in the latest poetry than might be expected. The prose poem appears among other forms in the poetry of Einar Økland, Lars Amund Vaage and a host of other poets, and it can be found as an adapted, not so rigid form in other poets like, for example, Nils Christian Moe-Repstad, Paal-Helge Haugen, Are Frode Søholt, etc. Returning to the 2011 vintage, the prose poem appears as a fixture in about ten books, but the prose poem in its most rigid form; texts with straight left and right margins, is only prevalent in two books. This applies to Rune Christiansen who made a return to poetry after several prose books with his 2011 collection *Jeg har tenkt meg til de elysiske sletter. Dikt 2002 – 2011*. It also applies to the remarkable *Fjord* by Kjartan Hatløy – scraped down, linguistically attentive observations of nature centred around the fjord motif in poems of two to four lines. Particularly Hatløy’s book may lead our thoughts in the direction of the issue of form that cannot be observed through the naked eye and browsing through approximately 700 books. Jørn H. Sværen, another lyrically prose-oriented poet, ends a text in the magnificent *Dronning av England* (2011) as follows (Sværen 2011, 38):

Jeg forestiller meg boken som en bygning. En side er et rom. Forsiden er fasaden. Hvis det følgende står å lese for seg selv på en side:

elsker

Så er det ingen andre ting i dette rommet. Du kan bli stående og tenke over dette eller gå videre. Bilder i andre rom vil kaste lys over bilder i andre rom igjen.

elsker ikke

Dette handler ikke om prosa, men diktet, og ikke enkelt diktet, men samlingen ellersuiten.

[I imagine the book as a building. One / page is a room. The cover is the facade. If the / following be read on its own on a page: / loves / Then there are no other things in this room. You / can stand there and reflect on this or go / on. Images in other rooms will shed light on / images in still other rooms. / doesn't love / This is not about prose, but the poem, and / not the individual poem, but the collection or the suite.]

Poems in a collection are indeed often put together in such a way that one poem enlightens and sheds as much light as possible on another; thus giving rise to suites and lyrical sequences, with the individual poems joining together to form a whole and a unit. Nevertheless we can sometimes in the same collection have the sensation of being in one room before exiting it and entering a new room; the individual poem is experienced as a room, an autonomous (in a narrow or broad sense) structure in itself. These single-poem collections seem to be in decline in contemporary literature, being replaced by major compositions of various kinds. The long poem, often anchored elsewhere than (just) the lyric poem, is the dominant form of contemporary poetry. For example, what will later be referred to as the novelistic long poem requires the reader to move from room to room in the same way that the reader of a novel will move from page to page. Of the 63 poetry books released in 2011 only around twenty books can be labelled as single-poem collections, while around 35 are long poems. The remaining books contain hybrid forms – like, for instance, in Øyvind Rimbereid's *Herbarium* the long poem “Tulipan” is placed alongside short and shorter single poems – unless the whole work is to be interpreted as one long poem? In order to give a structural overview of contemporary poetry with its richness and diversity of form as its most prominent feature, at least two sorting instruments are needed, one aimed at *the aspects of form*, and another aimed at *aspects of genre*.

#### **Route 4: Centrallyrik and interactionist form traits, short and long poems**

Contemporary Norwegian poetry ranges from the outward-looking to the inward-facing, from complex text structures to readily accessible texts,



from conceptually conceived uncreative writing to traditional *Zentralyrik*. Borrowing from the Danish poetry scholar Peter Stein Larsen, we could call the one pole interactionist, while the other is *Zentrallyrik*. The latter is an ancient concept harking back to the romantic type of poetry that was mentioned earlier – with the sea, death and love as its main themes. In more recent research the concept has been restored and renovated; the I concept has been tightened, appearing more formally than thematically oriented, but at the same time able to include a more impersonalised artistic attitude. Despite this, the romantic poetry conception still sings along. *Zentrallyrik*, says Stein Larsen, is characterised by (1) the poetic subject being “*entydigt udsigelsescentrum i det poetiske univers*” [translation: the unambiguous enunciation centre of the poetic universe], (2) that the poetic language differs from all other language use with “*karakter af noget unikt og autentisk for den enkelte digter*” [translation: the characteristics of something unique and authentic to the individual poet] and (3) by the poem being monologic, limited in scope and with “*en utvetydig affinitet til et klassisk genrebegreb.*” [translation: an unambiguous affinity to a classic concept of genre] (Stein Larsen 2009, 54). If we think about it, we will quickly see that this explanation of what *Zentrallyrik* is, is not too far away from what the textbooks tell us that poetry is, as mentioned earlier. Nor should anyone be offended at being branded *Zentral-lyricist* in this sense, because in contemporary Danish poetry Stein Larsen Søren Ulrik Thomsen, Pia Tafdrup and Henrik Nordbrandt are all considered typical proponents of this kind of poetry.

What then with the polar opposite of *Zentrallyrik*, the interactionist poetry? This poetry will inevitably differ from the *Zentrallyrik* when it comes to enunciation, scope, etc. Interactionist poetry, says Stein Larsen, is “*karakteristisk ved at det poetiske subjekts autoritet er anfægtet. (...) [D] et essentielle ved denne poesi er, at udsigelsesinstansen (...) står i et interaktionsforhold til og er påvirket af andre udsigelsesinstanser, der sætter deres præg på den poetiske stil.*” [translation: characteristic by the contested authority of the poetic subject (...) The essential of this kind of poetry is that the speaker (...) is in an interactionist relationship to, and conditioned by, other voices that make their mark on the poetic style] (Stein Larsen 2009, 423-424). In short: interactionist poetry is characterised by different forms of prose-ification, polyphony, serial structures, open concepts of poems

and works, and naturally avant-garde textual strategies like ready-mades, collage and montage forms belong to this category. Also here contemporary Norwegian poets keep good company. For according to Stein Larsen, poets like Pia Juul, F. P. Jac, Per Højholt, Niels Lyngsø and many more are exponents of this type of poetry.

*Zentrallyrik* and interactionist poetry are, of course, polar opposites and extremities in contemporary poetry, and even Stein Larsen characterises them as “*hovedstrømninger*” [transl: main currents] and not “*absolutte kategorier*” [transl. absolute categories] (Stein Larsen 2009, 11). Most lyrical authorships are in flow somewhere between these poles, with some bordering the *Zentral-lyricist* pole, while others are closer to the interactionist. The force field is often strongest near the pole, but that does not necessarily mean that the strongest poetry books are only to be found there. It may well be that tensions and sparks occur just as well near equator where the two poetologies clash in a single book.

What happens then if we shake Norwegian poetry books from the 2000s through these very rough grids designed by Stein Larsen? I will mention a few names, hastening to add that other poets have published numerous books in the same period, of which some - or at least parts of the books – can be put in the category denoted as *Zentrallyrik*, others in the interactionist. Practitioners of *Zentrallyrik* include Arnold Eidslott, Stein Mehren, Per Jonassen, Øyvind Rimbereid, Cecilie Løveid, Eldrid Lunden, Helge Torvund, Arvid Torgeir Lie, Liv Lundberg, Hanne Bramness, Nils-Øyvind Haagensen, Jan Erik Vold, Bertrand Besigye, Paal-Helge Haugen, Einar Økland, Knut Ødegård, Tove Myhre, Terje Dragseth, Eva Jensen, Cornelis Jakhelln, Jo Eggen, Steinar Opstad, Lars Amund Vaage, Bjørn Aamodt and a number of others. The interactionist line can be linked to Øyvind Rimbereid, Terje Dragseth, Lars Amund Vaage, Arvid Torgeir Lie, Cecilie Løveid, Jo Eggen, Paal-Helge Haugen, Monica Aasprong, Erlend O. Nødtvedt, Øyvind Berg, Kirsti Bronken Senderud, Inger Bråtveit, Anne Bøe, Triztan Vindtorn, Ingrid Furre, Bjørn Aamodt, Jørn H. Sværen, Ingrid Storholmen, Audun Mortensen – and many more. To suggest a relative distribution between the two directions for the year in poetry as our chief example, i.e. 2011: An estimated 23 poetry books are primarily within the *Zentrallyrik* category, while the interactionist dominates in the other 40.

As previously mentioned the *Zentral-lyrical* (often short) poem can be joined with the surrounding poems to a collection of suites or lyrical sequences, and the wholeness puts so much pressure on the individual poems that they conform into a larger textual structure, a point touched upon in the quoted text by Jørn H. Sværen. One can with justification claim that this applies even more to poems belonging in the interactionist bag. The genre we thus close in on is the long poem, a genre term which in Norwegian criticism primarily is used descriptively:<sup>11</sup> A long poem is a poem which is long. There are few who say anything about how long, but one can presume that it is something which is longer than the 100 lines that the romantic poet Edgar Allan Poe operated with as a kind of limit for the length of a poem. The long poem is highly prominent in contemporary Norwegian poetry. As inferred earlier, this genre is in no way new. It exists and its roots can be traced back to romantic and post-romantic poetry and even before that – in folklore and in the topographic literature. The fact that as a genre term the long poem has not been established in Norwegian and Scandinavian criticism and literary history writing is not just down to the prevalence of the lyrically short poem, but also a form trait which is virtually embedded in the genre itself. A characteristic of the long poem is its variability and ability to renew and transform itself. In a study of Paal-Helge Haugens *Steingjerde* (1979) I have with reference to the latest long poem theories used the keywords *between-ness*, *lawlessness* and *newness* to characterise the genre as it is used in the most recent poetry (Karlsen 2008B, 134-136). For a characteristic of the long poem, whether we talk about *form as proceeding* or *form as superimposed*, is that it is created in the encounter with other genres, styles of writing, discursive forms, mindsets, mathematical principles, etc. In short: apart from a few possible lyrical sequences, the long poem considers other and constantly new and changing principles of organisation than just what underlies the lyrical poem, and when the number of these principles of organisation seems innumerable, classification according to genre will be difficult. In many long poems one might just as well talk about a lyricised prose as a prose-ified lyrical poetry, especially in what I here will call novelistic long poems, whose driving force originate elsewhere than within the lyrical field, as implied in the *novel* part of the word.

The long poem exists as a separate book and in books together with other poems. In *Utanfor institusjonen* (2006) Lars Amund Vaage has a poem titled “Biltur” which deals with cars, driving and the intense relationship that young people in rural communities have towards their vehicles. The poem consists of 15 serially connected sequences of prose poetry divided into 15 book pages - to give an example of how the long poem joins other poems in forming a collection. More conspicuous and more common in more recent poetry is the long poem’s form when the poem is laid out across a whole book, like Bjørn Aamodt’s posthumous *Avskjed* (2010), Ingrid Storholmen’s dialogic *Til kjærlighetens pris* (2011) or Terje Dragseth’s *Bella Blue* (2012), with the latter linking up with the science fiction genre in a manner similar to Øyvind Rimbereid’s classic *Solaris korrigert* (2004). The question is not just how to define the long poem – and whether it is just a hybrid form or a separate genre – but also how to categorise it. For how is one to create a taxonomy for a genre whose most prominent feature is its inherent ability to constantly renew and transform itself? Perhaps we should, like Rachel Blau DuPlessis, come to terms with the fact that we might not reach a “final definition” of such a changeable genre, but that it might be possible to create a taxonomy (Blau DuPlessis 2009, 11). At least such a taxonomy may contribute to a certain overview of this broad field, even if the grid might unavoidably be as crude as for the aforementioned terms *sentrallyrikk* and interactionist poetry.

In the international literature of the field we find that scholars operate with anything from two to fifteen different categories of modernist and postmodern long poems. From the perspective of contemporary Norwegian poetry I would tentatively suggest using three main categories; *the novelesque model*, *the architectural model* and *the lyrical sequence*, of which the first two share the lyrical thrusts against other genres, forms, mindsets, principles of organisation or discursive practices, while the lyrical impetus dominates in the third main category. In these terms one will recognise Brian McHale’s “the novelistic model” and “the architectural model” from his long poem study *The Obligation toward the Difficult Whole* (2004), while the modern lyric sequence as term is taken from one of the earliest studies of long poems in American research, the seminal classic *The Modern Poetic Sequence* (1983) by M. L. Rosenthal and Sally M. Gall.

The starting point for the last-mentioned study is the lyric sequence in Emily Dickinson. Here we are dealing with a lyrical type of text in which the totality is far bigger and more loaded with meaning than the sum of its parts. Even in our Norwegian literature the lyric sequence is well-known and rich in tradition, and may include separate sections or parts of poetry collections, or given specific form-categorical appellations, an example of this being the often used term *suite*. The lyric sequence is thus often quite conspicuous, like, for example, in Lars Amund Vaage's or Jan Erik Vold's *Zentral-lyrical* texts from the 2000s, where the sequential is signalled through titles and subheadings. Less conspicuous is the sequence form in some of Hanne Bramness' books, where several poems in different ways cluster without it being marked graphically or in other ways.<sup>12</sup> The concept of the novelesque model is also fairly self-explanatory, meaning that the long poem collides with and adopts elements from different forms of novels, types of narrative and historical accounts. In *Harudes* (2008) by Erlend O. Nødtvedt the story of the Hordes who originally came from Germany, and who settled in Hordaland, becoming *Hordalendinger*, *Hardinger*, *Bergensere*, etc. is told. In *Jimmen* (2011) by Øyvind Rimbereid the story of the horse Jimmen and his waggoner is succinctly told as a modern Norway changes around him, with the country about to enter the oil age; in *1920 Sørumsand* (2012) the *Bildungsroman* forms the basis, with the author Marco von Blatt telling through retrospective glimpses about his childhood growing up in Sørumsand in the 1980s. Or we could mention Lina Undrum Mariussen's gripping disease story in *Finne deg der inne og hente deg ut* (2011), a debut collection so powerful that it in some ways has established a new school for other publications and thus left its mark on the very latest poetry.

Getting an overview of the third group, *the architectural long poems*, proves more problematic. When Brian McHale jokingly calls it the Las Vegas model, it has to do with the famous Las Vegas Strip consisting of properties where the fronts are all of the same size but it is never easy to tell how far back they stretch, how far away from the street they reach; the composition being controlled and uncontrolled at the same time. When Jo Eggen wanted to create a poetry book about *Stavkirker* (2011) consisting of one poem about/for each stave church, we know that it had to be 30 poems; 30 poetic rooms, each furnished differently, since there are 30 stave churches that have been preserved. Put together this makes for a historicising pres-

entation which is quite different from endless historical treatises of the same phenomenon.<sup>13</sup> The principle is basically the same in Bjørn Aamodt's *Atom* (2002), where poems about the chemical elements – not all, but a selection – join together to form a whole. The degree of control may vary from the previously mentioned strict systemic structure of Georg Johannesen's *Ars moriendi* to a more *form-as-proceeding*-oriented working method in Hanne Bramness' *Uten film i kamera* (2010). Museums, collections, archives, internet-based forms of storage, graphic forms, geography, topography and a long list of other imaginable and unimaginable models and structures may serve as a starting point for such architecturally-modelled long poems. Numerous conceptual poetry books, whether they can be described as *uncreative writing* or not, belong in this in this category of genre.

### **Concluding remarks**

Around 60 poetry books are each year published in Norway. In addition, there are translations and anthologies. For a small population with an even smaller literary public, this may seem a lot. On the other hand contemporary Norwegian poetry maintains a high qualitative level, and there can be no doubting the fact the best poetry books are among the best books published in the country. It would be wrong to conclude, as has been done in the national press,<sup>14</sup> that we are currently experiencing a golden age for Norwegian poetry, but we can at least conclude that it is diverse and thriving with poets of different generations and from different camps, from retrogardism to conceptual poetry. In this article variation in form and genre has been emphasised, but I am quite certain that motif or thematic studies in contemporary poetry would demonstrate the same level of variation and diversity. If there had been a genuine fear of a lyrical vacuum with the passing of such literary greats as Olav H. Hauge, Gunvor Hofmo, Paal Brekke, Rolf Jacobsen and the much younger Tor Ulven in the 1990s, it has certainly not occurred. As has been made apparent both directly and indirectly from the above, the poetry of the noughties and the early twenty-tens does not represent a shift in the major lyrical lines from the last half of the previous century. Rather, the poetry of the noughties can, whether it is conceptual art, systematic poetry, long poems, interactionist poetry or *Zentrallyrical* poems, best be seen and understood in light of the lyrical blossoming that took place in Norwegian and Nordic poetry from

around the mid-1960s. It is perhaps not so surprising, given that most of the poets who first made their marks in the 1960s are still around, still writing significant and rich poetry. If the best poetry books are of an exceptionally high standard, and even if the poems reach a large audience through festivals and a great number of literary events up and down the country, sales records and the loans statistics from the libraries show that poetry books are seldom bought or borrowed, as pointed out by Atle Kittang in *Diktekunstens relasjonar* (Kittang 2009, 216-218). That said, certain poetry collections do sell out and are reprinted in a new edition. Nevertheless, it is an inescapable fact that the problem and challenge facing contemporary written poetry lies not in the poetry itself, but in its lack of readers. For surely, isn't a reader something different from a spectator at a literary event?

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## Notes

- 1 Vold's dream maker trilogy consists of *Tolv meditasjoner* (2002), *Drømmemakeren sa* (2004) and *Store hvite bok å se* (2011), books that are joined formally and in terms of design and packaging. In addition to this, 2005 saw the publication of *Diktet minner om verden*. Økland has published *Poetiske gleder* (2003), *Krattet på badet* (2006) and *Smil utan smilar* (2011), while Eldrid Lunden has published *Til stades* (2000) and *Flokken og skuggen* (2005). Also worth mentioning are *Profilists*



- like Tor Obrestad and Helge Rykkja with their respective works *Himmelen over Våländskogen* (2009) and *Eit hus mellom andre* (2003), *Slutningar til knes* (2004), *Bjørka til Dahl og 52 kameratslege oppmodingar* (2006).
- 2 In 2001 Løveid made a forceful return to poetry with *Spilt*. She has since then released the following significant collections: *Gartnerløs* (2007), *Nye ritualer* (2008), *Svartere bunader* (2010) and *Flytterester* (2012).
  - 3 The books are: *Ark* (2000), *Den siste ildlender* (2002), *Imperiet lukker seg* (2004), *Anrop fra en mørk stjerne* (2006), *I stillhetens lys* (2007) and *Ordre* (2008).
  - 4 The poem “Kvardag” from *Dropar i austavind* (1966) is often used to illustrate the transition from a romantic to a modernist poetic position in Hauge’s authorship, very often without sufficient attention paid to the tiny detail “ög” which suggests that it is possible to relate to different poetologies within the same authorship at the same time.
  - 5 Mai also reminds us of Jon Helt Haarder’s concept of performative biographism, pointing out that the purpose of bringing biographical details into the literary work is not so much based on a wish to create a context as using them for aesthetic purposes. Of the poets mentioned here, the concept of performative biographism seems particularly apt for Vold, Økland and Hågensen. See Mai (2010, 96).
  - 6 Jan Erik Vold is a notable trendsetter in the field; the cooperation between poetry and music being a trademark of all his poetic enterprises. Vold is also particularly attentive when it comes to design and formatting, even the folding text may be central to the overall understanding, and in some books the poems interact with visual art. A classic example is *Bok 8: Liv* (1973) which contains a classic series of pictures, the ox herders, from classical Zen Buddhist art. These illustrations can advantageously be read as an allegory of the texts, in the original sense of the word: *allegorein* = song next to.
  - 7 The articles were later reworked and reprinted in a book format in *Det norske syndromet* (1980).
  - 8 For the sake of comparison the available figures for publications of prose from the period 2000–2010 have also been included. Interestingly there is a marked increase in the number of publications, while the number of poetry publications remains fairly stable throughout the decade.
  - 9 As implied by the prefix retro, the retrogardists represent a reverse movement, towards older forms of poetry. The retrogardists emerged as a group of poets in the 1990s, its leading representatives being Håkan Sandell (a Swedish Oslo-based poet), Ronny Spaans and Erik Lodén.

- 10 The article is titled “Nullernes nordiske sonetter. Om en gammel genres genopblomstring i ny dansk, norsk og svensk lyrikk”. See Mønster (2012).
- 11 I have commented on the long poem as a genre in the articles “Nordisk lyrikk interartielt, teoretisk, nylest” (2008A), “Ein steingard som dei la, dei som fyre fer’. Tid, struktur og sjanger i Paal-Helge Haugens Steingjerde (1979)” (2008B) and “The short and long of it.’ Jan Erik Volds *sirkel, sirkel. Boken om Prins Adrians reise* (1979) som langdikt” (2011). See Karlsen 2008A, Karlsen 2008B og Karlsen 2011.
- 12 Atle Kittang gives an account of this trend in the Bramness chapter, the final chapter of *Poesiens hemmelege språk*. See Kittang (2012).
- 13 For a more detailed reading of this work, see Karlsen 2012 and Seiler 2012.
- 14 I am referring to *Dagsavisen*’s post on 13 August 2013 where *Klassekampen*’s literary critic Hadle Oftedal Andersen points to the resurgence of Norwegian poets and concludes that we are currently experiencing a golden age. Oftedal Andersen’s other observations in the article are reasonable enough, and I share his assessment except for the one point where he (or is it the journalist?) is wrong: Despite distributing books to the libraries, the State Purchasing Programme for Contemporary Norwegian Fiction and Non-Fiction does not ensure that poetry books are read. For the books to be read, they should preferably be borrowed, and the statistics show that the loan figures for contemporary poetry are disturbing.



## WHY CAN POETRY MATTER? Or: Poetry as an Ideal – or an Expanding Genre

PETER STEIN LARSEN

Two decades ago, in 1992, Dana Gioia published an article called "Can Poetry Matter?" As my title suggests, I will attempt to provide some answers to the wide-ranging, inquisitorial and polemical issue raised by Gioia. I will discuss the status of poetry in relation to society, literature and literary criticism. I will ask a series of fundamental questions: How can it be explained that we have witnessed a series of attacks on poetry, when in reality it is an extremely vital genre? And how can we understand poetry as a vital tradition that will supposedly also be important in the future?

It should be emphasized that the discussion about whether poetry matters is in a border area between the descriptive and the normative. If we promote positive or negative aspects of poetry or literature in general, we make certain choices of examples, perspectives and overall framework. The following discussion attempts to convey a clear and balanced discussion of the role of poetry in contemporary literature and society.

### **Poetry Crisis?**

In recent years, we have seen a number of attacks on both poetry and poetry research. The effect of these attacks has been that a consensus has developed regarding the use of a negatively charged or elegiac rhetoric when referring to poetry. At the beginning of his book *Poesiens hemmelege liv* (2012) (The secret life of poetry), Atle Kittang strikes a note which is so defensive that he almost seems to be making apologizes for writing a book about poetry. He writes: "among current literature scholars and literature students poetry does not have a high status", and adds: "Today it is said and repeated ad infinitum that poetry has become the poor stepchild of literature. That no one buys poetry, no one reads poetry, no one writes about poetry. This pessimistic diagnosis is only partly true" (Kittang 2012, 7).

The endless repetition of the above claims is probably slightly exaggerated, but the discourse occurs in literature criticism back to the 1990s

and even further. A famous example is Dana Gioia's article "Can Poetry Matter?" (1992). Gioia begins his article as follows:

American poetry now belongs to a subculture. No longer part of the mainstream of artistic and intellectual life, it has become the specialized occupation of a relatively small and isolated group. Little of the frenetic activity it generates ever reaches outside that closed group. As a class, poets are not without cultural status. Like priests in a town of agnostics, they still command a certain residual prestige. But as individual artists they are almost invisible. (Gioia 1992, 1)

In Scandinavia, Erling Aadland argues much along the same line in "Før, nå og etterpå. En litteraturteoretisk rapport" (1998) ("Before, now, and then. A literature theoretical report"):

Poetry is not being read, it is not being noticed, it does not confer reputation, and it has no consequences for the understanding of art or language, not in society, not among the authors, not even within the academy. The crisis of poetry is quite simply caused by the fact that today poetry stands as a relic of the past, a genre without meaning and power. (Aadland 1998, 30)

Similarly, the most aggressive attack on poetry in Scandinavia is probably Bendik Wold's "Dikt som religionserstatning. Eller: Hva er galt med norsk samtidspoesi?" (2007) ("Poetry as a replacement for religion. Or: What is wrong with Norwegian contemporary poetry?") (2007), in which Erling Aadland's brutal fanfare is repeated as an introduction:

It is said that poetry is in crisis. It is not being read. It is not being understood. It has no social significance. Once the diagnosis has been made by the poets themselves, the responsibility is usually placed on one of disseminating institutions: Schools, literature studies, the media (especially the latter). But is it possible that contemporary poetry has itself to blame? That the problems are self-inflicted. (Wold 2007, 1)

Wold argues that it is the poet's own fault that no one supposedly reads poetry, and he characterizes contemporary poetry as self-sufficient, pathetic, sacral, hermetic, meta-oriented poetry. Libelous metaphors are countless: Poetry is a "celebration garment - a costume, a tuxedo" (1), "a tour in the Hall of Mirrors", and "a kind of self-fertilization" (6), and when "the poem is flirting with other genres, it is just "a safely distanced safari expedition which only adds renewed confidence to the dogma of self-referential poetry" (6). Poetry is also a "strange uncle we meet once or twice a year", and the poet is an "elitist and anti-democrat" (11). As regards the relationship between poetry and literary studies, Bendik Wold – for once without using metaphors – made the following perfidious statement: "In this way, the outside world is encouraged to engage in repeated reading and deciphering - and endorse an ever-increasing number of literary doctoral scholarships" (4).

### **The background of the argument about poetry**

Fundamentally, two aspects seem to be represented in the attack on poetry. The first concerns the institutional conditions pertaining to the creation of poetry. The second relates to the notion of poetry in general, seen in a historical context.

The institutionally oriented critique is represented by Dana Gioia's "Can Poetry Matter?" In Gioia's view, an important reason as to why poetry does not matter are the creative writing courses in American colleges and universities. These courses have removed the discussions on poetry from the public journals and installed them into classrooms. This has created a situation in which poets only relate to other poets, who have been schooled in similar poetic tendencies. Poetry has become homogenized and flat, Gioia argues:

Over the past half century, as American poetry's specialist audience has been steadily expanded, its general readership has declined. Moreover, the engines that have driven poetry's institutional success – the explosion of academic writing programs, the proliferation of subsidized magazines and presses, the emergence of a creative-writing career track, and the migration of American literary culture to the university

– have unwittingly contributed to its disappearance from public view. (Gioia 1992, 2)

Gioia's description of poetry in the United States in the 1990s is more than sarcastic. He writes:

The proliferation of literary journals and presses over the past thirty years has been a response less to an increased appetite for poetry among the public than to the desperate need of writing teachers for professional validation. Like subsidized farming that grows food no one wants, a poetry industry has been created to serve the interests of the producers and not the consumers. And in the process, the integrity of the art has been betrayed. (Gioia 1992, 8)

One of Gioia's sources of inspiration for "Can Poetry Matter?" is Joseph Epstein's article "Who Killed Poetry?" (1988). In his article, Epstein contrasts the major achievements of the High Modernists such as Eliot, Pound, Stevens, and Williams, who, in Epstein's view, had a broad cultural vision, with contemporary poets. According to Epstein, the latter are narrow-minded "poetry professionals", who operate within the closed world of the university with their creative-writing programs.

Unlike Bendik Wold, Dana Gioia does not only express criticism in "Can Poetry Matter?", he also makes concrete proposals as to what can be done to counteract the death of poetry. To revitalize and resocialize poetry, Gioia suggests that in poetry readings authors should recite the works of other authors, that they should mix poetry with other genres and art forms, and that poets should write in a non-academic way about poetry.

To be fair, the self-sufficiency of the creative writing programs and the conflict between creative programs and poetry, as Gioia points out, no longer exist to the same extent in the United States. This goes for example for the poet Al Filreis, whose contemporary poetry classes, hosted by the University of Pennsylvania and offered via the online free education program Coursera, draw immense crowds.

We will now take a look at the critique of poetry, which relates to the notion of poetry in general. Bendik Wold and Erling Aadland make accu-

sations against not only poetry's connection to the literary institution, but also to the concept of poetry in general. When Aadland states that "poetry stands as a relic of the past", and Wold writes that poetry is "a tour in the Hall of Mirrors", and "a kind of self-fertilization", they are pointing to an essential feature of the view we have held of poetry for centuries. Long before writing courses and the late modernist poetry, which Gioia and Epstein criticize, were a reality.

A crucial issue in Wold's article concerns the striking disparity that exists between, on the one hand, the general assertion that poetry is not being read, not being understood and has no social value, and, on the other hand, the anger and contempt - expressed in uncontrolled rhetoric - with which this view is presented. Anker Gemzøe calls this mode "the pathos of rejection and denial" (Gemzøe 2003, 298). Similarly, it would seem paradoxical that Erling Aadland should write the longest section of the anthology *Lyrikk og lyrikklesning* (Poetry and poetry reading) (1998), if poetry were indeed a "relic of the past, a genre without meaning and power".

In her article "Who Reads Poetry?" (2008), Virginia Jackson discusses why, in relation to poetry, we have such peculiar double bind messages as the above. She points out a similar issue in American literary criticism. On the one hand, we find writers such as Marjorie Perloff, who have pointed out that poetry has been expelled from the academic world, but that it can be found in a large scale beyond the academy: "Out there in the world beyond the academy, individual poets are warmly celebrated". On the other hand, we find researchers such as Mary Poovey, who have argued that poetry has been a force that has been absolutely controlling in literature research: "Literary studies is trapped in the model of the Romantic lyric". Virginia Jackson's point is as follows:

While Perloff claimed that we read everything except poetry, Poovey claimed that we read nothing but. But what poem? What kind of poem? Whose poem, when? While Poovey complains that literary studies is trapped in the model of the Romantic lyric, it's clear that she is one of the literary critics that Perloff has in mind who don't want to read any poems themselves. Yet the problem with both ends of the spectrum



is that the abstraction of poetry is just that: an abstraction.  
(Jackson 2008, 181-182)

As Jackson points out, the idea of poetry has always been exceedingly strong in literary criticism. But a precise definition as to what is meant by poetry is often absent in discussions. When Perloff and Poovey are talking about poetry, there are not many similarities between the understanding the former of poetry as 21<sup>st</sup> century electronic avant-garde and that of the latter, who perceives it as romantic poetry. And when Bendik Wold describes contemporary poetry as a religion substitute and inferior meta poetry, this does certainly not relate to the essential contemporary poets, as discussed in some of today's many anthologies of analyses of contemporary poetry.

According to Virginia Jackson, it is obvious that the idea or ideal of poetry has been of huge importance in literary criticism. Great poets in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, who were also critics, e.g. Coleridge, Shelley, Poe, Baudelaire, and Mallarmé, never questioned that poetry was the most important literary genre. In 20<sup>th</sup> century literary criticism, we may also note that poetry is often emphasized as the true literature. Anthologies of modern literary theory usually present texts by TS Eliot, Roman Jakobson, Jan Mukarovsky, William Empson, Cleanth Brooks, Jean-Pierre Richard, and Th.W. Adorno, who are all propagators of the poetic genre. Roman Jakobson concludes in his essay, "What is Poetry?" (1933) that poetry's aim is to ensure "our formulas for love and hate, rebellion and reconciliation, faith and resistance against automation and rusting" (Jakobson 1991: 124). In "On Poetic Language" (1940) Jan Mukarovsky states that poetic language "continues to revive man's relationship to language and language to reality" (Mukarovsky 1977 : 39). And Adorno argues in his essay "Rede über Lyrik und Gesellschaft" (1951) ("On Lyric Poetry and Society") (1958) that the poem articulates "the dream of a world that is different " (Adorno 1970, 103).

Focusing on the poetic genre, literary criticism usually argues self-consciously about the importance of this genre. But literary critics take quite a different stance as they are interested in other genres, i.e. the novel. They are being contested and feel that their genre has been overlooked and should be promoted. And they do not save toxic comments when characterizing the

poetic genre. The most prominent names in this context are Georg Lukács and Michail Bakhtin. Theoretically, one of the first attacks on the sacral status of poetry was Lukács' *Die Theorie des Romans* (1916) (The theory of the novel), in which we may read the following ironic characterization of the poetic genre:

In lyric poetry, only the great moment exists, the moment at which the meaningful unity of nature and soul or their meaningful divorce, the necessary and affirmed loneliness of the soul becomes eternal. At the lyrical moment the purest interiority of the soul, set apart from duration without choice, lifted above the obscurely-determined multiplicity of things, solidifies into substance; whilst alien, unknowable nature is driven from within, to agglomerate into a symbol that is illuminated throughout. (Lukács 1994, 50)

Michail Bakhtin is clearly inspired by Lukács' critique of poetry, and in Bakhtin's *Discourse in the Novel* (1935-36), he agrees with Lukács' ironic characterization of poetry as a genre that embodies "the purest interiority of the soul", "the great moment" and "a symbol that is illuminated". Bakhtin describes how, in poetry, the aim of the words is not so much the "wealth and contradictory multiplicity of the object it-self", but the 'virginal', still 'unuttered' nature" of the word (Bakhtin 1981, 278). As in Lukács' work, what Bakhtin is trying to criticize with his metaphors are the self-sufficient and hermetic poetry. He illustrates this by setting up a dichotomy between prose, which by virtue of its "dialogized heteroglossia" is social and has an emancipatory potential, and poetry, which uses a "unitary and singular language" and represents the opposite:

For this reason the poetic language often becomes authoritarian, dogmatic and conservative, sealing itself from the influence of extra-literary social dialects. Therefore, such ideas as a special 'poetic language', a 'language of the gods', a 'priestly language of poetry' and so forth could flourish on poetic soil. (Bakhtin 1981, 82)

It is characteristic, writes Bakhtin, that in his non-acceptance of the social languages, the poet will rather dream of an artificial construction of a new poetic language than of the use of real existing social discourses.

There is a connection between Lukács' and Bakhtin's polemic attempt to highlight the importance of prose at the expense of poetry and Aadland's and Wold's similar attempts in recent years. They all characterize poetry as metaphysical ravings, contemplative pathos, aesthetic elitism, and ignorance of the outside world. The differences simply relate to the fact that Aadland and Wold are sharpening the argument by stating that the poetry against which they are reacting so aggressively, has lost its meaning. However, Lukács and Bakhtin are not denying the great part played by poetry in relation to contemporary criticism and literature. But as Virginia Jackson emphasizes, in both past and present attacks on poetry, poetry is usually described as a caricature of Romantic or Symbolist poetics. And this conception is far from being predominant in contemporary literature. Or as Jackson phrases it: It is a pure abstraction.

In accordance with Virginia Jackson, Stefan Kjerkegaard pointed out in "Genreopbrud i 00'ernes danske poesi" (2010) ("Genre break-up of 00s Danish poetry") that the literary world has often had a narrow understanding of poetry as "charged snapshots" or "short, non-narrative texts which produce a subjective experience". The criticism has often, states Kjerkegaard, ignored other forms of poetry, such as long poems, narrative poems and autobiographical poems (Kjerkegaard 2010, 112).

Similarly, in *Lyrikkens liv* (2003) (The life of poetry) Christian Janss and Christian Refsum present a "critique of a universal poetry concept". This book discusses a wide range of different types of poetry. In the introduction, it is argued that the book is "more concerned with displaying the width in the lyrical tradition – life of poetry - than with defining poetry in unambiguous terms" (Janss and Refsum 2003, 7). Comparing Janss' and Refsum's book about poetry with its predecessor in this genre of Scandinavian literature research, Kittang's and Aarseth's *Lyriske strukturer* (Poetic structures) (1968), we will notice a strong expansion in terms of the types of texts Janss and Refsum are exploring in the former work. A significant role in Janss' and Refsum's poetry discussions is played by prose poems, song lyrics, and concrete or system poems.

Finally, in *Drømme og dialoger* (2009) (Dreams and dialogues) I have argued that throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the conception of poetry has been guided by a standard called "centrallyrik", which defines the poem as a monologue, stylistically homogeneous, concentrated, clearly delimited text, in which the poetic subject acts as a well-defined center. In contrast to this standard, there is the type of poetry which I have called "interaktionslyrik"; this is characterized by polyphonic enunciation, stylistic heterogeneity, genre blending aesthetics, and a lack of consistency in the poetic form.

### **The development and future of poetry**

Virginia Jackson's point in "Who Reads Poetry?" is that genres should be understood as literary norms which are influenced by the historical development, and that the idea of what poetry is has changed significantly over time. She points out that a number of poetic subgenres have disappeared over the last 200 years, and this trend is linked to the idealization of the poetic genre, or as she phrases it: "this shift from poetry as cultural practice to poetry as pathetic abstraction" (Jackson 2008, 183). Jackson argues that at the time before Romanticism, a variety of poetic genres prevailed, each of which performing their own function. These genres were, for example, songs, epigrams, sonnets, elegies, hymns, epistles, odes, epitaphs, and ballads.

An early precursor to Jackson's reasoning in American literary criticism is Edmund Wilson's article "Is Verse a Dying Technique?" (1934). This suggests a clear intertextual connection indicated in the inquisitorial questioning and polemical titles from Wilson's "Is Verse a Dying Technique?" over Epstein's "Who Killed Poetry?" (1988) and Gioia's "Can Poetry Matter?" (1992) to Jackson's "Who reads poetry?" (2006). The witty aural similarity between Epstein's and Jackson's titles, "Who Killed Poetry?" and "Who Reads Poetry?", is also obvious. Wilson's pioneering article argues that after the 18th century, the poetic genre has been remarkably narrow. Whereas verse was previously used for narrative, satire, drama, and even non-literary purposes as historical and scientific speculation, in Romanticism poetry was defined as a genre that dealt exclusively with the soul and with metaphysical topics. Therefore, prose had now gained increasing importance, and the future belonged almost entirely to prose, argued Wilson.

Of course we might criticize Wilson's and Jackson's claims by arguing that many of the classic sub-genres still exist, and that modern European and American poetry has since adopted numerous other poetic genres from other continents' poetry (rubai, haiku, tanka, blues, rap, etc.). However, Jackson is right in stating that the dominant idea or the ideal of poetry as a short, non-narrative text which produces a subjective experience is dating from the early 19<sup>th</sup> century.

These views are also shared by Gérard Genette in his "Introduction à l'architext" (The architext - an introduction) (1997). Genette's view of poetry is that we are still stuck in a conservative post-romantic determination of the lyric genre, originating from "our Symbolist and 'modern' vulgar understanding under the slogan 'poetry pure'", as defined by, in particular, Poe and Baudelaire (Genette 1997, 186).

An important point in Genette's argument is that the idea of a division into three main genres is a construction of Romanticism whose true basis is debatable. Genette states that only the two modes, epic as narration, and dramatic as dialogue, are well defined. The third mode, lyric poetry, should be considered as a mixture of everything that does not fall within the other categories. This can be further linked to the fact that the concept of poetry in ancient times had a meaning that was different from that of the present. Wordsworth's positive determination of poetry as "the spontaneous overflow of powerful feeling" is exactly what is cautioned against in Plato's *Republic* and Horace's *Ars Poetica's* critique of a figurative language with "dolphins in the woods". Genette's point is that modern poetry is different in every way from ancient poetry, and that a modern conception of poetry should bear in mind that many other poetic forms exist than those from Romanticism.

Late Romanticism attempts to institutionalize a poetry concept derive from Stuart Mill, who points out that any kind of report, description and didactic mode must be regarded as anti-poetic. Stuart Mill writes about the epic poem in *The Two Kinds of Poetry* (1833): "in so far as it is epic it is not poetry at all". Similarly, in *The Poetic Principle* (1850) Poe launches his famous dictum that a poem should always be short, and Baudelaire continues in *Notices sur Edgar Poe* (1856) the above arguments by completely condemning the presence of epic and didactic elements in poetry. In other words, Genette's argument coincides with Virginia Jackson's: The poetic genre is constantly changing.

However, others have been more specific than Jackson and Genette with regard to describing the development of the poetic genre, whose argument remains with the negative characterization of the canonized poetry tradition from Romanticism to Modernism. Joseph M. Conte's article, "The Multimodal Icon: Sight, Sound and Intellection in Recent Poetries" (2013), outlines poetry history to the present day, based on the thesis that a shift has occurred in the way we decode poetry. While previously we saw poetry as an art form that only expressed itself in one code, namely the letters on the book page, the poem in the digital age has become a multi-modal icon. In the multimodal poetry, text and image interact in the significance process and cannot be separated from each other. In this new poetry, Conte claims, new approaches and skills are required of the interpreter if he wants to understand the poetry.

In a more recent and far more optimistic article than "Does Poetry matter?", called "Disappearing Ink: Poetry at the End of Print Culture" (2003), Dana Gioia discusses, like Conte, poetry's development in the future. As the title suggests, the article operates with the thesis that we are facing a new era in poetry, in which the book medium's monopoly on poetry will be replaced by a variety of poetic manifestations. These are "performance poetry" (eg. "poetry slam"), "oral poetry" (eg. "rap", "spoken word poetry" and "cowboy poetry") and "visualize" and "audio-visual poetry", which are unfolded within the digital media. In his enthusiasm of the many forms of poetry, Gioia states that poetry has a rich and vital future:

As long as humanity faces morality and uses language to describe its existence, poetry will remain one of its essential spiritual resources. Poetry is an art that preceded writing, and it will survive television and video games. How? Mostly by being itself – concise, immediate, emotive, memorable, and musical. (Gioia 2003, 15)

Of course it may be claimed that Gioia's poetry concept is wider than most. On the other hand, it is a charitable counterweight to the narrow and outdated understandings of what poetry is, in the writings of Bendik Wold and his peers.

Hans Kristian Rustad is more analytical and sober and less prophetic-ecstatic than Gioia in his discussion of poetry's role in the future in his book *Digital litteratur. En innføring* (2012) (Digital literature. An introduction). Rustad points out that "poetry appears to be one of the most innovative genres in digital media" (Rustad 2012, 72), and he describes the recent boom in a digital poetry characterized by complex interaction between writing, image, music, graphics, movies and speech. There are numerous websites, says Rustad, in which poems are published and commented upon, and in social media such as blogs, Twitter and Facebook, poetry has also found its place.

### **Five reasons why poetry can matter**

After studying the many researchers who have discussed the status of poetry today, it seems obvious that poetry can in no way be regarded as a static or rigid ideal, but rather as a genre experiencing expansion and development. In conclusion, I will present five arguments for considering poetry to be a very important genre.

My first argument is that poetry represents the linguistic renewal which is the prerequisite for any kind of free expression. In poetry's "de-familiarization" of language, we experience the world in a new way. The unique, concentrated, and fascinating composition of words is the key to the power of art, as determined by, for instance, the theorists Viktor Shklovsky, Jan Mukarovsky, Roman Jakobson, I.A. Richards, William Empson, Cleath Brooks, and Th. W. Adorno. Dana Gioia also summarizes this problem in "Can Poetry Matter?": "A society whose intellectual leaders lose the skill to shape, appreciate, and understand the power of language will become the slave of those who retain it - be they politicians, preachers, copywriters, or newscasters" (Gioia 1992, 17).

The second reason why poetry can matter is that poetry interacts and connects with other art forms. This interaction has represented an essential aspect of the development of art forms for more than a century. As Peter Dayan points out in *Art as Music, Music as Poetry, Poetry as To, from Whistler two Stravinsky and beyond* (2011), the core of modern art are art forms, which are interartially and intermedially oriented. In a key formulation, Dayan says: "The key to their expression is the description as of each art as if it were one of the others: poetry as music, music as painting, painting as

poetry, and so on” (Dayan 2011, 1). The interartial and intermedial trends have become more pronounced in contemporary poetry, as shown in the above literary criticism by Gioia, Conte, and Rustad.

The third reason for poetry’s importance relates to the role of poets within literature. As the Danish author Klaus Rifbjerg once pointed out, poetry is considered the ”reactor kernel of literature.” Literary influence often travels from poetry to prose, as most of the major prose authors make their debuts in the ”language laboratory of poetry”. Great interaction often takes place between poetry and experimental prose, because experimental prose distances itself from the bestseller’s conventional resort. In *Bestseller* (2002), Clive Bloom points out that the difference between bestsellers and quality literature is that bestsellers neutralize the style, while quality literature fetishizes the style (Bloom 2002, 20). Tue Andersen Nexø is sharper in his description of ”Uopmærksomhedens æstetik (2010) (The aesthetics of inattentiveness) (2010); he points out that the bestseller is usually a work in which we meet ”a reality whose structure we recognize first and foremost from the media” (Nexø 2010, 20), ”where everything is reduced to schematic contradictions and predictable conflicts entangling and dissolving” (21), and in which style is ”redundant and functional” (22). Nexø concludes that the bestseller ”does not reward the attentive reader” (22). We may add that the bestseller does not express the individual or ”einmalige”, which should actually be the purposes of art and literature. The bestseller’s mode is pedagogical explanation rather than the perception, experience, challenge and reflection of the reader. And the bestseller’s style is clichéd rather than innovative. In the current years, the gap between experimental poetry and prose is growing noticeably smaller, while bestseller literature is differing significantly, in terms of both quality and quantity, from experimental literature. As usually poetry represents an aesthetic standard that is constantly challenging prose, poetry is a key reason for the significant evolvement of prose and quality literature in general during the last few decades.

The fourth reason why poetry can matter is its ability to challenge and develop literary criticism. Above, we have seen how poetry has been crucial for many of the important theorists of the past 200 years. And this continues to be the case. In my articles, ”Kampen om lyrikken. Litteraturvidenskabelige refleksioner over en genre” (2013) (The argument about poetry. Literary study reflections on a genre), I discuss how poetry is part



of the vital and important interaction with literary criticism. A parallel development is found between new poetic experiments and the pluralism of the schools of criticism, such as deconstruction, phenomenology, formalism, cognitive linguistics, studies of place, ecocriticism, studies of ekphrasis, and other interartial and intermedial studies.

The fifth and final important factor which makes poetry inevitable concerns the psychological and existential impact and function of poetry. Despite all the avant-garde and postmodern denials of the subject's role in literature, it is a fact that poetry has always been an important source of interpretation of the human mind. This applies whether we relate poetry to TS Eliot's idea of "objective correlatives", Baudelaire's provision of poetry as "translations of the soul" or other aesthetic-psychological theories. By virtue of its at once concentrated, complex, original, and precise language to interpret what is going on in the depth of the mind, poetry has always been of unique importance in the history of human. And because of this mission alone, poetry will undoubtedly survive countless other less important phenomena in our culture.

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# ART WRITING HUNG OUT TO DRY

JAMES DAY

## I

It seems remarkable that despite more than a century of modernist and avant-garde experimentation with language – in both the visual arts and literature – the writing in disciplines like art history or literary studies still clings to ideals of reliable narration through a transparent medium (broadly speaking the characteristics of Balzacian realism) that it abandoned long ago in theory. Recent practices of Art Writing seem to begin working out this contradiction – in which theoretical acceptance of the critical value of aesthetic experiment does not knock on into practice – in ways that may interrupt the writing of art historians and literary critics. Although there have been sporadic attempts to draw attention to the inconsistency between theory and practice within literary criticism and art history, experimental writing remains very much at the margins of both disciplines. Discussion of this gap between art-historical understanding and its writerly practice will be confined largely to the footnotes here however, even though it remains undertheorized, it would take much longer and more painstaking work to treat of it properly.<sup>1</sup> Rather, the following notes try and glimpse what radical practices of critical writing might look like through works of poetry and art that come across recent practices of Art Writing at different angles.

Of the artists and poets discussed here, only Caroline Bergvall could be properly called an Art Writer. Her multi-media, performance poetry practice moves easily from the art world back into poetry much in the way Art Writing might be expected to. Indeed, Bergvall has been writer in residence at the Whitechapel Gallery and artist in residence at the Litteraturcenter in Aarhus. Tris Vonna-Michell and Claire Fontaine are more obviously artists and not associated with Art Writing as such. Their respective practices have much in common with work that defines itself as Art Writing though, pointing to its problematic (but also potentially very useful) openness to experimentation and ability to switch between art and literature. Quite who

counts as an Art Writer is often difficult to figure out. Although in no way representative of Art Writing as a whole then, it is possible to sketch some of AW's latent critical use by looking at the trio's work one after the other. Starting with medium reflexivity and unreliable narration in Vonna-Michell's work, the argument for this potential moves on to Bergvall's polyglot, performative writing before finishing off with Claire Fontaine's "readymade" practice as a limit case for Art Writing within the art world. By means of these fragments it is possible to gather a thread that may be taken up by critical practices of writing however defined.

Practices of Art Writing have emerged recently – initially from an MA at Goldsmiths College in London - and seem at first sight to confuse the institutional divisions through which literature, the visual arts, criticism and the writing of history are usually produced and displayed. According to the eleven "Statements" published in 2011, which can be taken as a manifesto of sorts for Art Writing, it "can engage public space no longer sustained by ground, including that of truth", suggesting some overcoming of the separation of cultural production from everyday life, something put forwards again in the last statement, with its weak reference to the avant-garde, in which Art Writing "sometimes disappears" into a public space it "institutes" itself (Fusco 2011). In practice this is rarely the case, with Art Writing slotting easily into existing institutions, whether these be university courses (which interestingly give different weight to Art Writing as a critical or creative practice), writers in residence, through exhibitions and performances at galleries or at literary centres and writers' houses, or publication in digital or physical magazines and journals. It's worth noting that the "Statements" were published by *Frieze*, a glossy art magazine, suggesting that from the off Art Writing worked quite comfortably within the art world.

Most crucial in the "Statements" is recognition of how the ideal "non-separation" of these different activities of writing – of course in practice they tend to operate within highly professionalized and isolated institutions - would seem necessarily to rebound upon critical writing, just one practice of writing among others after all. High degrees of specialization and the professional obligations that go with it prevent the connection of scholarly work with more thorough critique of the political economy; too often art criticism is only able to comment on the art world and participate in its organs; much artwork itself is increasingly tailored to consumption

in super museums and grows closer than ever to the entertainment industry, which threatens to rob it of autonomy and the ability to provide any meaningful criticism. Art Writing, like practices of artistic research, currently much in vogue, seem to have the potential to overcome problems of over-specialization and professional separation so long as they operate outside of or contest existing art-world institutions.<sup>2</sup> This potential could also be explored within an academy burdened with similar structural limitations too; it might be said that insofar as it helps reproduce itself, even when practised with a degree of critical reflexivity, academic work remains wriggling on the same stick as critically important artwork like that associated with Institutional Critique. Put apodictically: Critical writing is possible within the university only because it is cut off from daily life and therefore remains merely academic, something Art Writing proposes to challenge, however ineffectively it may do so in practice. Of course there are important differences between the art world and the academy, not least the need to meet scientific standards guaranteed by peer review. If the literary conservatism of academic journals can be demonstrated to be unfit for discussion of certain types of artwork or literature though (and although much of the New Art History can be seen to point in this direction, much arguing is still to be done), their adherence to often unspoken limits to acceptable literary presentation seems to handicap, rather than guarantee, their supposedly “scientific” status. If, for example, the realist window on the world is no longer available to novelists and poets, how is it still there for critics and historians? Although it’s over fifty years since Hayden White pointed out that “there have been no significant attempts at surrealist, expressionistic, or existentialist historiography (except by novelists and poets themselves)” surprisingly little practical work has been done in this direction (White 1996, 127). Two aspects strike me as crucial for practices of art writing (meant here both in its recent incarnation as an apparently new form of art, literature and criticism, and a longer tradition of writing about the arts, which is potentially disrupted by the apparently gerundive construction of the new discipline): The first is medium reflexivity, with its recognition that language is a physically unique experience which can limit or inhibit the expression of thought.<sup>3</sup>

Here Art Writers often take their point of departure in the poetry written by artists like Carl Andre, for whom writing is just as “material”

as sculpture (although the use of these materials in Andre's sculpture and poetry is often different), but be this as it may, according to James Meyer, "The cut of language, the severing of syntax, the serial arrangement of words – such tactics underscore his assertion of matter's primacy in the world and in human affairs" (Andres 2005, 17). Art historian Craig Owens, some of whose writing appeared posthumously in *The Happy Hypocrite* (one of the foremost organs of Art Writing), suggests that Robert Smithson's "view of language as material also discloses the absolute congruence, and hence interchangeability, of writing and sculpture" (Owens 1979, 124). In his essay Owens goes on to quote Smithson's description of the fissuring of language and rocks, the splitting syntax of both print and material. Such sculptural use of language might be seen as a reminder of the materiality of the nuts and bolts of writing, bringing these into the foreground before seeing through the material stuff for meaning.

The likes of Smithson and Andre have been sources of inspiration for Conceptual Poets and Art Writers during the last decade or so, and it's interesting to look at their work in tandem with early Language Poetry, especially when an awareness of the sculptural qualities of language are seen as a way of making clear the materials and processes of writing, even if this older work is often ripped out of its art-historical context in the process by Art Writers. Something like this can be seen in Charles Bernstein and Jay Sander's "Poetry Plastique" exhibition of 2001, which put the work of artists like Smithson up alongside poets such as Kenneth Goldsmith, who was named as MoMA's inaugural poet laureate in 2013. Bernstein recently exaggerated Goldsmith's polemic (and to my mind mistaken) claim that literature is fifty years behind the visual arts (something Goldsmith sought to prove by rewriting Sol LeWitt's "Paragraphs on Conceptual Art" as "Paragraphs on Conceptual Writing" in 2005, to the outrage of some in the poetry community, who apparently didn't recognise its source), by claiming that art criticism must be at least fifty years back again, a century away from contemporary art practice.<sup>4</sup>

Bernstein politicizes the refusal of literary experimentation within the university in his recent book *Attack of the Difficult Poems* (2011). According to him, "It may be true that academic prose permits dissident ideas, but ideas mean nothing if not embodied in material practices, and for those in the academic profession, writing is one of the most fundamental

of such practices” (Bernstein 2011, 22). Bernstein is particularly sensitive to the accommodation of Language Poetry within the academy, which has often recovered radical textual practice to more recognisable forms of writing, very much against the grain of much of the poetry itself. Bernstein’s point seems to be that if the poetry were taken seriously, scholarly exposition would be correspondingly affected. That this has not happened, that the material substance of writing remains by and large overlooked within academia, is seen as a failure of literary criticism to get to grips with Language Poetry. As Bernstein makes clear in a different chapter of the book, some peer reviewers are willing to accept an argument that the transparent use of prose in scholarly articles is far from self-evident after the poetic breakthroughs of the last hundred and fifty years, but are more hesitant about writing that departs from these norms into supposedly more “obscure”, “difficult” or “experimental” writing. That such writing is suitable (or even necessary) in literary or art criticism and the writing of art history is exactly the point though. When writing that emphasises its materiality does creep into art-historical publications, it tends to be when showcasing the works of artists, as in the 1982 special edition of the *Art Journal* “Word Works”. (The creative writing number of *Art History*, one of the major art-historical journals in the UK, in 2012 in some ways reinforced the side-lining of writerly experimentation in art history in a one-off special issue.)<sup>5</sup> Reflexes back towards the materials of writing is one way of making clear the processes of academic production, and in this seems aligned with some of the intellectual and political standards set by the new art history.

## II

Tris Vonna-Michell’s performances and installations dramatize the entanglement of storytelling and technology, and more or less explicitly replace the reliable, historical narrator with more fragmentary voice formations, slips and inconsistencies, reminiscent of the *nouveau roman*. One recurring narrative revolves around Berlin’s Anhalter Bahnhof, his mother’s childhood, the fall of the Berlin Wall, his own wandering in Berlin, which are more or less distinct or entangled in the storytelling. Objects and photographs or slides are often scattered over tabletops or projected onto walls during the performance or recording, which further suggests an ineluctable fragmentation. A different conceit that also emphasizes incompleteness has



been to limit stories according to a countdown from an egg timer, on occasions Vonna-Michell seems hurried or short of breath, as though there's some desperate need to keep his narrative afloat. Most interesting perhaps is the slippage between Vonna-Michell's voice and the technology used to reproduce it. In his <> (2008), now part of Tate's collection, the tape playback – especially its fast-forward and rewind functions – seems to mimic – or rather the story telling seems dependent, or at least to have been decisively affected by – this technology, to such an extent that human memory seems alterable by – or rather reliant upon – technologies of reproduction. As the works included in his exhibition for the 2014 Turner Prize suggest, Vonna-Michell now seems to be moving further away from performance work, in which bodily presence is a crucial part of the immediacy – or contingency – of his storytelling and towards fantasies of disembodied subjectivity, made up of digital and analogue archives, which replace the supposed presence of the storyteller, who now seems made up more of narrative traces and bits and pieces of artefacts than as a coherent body.

There is more than a nod towards an avant-garde heritage, especially in the works about sound poet Henri Chopin, who from the 1950s on explored the physical make up of “voice” and its recording and reproduction by, for example, swallowing microphones or inserting them into his nostrils. Chopin's sound poems might be seen to suggest that when the physical stuff of art making is explored thoroughly, its presumed dignity is dependent upon rather uncivilised, creaturely needs. This may be seen to bring language back to its own matter (and here the pun on matter as both material and content is meant), even if it also goes beyond or “transcends” this reflex, through the experience of “a break-through in a break down” (Jammet 2009, 111). Though much of this avant-garde ambition seems to have been lost in Vonna-Michell's work – he seems like a perfectly suitable candidate for the Turner Prize, and the anti-art impulse in Chopin's poetry has fallen by the wayside – his initial insistence on physical presence (not only by performing live, but also through his emphasis on walking in his stories, and highly-prized collection of objects and photographs) and the current move towards withdrawing this presence, and more disjunctive and disconnected narration prompts some reflection on the apparatus of writing within the academy, which often makes use of PowerPoint pres-

entations and narrative devices, apparently without reflection upon how these may affect the substance of argument itself.

### III

In the end this reflex towards the materials of storytelling might be seen to come back to the body of the writer herself (even if it proves to decompose this body), and a physical approach to the page or computer screen, desk or audience, library, seminar room, auditorium or street. In the transcript of a lecture poet and/or multimedia artist Caroline Bergvall gave in 1996 at the first Symposium of Performance Writing at Dartington College of Arts she suggests close attention to “the workings, the sitings and the political dimensions of atomised writing practices – whether on or beyond the page”, that is to say to “the performance of writing itself”, which seems like a suitably ambiguous phrase, and leads Bergvall on to suggest “a live situation where writing is addressed explicitly. During and as part of the live piece” (Bergvall 2015).

It’s especially within performance studies that performative writing – one part of which would consist of textual practice, and another of the physical act of writing itself – has been theorized, and practised rather hesitantly, within art history. For Gavin Butt there is a need to “rediscover criticism and its agency within the very mode of critical address itself” in response to a critical industry “deadened by the hand of capital and the academy” (Butt 2005, 5). Della Pollock’s description of performative writing “as an important, dangerous, and difficult intervention into routine representations of social/performative life” suggests some impulse for writing to respond to its environment too, or perhaps even to test writing against its institutional limits (Pollock 1975). (This, perhaps, is something that much Art Writing doesn’t achieve, it often seems to fit quite complacently into gallery rooms or on the pages of magazines. As with Vonna-Michell’s work, supersession of the institutions of art, literature and criticism doesn’t really seem to be on the cards, although his sensitivity to gallery spaces does suggest some awareness of the immediate surroundings in which writing or language might be produced and consumed. What these works seem to point towards though are radical textual practices that test themselves in some way against their social relations.)

Bergvall's work is emblematic of much of what seems best about Art Writing. Works like *Via* or *Ambient Fish* and "A Cat in the Throat", an essay on bilingualism published in *Jacket* magazine, suggest that polyglot writing practices effectively decentre national belonging and lexical expectations and move way beyond standardized, academic English (oddly still the language of choice for many postcolonial or decolonial critics) or even what Martha Rosler has recently referred to as the "word salads" of International Art English.<sup>6</sup> In "A Cat in the Throat" puns on cat, spittle and pussy lead into a direct discussion of bodily noises, which are seen to be – "at the root of Sound Poetry's revolutionary and internationalist politics, its profound revolt against semantic dominance", and suggests greater attention to the ways the "body speaks", but also to its potential violence against speech, as the references to Samuel Beckett and "spittle" point to (Michel Leiris's brilliant entry to the "Critical Dictionary" in *Documents* in 1929 springs to mind). Cherry Smyth, reviewing Bergvall's *Drift* for *Art Monthly*, writes that during the performance "Language eats itself as physical and/or spiritual fug sets in" (Smyth 2014, 31). In *Drift*, her most recent book and performance, Bergvall continues her interest in old English as much as modern international English, situated more easily within multilingual subjects than home and hearth BBC norms. Most remarkable, perhaps, is the series of graphic waves or crossings out which may suggest a turn of handwriting against itself. In her essay writing, Bergvall often draws parallels between the different disciplines, directly comparing Sound Poetry and Performance Art, further suggesting overlaps between them, or even their ideal non-separation, mentioned earlier.<sup>7</sup> Her *Ghost Cargo Sky Banner* flown over Leeds in 2011, a mix of poetry event and protest banner, is an excellent example of Art Writing taking place in public, pulling poetry a long way from the ground that usually supports it. The flyover marked the start of Refugee Week and was intended as a reminder of extraordinary rendition and the use of European airspace by the CIA following 9/11, conceptually justifying the poetic action.

#### IV

I have been looking through my papers tonight. Some have been converted to kitchen uses, some the child has destroyed. This form of censorship pleases me for it has the indifference

of the natural world to the constructions of art – an indifference I am beginning to share.  
(Lawrence Durrell, *Justine*)

An expanded field for writing seems to be opening up, one no longer bound to traditional media and institutions. Indeed, one of the greatest challenges Art Writing strikes me as posing – whether it's presented within galleries or intervenes in public space – is a sort of testing of writing against its physical and social limits, when writing leaves the page altogether or when the book form is tested against its outside. Balance between contemplation and intervention is just about held in Claire Fontaine's *La société du spectacle brickbat* (2006), something of a limit case for this meeting of artwork and its outside. (The pun on "brickbat", which may be a spoken attack or caustic criticism, or an object, often a brick, used as a weapon to be thrown or used as a club, means that the sculptural tension is continued in the title.) As Hal Foster observes, Fontaine's work is full of such playful use of language, most elegantly in their work *Change* (2006), in which the curved blade inserted into a coin resembles a cedilla, "a 'transformative grapheme' in French that turns a hard K sounds into a cutting S sound" (Foster 2012, 154). The artist duo take their name from a series of notebooks often used in French schools (though may also hark back to Marcel Duchamp's *Fountain* (1917); he is an artist they refer to when talking about work done under the name Fontaine, most obviously in describing her as a "readymade" artist), and they often work with text, such as neon signs with political slogans placed on gallery walls or inside gallery windows. Duchamp's *Unhappy Readymade* (1919) seems like an obvious precursor for the brickbat series. For this readymade, Duchamp gave his sister a geometry book and asked her to hang it off of her balcony so that the wind could flip through and choose its own problems or the rain soak through the pages, Duchamp's joke being that the rules of geometry would get the facts of life. (This joke is revived in Roberto Bolaño's long novel *2666*, in which the character Amalfitano, who teaches philosophy, hangs a book out with the washing, though here it remains merely a literary device, with no threat to the book form itself (Bolaño 2009, 190)).

Easily readable according to the tradition of Minimalist sculpture, the *brickbat* might also be seen as an incitement to cast the brick through the

gallery window, an action more consistent with the use of bricks and books in antagonistic culture (most obviously by the throwing of bricks during demonstrations and riots, or use of literature in book blocks, a tactic first used by the *Tute Bianchi*), suggested most of all by the reference to a radical milieu devoted in part to the sublation of all forms of culture. (That this is the provocation is further suggested by the print *Untitled – Throwing Bricks* (2012), in which a man has picked up a brick from a Carl Andre-like stack and is caught in the act of chucking it through a window, one of several “Joke paintings” that replay public outrage at Tate’s purchase of Andre’s *Equivalent VIII* in 1970).<sup>8</sup> Such oscillation between contemplation and its interruption raises questions about the gap between the ambition of much theory and its incarnation within an often recognisable critical industry.

Disturbing this industry seems like a reasonable ambition for critical practice and – at least within art history – reflection upon the discipline’s institutional isolation remains something of a blind spot. Even Fontaine’s repertoire of theory seems to come readymade, with frequent reference to the likes of Agamben, Rancière and Deleuze and Guattari. That it’s colour printouts of dust jackets that are wrapped around bricks seems to confirm this kind of print on demand access. Though recognition of the impotence of much “political” contemporary art making is salutary, Fontaine’s own stance of ironized helplessness within this scene seems like a sell out, in which a prospect for resistance is held half open. On occasion this may discomfort viewers, challenging the passivity of spectatorship by presenting the possibility of participating against its rules, though more often, given their co-option by the art world and high-gloss look, it seems like aesthetic posturing laced with a disempowering irony. (Here Foster seems over enthusiastic in his reading of Fontaine, which lacks a critique of art to join to their art of critique.) The provocation to pick up the work of art and use it as a weapon remains a gesture then, actually smashing through the gallery window and casting art onto the street would not, of course, realize avant-garde ambitions of dissolving the separation of the two; much more radical undoing would be required for this. The *brickbat* might, though, be seen to point a direction for critical writing: that its apparent separation from the world it looks at is something that needs to be overcome. Again, points of departure for this overcoming may well be found in the radical philosophical work Fontaine pick up on. Brain Massumi sketches out a

thoroughgoing decomposition of subject-object relations in his introduction to Deleuze and Guattari's *Thousand Plateaus*, using building bricks turned from constructive to destructive purpose as a figure of speech:

A concept is a brick. It can be used to build the courthouse of reason. Or it can be thrown through the window. What is the subject of the brick? The arm that throws it? The body connected to the arm? The brain encased in the body? The situation that brought brain and body to such a juncture? All and none of the above. (Massumi 1987, xii)

A corollary to this is that writing is just as involved here as throwing bricks, taking it beyond the false escape of figures of speech. Bergvall's emphasis on the performance of writing is highly suggestive here for forms of writing that actually encounter the outside they mediate. Given the relatively shielded situations in which writing normally gets done (the first words of Alain Robbe-Grillet's *In the Labyrinth*, "I am alone here now, safe and sheltered" express this perfectly), this kind of contact may be difficult to establish and is likely to remain largely symbolic (Robbe-Grillet 2008, 9).<sup>9</sup> Indeed one of the challenges for performative writing is figuring out how it is physically entangled in often inscrutable social relations (from the labour and materials required to build a laptop and create its virtual space to the increasingly pressurized environment of university life, for example). In what ways may practices of critical writing be transformed in order to bring its practice in line with its complex theoretical understanding? (Think of the kind of activity and subject forms suggested in Massumi's paraphrase of Deleuze and Guattari, where does the subject plugged into her MacBook tapping out an essay in literary criticism fit into the "all and none of the above" dynamic involving arms and class relations?) Often, and rather unfortunately, more experimental work seems to be thought of as merely extending the materials and circumstances in which literature – or other forms of writing – may take place. (The recent anthology of texts from the *Poetics Journal*, edited by Lyn Hejinian and Barret Warren seems to take an expanded field to mean this (Hejinian 2013, 30-44)). Here, however, the kinds of transversal practices across different media associated with Art Writing are seen as pointing to the

possibility of a generalized writing practice, which works through or even breaks through existing frameworks.

The many crossovers between contemporary visual art making and poetry suggests some attempt to overcome “atomised” practices of writing, or art making for that matter. This institutional separation is something that Art Writing seems initially to have been imagined to go beyond, though it often seems to collapse rather too easily back into already existing worlds (that the Art Writing programme at Goldsmiths is now offered as part of a fine arts degree, rather than a more generalized practice, might be seen as symptomatic of this). Too often it seems that art historians and literary critics are keen to return to that window onto the world that was broken through so long ago. The refusal to allow a highly complex understanding of artists’ critical response to modernity through experimentation with media, and avant-garde attempts to supersede the institutions of art and literature, affect modes of critical writing seems contradictory. More radical experimentation with language and challenge to its apparatus seems consistent with critical exposition, even if it disrupts what would conventionally be thought of as clear argumentation, and here Art Writing may be taken as a point of departure.

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## Notes

- 1 The argument for more "experimental" writing (for want of a better term) can be sketched quickly here though, at least as goes for the history of art: That despite an enthusiastic accommodation of writers associated with post-structuralism within the New Art History, some of the highly experimental writing published by the likes Jacques Derrida and Roland Barthes, and especially the journal *Tel Quel* (which first published key Derrida texts like *Numbers* alongside the writing of novelists and poets like Phillippe Sollers and Denis Roche), have not been taken up with anywhere near such enthusiasm. Over and above this is the recognition that the "transgressive" writing of Georges Bataille – one of the key figures in the New Art History – is indissociable from his thought, or that the aesthetic breakthroughs of the likes of Picasso or Robert Morris were critically reflexive responses to the advance of the twentieth century. That this art-historical understanding can be extrapolated to inform critical method itself is still far from being established however, and to do so would require more comprehensive reading of the New Art History than is possible here. The few examples of artwork and poetry that may be seen to affect the foundations of art historical writing given below will have to stand on their suggestiveness alone.
- 2 For an "expanded" conception of artistic research see Juhl (2014).
- 3 The phrase art writing as used at Goldsmith's is grammatically unstable: the gerundive suggests that something ought to be the subject of action and at least for Adrian Rifkin, best describes art writing.
- 4 See Perloff.
- 5 See Grant. Grant's introduction gathers together some of the art historians who have taken on literary breakthroughs made by "creative" writers in their own work.
- 6 See Bergvall (2009 and 2001) and Rosler (2013).
- 7 See, for example, Bergvall (2012).
- 8 Fontaine's equivalents were shown recently at Galerie Chantal Crousel, and their press release describes Fontaine works like *Brick-bats*, *Equivalents* and the related prints heritage in Tate's purchase of Andre's work.

- 9 Richard Howard translates Robbe Grillet's "Je suis seul ici, maintenant, bien à l'abri" thus: "I am alone here now, under cover".



# POETRY IS THE SIGNIFICANT FLOW OF LIFE

## Poetry as a Trans-Medial Concept in the Work of Filmmaker and Poet Jørgen Leth

DAN RINGGAARD

This essay is about the transfer of poetry between art forms. Or more precisely: how the transfer between art forms makes poetry visible as a quality of life. I will explore at least some of the traits of poetry by way of the works of Danish poet, filmmaker, prose writer, sports reporter, foreign-affairs correspondent, music and poetry performer Jørgen Leth. Internationally Leth is known as a documentarian, most widely perhaps for his collaboration with Lars von Trier in the 2003 film *The Five Obstructions*.<sup>1</sup> Over the years Leth has developed a highly contemporary method for making poetry visible as a quality of life. This method is rooted in the conceptual practices of the avant-garde scene of the sixties. It grants him freedom of movement between genres, art forms and media, and to some extent takes the place of traditional aesthetic values such as craft and substance.

The method makes poetry visible not as an essence or some other sort of pre-given entity, but as something that takes place and is formed through a given medium. As revealed by the broad range of Leth's activities outlined above, a broad concept of media is required to fully grasp his work, although the particular way in which poetry is expressed owes a lot to the tradition of a genre, in effect lyric poetry, and to the specific limitations of particular art forms. The method is basically trans-medial, but it is moulded by the encounters of genres and art forms. Since the main trajectory in Leth's oeuvre goes between poems and films, the basis of this exploration is that of poetry between art forms. However, the scope of the exploration is broader, and I will end the essay by suggesting that poetry is itself a medium in the sense that it is that through which life expresses itself. If poetry is the medium, and the medium is the message, then what we see when we see life expressing itself is not plain life but life as poetry.

### Poetry in Transit

The distinction between poetry as poems and poetry as a quality of life is common in German, French, English and related European languages, although the connotations may differ depending on the respective national literary histories. Furthermore, the additional terms “Dichtung” and “Gedicht” in German and their equivalents in Scandinavian languages perhaps make it easier to uphold the distinction in these literatures. The order of the two meanings differs from one dictionary to the next. Most dictionaries, however, tend to regard the second meaning as being derived from the first, a priority that (given the etymology of the word as well as its history of use) is not altogether obvious. The Greek verb ‘poiein’ meant to create, to produce, to do, and was not attached to any particular genre or art form; and until literature at some point in the 19<sup>th</sup> century acquired the meaning it has today, it often designated the whole field of creative or aesthetic writing. Of course most of the writing was in verse at the time, although it was by no means exclusively lyrical, and nor was it necessarily recognisable as what we today would identify as a poem.<sup>2</sup> That said, it still makes sense to regard the second meaning of the word as a derivation of the first. An important event in this process of derivation – or the liberation of poetry from the poem – was Friedrich Schlegel’s Atheneum fragment #116.

“Romantic poetry is a progressive, universal poetry”, Schlegel famously states: “Its aim isn’t merely to reunite all the separate species of poetry and put poetry in touch with philosophy and rhetoric. It tries to and should mix and fuse poetry and prose, inspiration and criticism, the poetry of art and the poetry of nature; and make poetry lively and sociable, and life and society poetical [...] It embraces everything that is purely poetic, from the greatest systems of art, containing within themselves still further systems, to the sigh, the kiss that the poetizing child breathes forth in artless song” (Schlegel 1971, 174).<sup>3</sup> The universal and progressive quality of what Schlegel calls romantic poetry has to do with its ability to include everything in a idealist dialectics that include the dynamic interdependency of life and art. Poetry has agency, it can transform life, and at the same time it imitates the very motion of life as a coming into being: “The romantic kind of poetry is still in the state of becoming; that, in fact, is its real essence: that it should forever be becoming and never be perfected” (Schlegel 1971, 175).<sup>4</sup> Poetry is not being but becoming. It transgresses genres as well as art

forms and media. Schlegel's fragment is a decisive caesura in the history of the term poetry, one that with great persuasion not merely treats poetry as an aesthetic concept, but also makes it possible for us today to regard poetry as a trans-medial concept. Actually poetry is a highly contemporary concept since it has this ability to move between genres, art forms and media. The questions remaining are how it does this, and what qualities it possesses. I shall begin with the 'how' question. What does the 'trans' in trans-media mean? How does poetry move between things?

Let me begin with Leth's example. His entire work is best characterised by four transgressions, three of which are typical of the avant-garde of the sixties to which he belonged: the transgression of the borders between art forms, between high and low culture, and between life and art. The fourth transgression in Leth's oeuvre materialises slightly later in his career in the form of an anthropological transgression of global cultures. In order to move between these spheres, Leth developed a method that he expresses in a condensed form in the last line of his poem "Coppi" from the collection *Det går forbi mig* (It passes me by) in 1975: "Find an area, delimit it, examine it, write it down" (Leth 2002, 297).<sup>5</sup> It is a process of framing. The framing is an arbitrary intervention that leaves what happens within the frame to chance. What shows itself there is staged; but apart from that it is uncensored life, a life that because of the intervention may be poetic. This kind of open work avant-garde strategy seeks raw life as opposed to artistically metabolised and condensed life, but nevertheless provokes life into poetic being by way of artistic manipulation. The method can be used for just about any subject imaginable. It is not primarily dependent on artistic skill or tradition, although it is not necessarily opposed to these concepts either. The conditions will vary depending on whether what is involved is a poem, a film or a stage in the Tour de France (from which Leth has been reporting for decades); but the basic method remains the same. It is a *prêt à porter* method that depends on the inherent qualities of the phenomenal world and a sufficiently imaginative conceptualisation.

This method is contemporary to the extent that it seems to be applicable not just in the field of art, but to almost anything. In a world of accelerated change, method takes the place of knowledge and skill. There is a rising need to learn how to learn because substantial learning is too quickly outdated. It is also contemporary with regard to the increasingly porous

limits between the art world and all other sorts of human expression and enterprise. The need to adapt to new environments, to intervene and to discover rather than invent or build, seems to be the general condition in contemporary society within which such a method can unfold and appear not only relevant but also essential.

Now if we posit that no phenomenon is static, not only due to the fact that change is a dominant force in globalisation or late modernity, but also because it is defined by what surrounds it and what passes through it, and if we further posit that any phenomenon – be it a poem, a film, a sports event, a dinner or a city – is influenced by what is done to it or within it, then we should choose the prefix *trans-*, and not *inter-* or *multi-*, to define the movement between phenomena.<sup>6</sup> When we say *trans-media* we imply that the ‘between’ is between non-static entities and involves the perpetual renegotiation of these entities or environments from the point of view of transport. This means that things such as poems, films or cycling races are always to some extent changed by such practices; but it also means that a quality such as poetry becomes visible once it is no longer a natural and therefore somewhat invisible part of one entity – such as the poem – but is recycled between entities. It is this process that I will now proceed to scrutinise, focussing on the exchange between poems and films in Leth’s oeuvre. What exactly are the poetic qualities that this process makes visible?

### **A Film is Like a Poem**

In his seminal essay “Pour un cinéma impur”, French film critic André Bazin spoke for an impure film art, one that is in constant dialogue with other arts and with its own time. The arts do not compete for a specific amount of status or exposure, because according to Bazin they supplement, strengthen and inspire each other. He writes that 20<sup>th</sup> century literature has not been as influenced by cinema as one might expect. Instead, it has been influenced by the experiences of modernity in general, experiences shaped by, among other things, modern technologies such as cinema. Bazin looks in the opposite direction, and writes about how film needs to learn from the modernist novel and its montage techniques. When film first sought inspiration in literature, it turned its gaze towards the 18<sup>th</sup> century novel, and the films of the thirties and forties were accordingly made

as realist narratives. This made film seem outdated when compared to the contemporary novel.

Bazin's essays on film had a huge impact on the French new-wave cinema and its mutations in Europe and the United States. In two episodes from the history of this breakthrough we find a pen. The first one is in French director Alexandre Astruc's essay "Du stylo à la caméra et de la caméra au stylo" (The Pen in the Camera and the Camera in the Pen) from 1948. Here Astruc predicts a new age in which the camera will become just another writing tool. Followed by Bazin and Truffaut, Astruc laid the foundation of what became the auteur theory, which is the idea that a film carries the director's unmistakable signature just as a poem or a novel carries the mark of its author. The second episode took place in Lyon in 1963 at a seminar on the relatively novel currents of documentary cinema, the French *cinéma vérité* and the North American direct cinema. Here a camera technician, André Coutant, presented a ballpoint pen from his pocket while demonstrating a new camera and said: "The camera is not yet as simple as this, but we are working on it" (Ellis and Maclane, 2007). He expressed the mutual dream of the documentary directors present: the idea of being able to work freely, individually and in a more improvised manner with the camera and their subject matter as if they were writing with a pen on a piece of paper.

The influence of literature on the films of Jørgen Leth must be seen in the light of these two incidents: Leth is an auteur, someone whose personal stamp on his films is unmistakable. The technological improvements that Coutant promised have now actually been achieved, and Leth has developed film into a more spontaneous medium. In this manner he has fulfilled Bazin's request to look to literature for inspiration. But unlike Bazin and many others, Leth turned not towards the novel, but towards the poem. When Leth writes about how his films are formed in the image of the poem, he usually points to the ability of the poem to begin somewhere and to develop spontaneously. I quote from his book with texts on film, *Tilfeldets gaver* (The Gifts of Chance): "I have always wanted the making of a film to be as much like the writing of a poem as possible. Just as simple, and just as unpredictable. When I write a poem I never know where it will end. It starts in the upper left corner and takes an unknown course



down the page. I see where it leads, and accept it. This is why I have never wanted to write normal scripts for my films” (Leth 2009, 16).<sup>7</sup>

But what does it mean that a poem unfolds in time across the page? It begins in the upper left corner and proceeds down the page in one unbroken movement. How is that done? How does a poem manifest itself as a stretch of time where random things occur? How does time run through a poem? It is a question of how to organise the material. Leth has always objected to narrative fiction, be it in film or literature, as he has rejected the overarching use of argument in mainstream documentary. He also, early on in his career as a poet, gave up metaphor as an organising principal. This leaves him with rhythm. Rhythm is what organises his material. Unlike narrative, rhythm does not have to connect the parts by taking heed of “probability and necessity” (Aristotle 1995, 63). Unlike argument, rhythm is not logical; and unlike metaphor, rhythm does not signify. Instead, rhythm organises material in chains of repetition and variation: it combines images, meanings and movements over time. To Leth rhythm is *rhythmos* in the Greek sense, explained by Emil Benveniste as the realisation of form in time. This means that there is no pre-given metric structure to be filled out, but that things develop as a continual process of becoming, an unfolding of life, which in a poem means a life articulated through the act of writing. It doesn't matter whether life is a film, a poem, a woman passing you on the street, an athlete throwing a javelin, or a bike rider suddenly breaking away from his competitors on a mountainside, because it's all *rhythmos*. It is an open-ended experience of time and body that has no measure, it is flow as opposed to pulsation. Using Deleuzian film-speak, it comes close to the time image. We have arrived at our first prominent poetic quality: *rhythmos*.

The text in *Gifts of Chance* goes on to mention a third influence from the poem (next to that of the auteur theory and the spontaneous development in time), one that got its most direct expression in Leth's first major film, *The Perfect Human*. This film, Leth writes, is “in many ways a writing in an empty space” (Leth 2009, 17).<sup>8</sup> The blank page is a recurrent motif in modernist poetry, and almost always has a resonance of nihilism: it is the act of writing upon nothing, to face a world that has no pre-given meaning and therefore allows you to do whatever you like. The white background in front of which the two persons or models of the film act is a nothingness

that draws them into its own all-white abyss just as much as it allows them to step forward in front of itself as examples of life. "The room is boundless, and radiant with light. It is an empty room. Here are no boundaries. Here is nothing" (Leth 2007-9, 2:38), Leth's voice-over says in the film.<sup>9</sup> In *The Five Obstructions* Leth states that the genius of Claus Nissen, the male actor in *The Perfect Human*, is that he toys with emptiness. The white world that was so popular on the art scene in the late sixties is a neutral world where the nihilism of modernism and its version of the *creatio ex nihilo* has become a postmodern freedom from meaning: the wide world.

The characters in *The Perfect Human* are improvised bodily signs that step out of that neutrality on the command of the auteur. As they lie, sit or stand they form certain figures, and their acts and movements scan an otherwise empty universe. They are like living black-and-white letters on a white screen. The body and the image are signs that appear from and disappear into nothing. This may be the second quality of poetry that Leth's work allows us to glimpse: the incarnated sign. The attempt to overrule the arbitrariness of the symbolic sign by incarnating it, and by making visual, bodily signs that have no fixed referential meaning, but are merely sign-like. It is the referentially loose but rich word-as-image that Henri Michaux dreamt of, the linguistic sign distorted by the painter, the sculptor, the calligrapher or the filmmaker and made into a body. It is an unruly fusion of sign and thing that in no way annuls the difference, but rather makes the two visible by way of each other while pointing to a somehow richer, fleshier and more creative process of signification.

### **A Poem is Like a Film**

But the influence of literature on film also works the other way around. Leth has at least three ways of letting film influence his poetry. The most fundamental one is that film has made Leth into a poet who sees. Not a visionary poet, but an observer. Following this visual inclination, Leth uses framing in particular as a way of seeing in his poems. He doesn't just see, he sees as a camera. This is the second way that the film influences the poem: film technologies such as framing, but also cutting, travelling and frame composition, are developed into a poetic method. It may be the *15 Frames of Eventyret om den sædvanlige udsigt* (The Fairy Tale About the Usual View), or it may be the way in which the long pornographic poem

“Fotografen har muligvis lyst” (The Photographer May Feel Like It) constantly cuts between different frames. There are many examples. They create a distance by pushing the camera and with it a self-conscious subject in between the words and what they show. The blatant use of film techniques works as a counterweight to the spontaneity of the poems by pointing towards technology as an unavoidable part of the human experience and, more importantly, by pointing to the process of signification itself. If not just any “good poetry”, but especially lyric poetry is “the spontaneous overflow of powerful feeling” (Wordsworth 2014, 79), an apparently unmediated expression of subjectivity, then film liberates the poem from the lyric, thereby liberating poetry from the lyric poem. Poetry becomes visible as intervention, method and self-reflection.<sup>10</sup> It is not inherent in a feeling or a situation; it is something that happens to something because of an intervention.

Thirdly film is present in the poems as ideas for films, as scripts in progress. The book *Traberg* and the long text “Kærlighedskataloget” (The Love Catalogue) from *Gifts of Chance* are the most spectacular examples; but a lot of poems, so many that they form a central type of poems in Leth’s oeuvre, are written from the perspective of a film. What is important here is that the film offers the poem an opportunity to avoid an ending, a way to begin again by reaching beyond itself towards something else, towards another work of art that is not yet concrete. It involves the poem in a process, makes it into a note or a fragment. Paradoxically the film gives the spontaneity and the ability to improvise that it borrowed from the poem in order to liberate itself, back to the poem, ensuring that it too will remain open-ended.

A key genre for this open-endedness in Leth’s work is the writing of notes. Notes are spontaneous, something that is scribbled down here and now, a striking idea that must not go to waste. Notes are preliminary and incomplete. They point beyond themselves toward a future completion. And then they are traces of life. They are indexical. Notes are traces of the here and now of writing and conception. They witness time and coincidence. As traces they point back at lived life, as incomplete they point toward their completion, and as spontaneous they are expressions of contingency. They stem from the romantic fragment, they are “still in the state of becoming”. The difference between Schlegel and Leth and the sixties

avant-garde is, among other things, that their German predecessor would not have accepted a world purely of time and coincidence. For Schlegel the fragment pointed towards an ungraspable whole: like the renowned hedgehog from Athenäum fragment #206, it is at once complete in itself and pointing in all directions.<sup>11</sup> Notes are less charged. They are fleeting ways of grasping poetry as the contingent emergence of life, as instant poesis situated in the time that shapes things, in *rhythmos*.

The rhythm of a film that takes on the logic of the notes is one of shifting intensities. Leth's film *Haiti. No Title* from 1996 is (like many of his films) composed in series, in this case a variety of different series. One is brutal, showing stills of corpses on the roads, while another follows the progression towards ecstasy in a voodoo ceremony. A third series depicts the daily routines of an American soldier, while in a fourth series the French photographer Chantal Ragnault speaks about her relationship with Haiti, and in a fifth there are interviews with Haitian gangsters. Yet another series consists of images from Haitian everyday life: people on bikes, people bathing in the river, a cart with vegetables that is stuck in a waterhole while its owner patiently strives to pull it free, or (in a key scene of the film) a long take of mourners desperately trying to fit a coffin into a grave. These are scenes in which life is slow and has no direction, as if it has almost come to a standstill.

In this series there is also a scene with children and some women who are collecting water in white buckets. First there are some close-ups of their faces as the water from the filled buckets spills down their eyes and cheeks. It is tapped from large water hoses into the buckets that they carry on their heads. Then human figures in full screen that move criss-cross towards the camera. They all wear colourful dresses, with the white buckets on top and puddles are reflecting in the sun. Finally a new full screen shot in an entirely different light where people with buckets, now in red and blue, move across the frame and away from the camera along a dirty canal where a couple of pigs are foraging, while in the background we can see some shanties in front of an unfinished concrete building. And all the time we hear repetitive electronic music. This scene is supposed to have a poetic impact. However, this impact is not entirely due to the immanent qualities of the scene. Its poetry depends on the constant serial shifts in the film between brutality and beauty, action and interviews, the mix of

politics, anthropology and everyday life, on scenes that are less intense, on everything that creates the rhythm of the film. The water scene intensifies the note-like progression (or rather lack of progression) of the film and creates what in German would be “Dichtung”, a thickening or condensation. This is yet another poetic quality worth noting next to rhythmos and incarnation. It is a scene of life emerging, but also a scene that emerges from the loose structure of the film as a “Dichtung”.

### **Word, Image, Sound**

The dialogue between the arts that plays such a pivotal role in Leth's oeuvre is by no means limited to film and poetry. Visual arts and music are also crucial. Leth's roots in the avant-garde of the sixties lean heavily on French new-wave cinema, but also very much on pop art and minimal art. There is also a more specific influence from the visual arts, and it has to do with the relation between word and image. Leth works with what he, recalling René Magritte, calls stamping. It is the stamping of words on images as in Magritte's “Ceci n'est pas une pipe”. One of Leth's early classical films, *Life in Denmark* from 1972, is made up of a series of *tableaux vivants*, and at the bottom of the screen you see comments like, in the case of a farmer, “The man takes good care of his pigs”, or in the case of a young girl, “She lives in Algade”.

The written words are tautological, they simply repeat the images or what the characters say, although with a slight displacement between the two. The words may say too little or too much, they may change the mood, often being quite comical, or they may appear at rhythmically different intervals. What occurs is an emblem, an image with words underneath that creates riddles as it forces us to decode two not absolutely compatible sign systems. As always in Leth, the sign systems create differences wherever they meet, and differences generate thinking and basically life. In the poem “Det går forbi mig” (It Passes Me By), which is also the title of the book, he talks of travellings in the spirit of Jean-Luc Godard: filming with a moving camera that follows a person, for instance. Instead of underlining the narrative, he wants the travelling to wander off on its own, to become an “independent trail of variation, an emancipated/ sign system that rides swiftly over/ the content, the message of the pictures, the sounds and statements/ of the texts” (Leth 2002, 307).<sup>12</sup> The text, in its Barthian sense, becomes the place of interchange between divergent sign systems, art forms and areas of life.

Let me elaborate just a little further on this concept of stamping. In a text called “Godard” in his autobiography *Det uperfekte menneske* 2005 (The Imperfect Human), and in a slightly different version in the poem “Jeg ved 2-3 ting om hende” (Two or Three Things I Know About Her) from *Billedet forestiller* (The Picture Represents), Leth describes a scene from Jean Luc Godard’s film *2 ou 3 choses que je sais d’elle*. The film follows its protagonist, played by Marina Vlady, one day around Paris. It is composed as a chain of situations, most of them quite common, and Leth stops at a particular scene where she is at a car wash. He writes: “The car is turned into a totem object. The trees are mirrored in its windows. It is one of these barrier-breaking magical moments. The words make the image into an emblem. The cranes in the building lot fill the horizon like giant writing in an empty space. The people do simple things, strange rituals from an unknown civilization” (Leth 2005, 97).

The words totem, emblem and ritual point in the direction of something significant and common to humans. Something contingent becomes mythical. The scene is doubled in everyday life and myth. It is another example of a “Dichtung”. The poetry of this scene obviously has a very strong anthropological component, as it has in Leth’s work in general, but it also has a semiotic impact. Everyday life becomes an emblem written in giant letters: it becomes a sign. Poetry is what develops in this double distancing: everyday life as exotic and as text. This is stamping at its most basic. It is literally speaking when words are written over an image, but more basically it is about something you see that turns into language the moment you see it. It is significant life. This is the fourth, and perhaps most basic quality of poetry. As I said in the opening remarks: What we see when we see life expressing itself through the medium of poetry is not plain life but life as poetry.

The influence of music on Leth’s work is also wide ranging. Being a former jazz critic and one of the first to introduce the genre of jazz and poetry in Denmark is one part of it. Here I shall point in another direction to the influence of John Cage, and particularly his concepts of structure and material. Structure is the neutral, metrical division of time. It may contain anything since it is not organically connected to its subject matter. Instead it creates a field of chance, of sudden events occurring without the interference of the composer. The material is what the structure contains and ma-

nipulates. And the material of music is not scales but sounds and silences. The sound may be noise and the silence is not only something taking up room in the music, but also a kind of sound. Total silence does not exist. To Leth the sense of material in Cage, as well as the use of sound and silence, has been important. But the most important impact that Cage has had on Leth has to do with the use of structure to obstruct and thus tease out ideas and occurrences in whatever media or art form he might be working in.

The ultimate Cageian structure is that of seriality. I have already given an example of how Leth's films are structured in series as opposed to narrative or argument. Seriality is rhythm, but it is not necessarily rhythmos. Being metrical, seriality is often evident repetition or pulsation. Repetition must of course be included among the qualities of poetry as life next to rhythmos, incarnation, "Dichtung" and stamping. It is the principle of the *versus* of verse, the turning around as opposed to the *prorsus* of prose, the moving forward, the crooked as opposed to the straight. Repetition in Leth takes the form of represented routines and presented series. The routines as well as the series connote what Michal Peled Ginsburg and Lorri G. Nandrea have referred to as the "forms and ceremonies" of poetry (Ginsburg and Nandrea 2006, 265). With it comes an, however subtle, art-making of life that overturn chronological time and make life significant, and in Leth's case also erotic. Rhythms, be it the flow of rhythmos or the repetition of the series, make life felt.

In Leth's work, this literally aesthetic element of poetry, which also surfaced through the incarnated sign, has one final quality: the grain of the voice. Leth's voice as the narrator of his films or in the television transmissions from the Tour de France has that two-sided quality that Barthes spoke of as the abstract (neutral language free of feeling), and the body (likewise liberated from emotional intentionality). Again word and matter, sign and thing, voice as that which is not yet meaning and no longer sound or vice versa.<sup>13</sup> Perhaps voice in this sense qualifies as the sixth element of poetry.

### **Poetry as Media**

Leth's ability to move between media and between art forms has to do with two things: method and purpose. His method is generally the same wherever he goes. To put it very simply, he uses a three-step method: 1) to decide on a structure with certain formal obstructions; 2) to frame, describe and

investigate a piece of life; and 3) to represent it in an interference of sign systems. The purpose or the guiding concept of this method is what I have called poetry. After this brief tour through Leth's work, some of the qualities attached to poetry can be named. These are: *rhythmos* as "an open-ended experience of time and body that has no measure", incarnation as the "distorted bodily sign", "Dichtung" as a "thickening within the loose texture of time and coincidence", stamping as "the emblem-making of everyday life" or simply as "significant life", repetition as the "forms and ceremonies" that loop time and make life felt, and finally voice as yet another crossing of sign and body. According to Jørgen Leth's work, trans-mediality is related to using the same method whatever the media or the material and with the continual exploration or teasing out of the state of life that is called poetry. This is what makes it possible for him to move between genres, art forms and media, and this is what makes him a very contemporary artist.

The list of poetic qualities could probably have been longer and certainly more elaborated. The two qualities that I would like to highlight, and to which I have given most attention, are those of stamping and *rhythmos*. Some of the others seem to overlap these two, which are perhaps the most central qualities of poetry as life. Stamping makes it evident that the poetry that shows itself is not life itself, but an occurrence initiated by the act of signification, however coincidental and involuntary this act may be. *Rhythmos* is the form that this emergent occurrence takes, one that has the blissful appearance of the flow. I have refrained from generalising these experiences, as I prefer to keep them close to the films and texts of Leth and insist on their specificity. Addressing such a broad discussion from an internationally relatively unknown oeuvre is of course far too narrow an approach, but then again the very specificity of the work may prove helpful in keeping the generalisations at bay.

Stamping and *rhythmos* are qualities of poetry as life. They may occur in many genres, art forms or media. However, in the case of *rhythmos* and a number of the other qualities that I have touched upon, there is a clear connection to the poem, in fact to lyric poetry. Ideas such as the flow of the poem from the upper left corner and down, the motivated sign, the condensation of a moment and so forth are clearly something that has been cultivated within lyric poetry. The chain between the poem and the poetry of life is in no way broken. But it does seem as if poetry in the age of trans-media



can be useful as a broader aesthetic term, as opposed to being the name of a genre within a particular art form.<sup>14</sup> In fact it is tempting to broaden the scope of the term even further as regards poetry, defining poetry not just as something that is made visible through various media, but also as something which is a medium in its own right.<sup>15</sup> Poetry is that through which life expresses itself. It is that with which we stamp life in order to find ourselves as alert participators of life's rhythms. Poetry is the significant flow of life.

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## Notes

- 1 In Kristin Thomson's and David Boardwell's *Film History* Leth is classified as someone that merges documentary and avant-garde (Thomson and Boardwell 2010, 562). Leth's poems are translated into English by Martin Aitken in the collection *Trivial and Everyday Things*. This essay draws on passages and ideas from my Danish book on Leth, *Stoleg. Jørgen Leths verdener* (Chair Games: The Worlds of Jørgen Leth).

- 2 For the history of the terms see Pestipon (2014, 13-40), Widdowson (1999, 26-62), Garber (2012, 3-30).
- 3 “Die romantische Poesie ist eine progressive Universalpoesie. Sie will, und soll auch Poesie und Prosa, Genialität und Kritik, Kunstpoesie und Naturpoesie bald mischen, bald verschmelzen, die Poesie lebendig und gesellig, und das Leben und die Gesellschaft poetisch machen [...] Sie umfasst alles was nur poetisch ist, vom größten wieder mehre Systeme in sich enthaltenden Systeme der Kunst, bis zu den Seufzer, dem Kuß, den das dichtende Kind aushaucht in kunstlosen Gesang” (Schlegel 1994, 90).
- 4 “Das romantischen Dichtart ist noch im Werden; ja das ist ihr eigentliches Wesen, daß sie ewig nur werden, nie wollendet sein kann” (Schlegel 1994, 91).
- 5 My translation. “Find et område, afgræns det, undersøg det, nedskriv det.”
- 6 For this discussion and definition see Ette (2005, 20-22).
- 7 My translation. “Jeg har altid ønsket, at det at lave en film så meget som muligt skulle ligne det at skrive et digt. Lige så enkelt, lige så uforudsigeligt. Når jeg skriver et digt, ved jeg aldrig hvor det vil ende. Det starter øverst i venstre hjørne, og så udvikler det sig ad ukendte baner ned over siden. Jeg ser, hvor det fører hen og accepterer det. Derfor har jeg aldrig villet skrive normale manuskripter til mine film.”
- 8 My translation. “... på flere måder en skrift i et tomt rum”.
- 9 “Rummet er grænseløst og strålende lyst. Det er et tomt rum. Her er ingen grænser. Her er ingenting.”
- 10 This quality of poetry again echoes Schlegel, who states in Athenäum fragment # 238 that transcendental poetry must be critical in the sense that it reflects itself and becomes a theory of poetry. It must “always be simultaneously poetry and the poetry of poetry” (Schlegel 1971, 195). “... überall zugleich Poesie und Poesie der Poesie sein” (Schlegel 1994, 105).
- 11 A fragment, like a miniature work of art, has to be entirely isolated from the surrounding world and be complete in itself like a porcupine” (Schlegel 1971, 189). “Ein Fragment muß gleich einem kleinen Kunstwerke von der umgebenden Welt ganz abgesondert und in sich selbst vollendet sein wie ein igel. (Schlegel 1994, 99).
- 12 My translation. “... et/ uafhængigt variations-spor, et emanciperet/ tegnsystem som kører gnidningsløst hen over tekst-/ ernes udsagn”.
- 13 For this latter definition see Agamben (1996).
- 14 See Kjerkegaard (2013).
- 15 This definition of media is McLuhan’s.

## A WORDPHARMACIST'S CONFESSIONS

MORTEN SØNDERGAARD

The ambulances do not arrive  
we stand by the roadside and gaze.  
How long will it take?  
He has the grand mal inside the house  
the Great Evil.  
He smashes the furniture  
flowers bloom with blood.  
The pills in the cupboards  
roll onto the floor  
they pump out of the mouths of everyone  
in the neighborhood:  
sleeping pills, valium, rohypnols, prozac  
pronouns, nouns, numerals, adverbs.  
Now it is as quiet  
as when a child falls asleep.  
But inside the body floats a tiny astronaut  
who cannot move  
nor get his spaceship going.  
The spaceship is valium-quiet  
blood rushing quietly in the quiet house.  
In this vast universe nobody can turn their heads  
and no-one can move their arms.  
But we know we will meet on a star.

I

It started in the aural slippage between valium and verbs. I remember as a child I was convinced they were the same. In my childhood home there was an unusually large number of pills. And a lot of language. My father taught at the university, he taught language and grammar, Danish and

English. He was a language man. They were his own words. My father was a language man. Other fathers were firemen or policemen. But my father was a language man. My father had language as a job. How was that possible? In our house there was language everywhere. A big typewriter in his office which had a bell sound when it hit the end of the line. A huge book called *The New Webster Dictionary*. It seemed that books were stored in all places and corners of the house. There was language everywhere. Language in the attic, language in the basement. There were a number of identical books with gold lettering: *Dictionary of the Danish Language*. There were so many volumes that I could not count them. I think there were more than a thousand and they continued for miles and miles and they somehow included the whole world. And there was also *Salmonsens Leksikon*, a descendent of *Encyclopedia Britannica*, in a black leather binding, so heavy that it weighed far more than the meteor that lay outside the Natural History Museum in Copenhagen.

But all these words and books were not mine. I felt left out. I was outside of language, not being able to spell right, and spent much of my time outside the classroom for misbehaving. I felt that I could not make contact with all that language and all those words. They were for them, the others. My father suffered from epilepsy. To keep the epilepsy under control he needed a lot of different pills and medicines. A lot. And to sleep he needed sleeping pills and to be able to work he needed working pills and to wake up he needed wake-up pills. Pills that needed wine to be swallowed. More and more wine. Pills everywhere. Bottles everywhere.

Grand mal. The great evil. Le petit mal. The good thing was the words. Grand bon. Le petit bon. The evil thing was the pills and what they hold, what they hold at bay. Thank you, daddy, for the words. Thanks to them. Every single one of them. They were there ready inside the books, they lay there waiting like eggs that one day would hatch and turn into insects and birds. A whole fauna that the tiny astronaut could explore the day he landed on a star with his spaceship. The words. The mess and the order in which it was possible to put them. Each time it was a new one. It was always something new. And the words became my destiny.

As I said before I felt left outside of language. I felt that way then, and I still do somehow. A strange place to be for a poet. Or to explain it with a metaphor: I sometimes feel like a bee that is trying to fly against a

window. I or the bee do not understand that strange transparent barrier. Language can be a barrier. Just how can we express the things we want to say? I try and try like the bee that flies against a window. But then sometimes suddenly the barrier is gone and I can say exactly what I want. I am inside language. Deep inside.

## II

But what is it, my Wordpharmacy? It is a clash between the ten word groups and instructions for medicine.

It is first and foremost a clash between two languages, two language systems: grammar and medicine. I took these two languages and made them collide. I took the grammatical language and made it collide with the pharmaceutical language in search of formulations. And then the best that can happen to a writer happened: that things write themselves. Every day I sat and read about grammar and looked for poetic formulations in grammar books and in medical instructions. I searched on the Internet. Oh my god, all these diseases! And the grammar books, so full of weird examples. In particular, there was the Diderichsen-grammar, a blue worn grammar book I was always using, most of all because of its examples. Some of them ended up in the instructions in Wordpharmacy. By the way, Diderichsen was a linguist, professor and editor of the Dictionary of the Danish Language.

In the process of working with grammar and the ten word classes I had come across a book on Danish core words: a list of the words that belong to the core of the Danish language. Core words or the words that you are expected to know in order to know a language. A sort of word-periodic table for a given language. Not necessarily the most common, but the vital ones.

Poetry sometimes borrows scientific features or values. But I believe that a poem is also a form of knowledge, it is a distribution of knowledge. To write a poem is to take an authority upon yourself. It is like clearing a spot in the world and saying: Listen, now this is the way it is! It is taking on an authoritative role in the world. I wrote a collection of poems called *Bees Die Sleeping*. I am not sure they do. But when I say it with the voice of a poet, people believe me.

The two languages, medicine and grammar, created a third in these new instructions. Instructions! We never read them, we throw them away and

if we read them, we immediately get all of the stated side effects. But it is a text that concerns our life and death. The text of medicine instructions can be regarded as the quintessence of modernity. The instructions represent the highest level of human development. They are the result of many experiments with chemistry and the organic. Many guinea pigs may have died in the lab. The instructions have been read and rewritten many times. By doctors and lawyers. The instructions contradict themselves beautifully because they must contain all imaginable scenarios. Loss of appetite. Increased appetite. Every word is weighed on a gold balance and thus they resemble words in a poem. It is a way to be as precise as possible and then... and then, in the end, they open up the maximum transparency. As with a poem, the instruction attempts to communicate as carefully and accurately as possible. To get as close as it can to what it wants to describe while all options still remain open.

It was very important to me that the instructions appeared as 'real' as possible; that the paper should be thin and that the layout should be identical to real ones. They are heavy words on the thin paper. It was important that the box should look like a real medicine box. I started to go and look for medicine boxes and studied their design.

Now the question was: should there be something other than the instructions in the box? I thought long about whether to put sweets, calcium or placebo tablets inside the boxes. I imagined that if I put pills in boxes, I would have problems with health or food control authorities. Instead, the list of Danish core words appears at the bottom of each instruction leaflet. And this fact plays with one of the beautiful aspects of words: the wonderful thing about words is that the more we use them the more there are. They can never be used up. Language is something fundamentally intangible that lives inside of us.

What is language? Language is something inside us. What are words? They are immaterial or clusters of neurons, basically electrical impulses, but certainly something we are not able to touch or grasp. And that is why the Wordpharmacy is understood by most people. It makes something from within meet the exterior. Something inner and invisible made visible. The otherwise non-tactile suddenly becomes tactile. I also think that the Wordpharmacy works because it makes things that we basically do not 'like' digestible. We do not want to take medicine and we really struggle to understand grammar.

### III

It was important to me that the Wordpharmacy had that little registered trademark sign ®. It is a way to play with the whole idea of owning words. Who owns words? Who owns language? No one and everyone. But Wordpharmacy plays with this idea and it would obviously be great to own all nouns in the world, but it's probably too big an enterprise for a relatively small company like Wordpharmacy! Can one own words? Words actually are sold to the highest bidder. A station, a football tournament, in Denmark we have the CocaCola league, the Eksperimentarium ® and so on. The German-owned company Mini Cooper tried recently to buy the name "Cooper" connected to a snowstorm. It was a large weather system to be named after the brand [ <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-16852429> ]. The idea was abandoned when the cold front claimed so many lives.

Some of the richest companies in the world belong to the medical industry. And the medicine industry constantly searches for new areas of disease. And one wonders sometimes: what is a sickness? What should we have a pill for this time? There is a strange asymmetry between the sick and manufacturers of medicine: We can do without consumer goods, but if we need medicine there is no way around it. If you are sick, you are prepared to pay large sums of money to get well.

Throughout history, quacks and fake doctors earned large sums from people's diseases and desperation. Medicine is, like language, something we can become addicted to, something we need.

As I said, I grew up among pills and language. I slowly started to write and soon I wrote and wrote. I loved and love to read science books. I'm looking for little bits of poetic knowledge that can mirror the world's wilderness in a few sentences. I saw my hand move across the pages like the needle on an electroencephalogram or on a seismograph. Everything related to science played a role, that is, the clinical, the scientific. And it is all based on a certain wondering. But trying to be precise at the same time. Maybe that is a simple definition of poetry: intense attention. I came across the Greek word Pharmakon. It is a famous autoantonym; Plato and Derrida have played with the word's double meaning of poison and cure. Pharmakon: poison and cure. Maybe also the situation of poetry in society: poison and cure. Poetry is outside, it is read by the few, it plays no role in society and at the same time it can be seen as an antidote to any linguistic de-



cay or as a poison that penetrates and destroys the linguistic tissue. When we write tiny elements react with each other like in a chemical synthesis or reaction. Each word is picked out to make a certain impact on the reader, in the same way as medicine works by carefully balancing molecules to create the right effect in the patient.

Are poems medicine? Can you use poems for anything? Is poetry useful? I always considered poetry as a basic research. As a scientific operation or approach to the world. One way to pass along the most important, the basic, the base of language. In contrast to science I think poetry rarely makes new discoveries. But we need to write poetry because the world constantly needs to be reformulated. Language develops and changes and evolves.

But are readers similar to a patient? Are you hospitalized in the book? Do we get better when we read? Where science is quickly outdated, good poetry often stands against the passing of time. Science is always a sort of negotiation, the knowledge we have today will definitely one day be obsolete. The beauty of scientific experiments is that even the experiments that fail have a scientific value, because then you know what not to do. A bad poem does not have the same effect on literature.

#### IV

The American writer William Burroughs argues that language is a virus from outer space. And you can sometimes easily have the feeling that language may be sick. The question is whether poetry can heal at all? Can literature be a cure? Or should it try to be a poison to the language of power and dominance for example?

I'm thinking of poetry as language with a kind of fever. And it's a healthy fever, a fever that is trying to cure the organism. Fever is fascinating. Fever wants us to stop. Fever sets temperature so high in the corpus to get us to a halt. And in that process we can have wild visions and achieve rare states of consciousness.

On the whole, one must assume that the language/body is always a little out of control, out of balance while being attacked from all sides by viruses, bacteria and disease. To be healthy is a state that is never really possible. It is only through constant approximation to our environment that we basically stay alive - as bodies or languages. Being completely healthy is an impossibility. It is only in the moment when life leaves us that we stop

the ongoing debate between a healthy state and disease. We are alive and kicking because we constantly incur infections.

Our language and body is kept alive by being infected both outside and inside. Language is a living material and it is good for it to have different types of transfusions. Translation is one such transfusion. You have to translate. Do translate! Translation is good for you! Let some strange language slip under the skin of your own language. Listen to the other language in your own language. Make it do its job there. It is a sort of vaccine to your language with a language far from your own.

I just said that language is a living material. In what sense is language alive? Burroughs called it a virus. And poetry? Perhaps poetry is a chemical substance that excretes in the reader's brain. Language can produce images that you carry with you for the rest of your life, that you store and use like a map to get through your life.

That is the beauty of words: that they work like an antidote in us. If you have a serious snakebite you need a little bit of the poison to be cured. And it is notable that the medicines with the strongest side effects are the ones that are most likely to cure you. The best example is chemotherapy. But drugs and poison are also used in a creative way. There are many examples of writers that have used drugs of various kinds to be able to write, from Charles Baudelaire to Henri Michaux to William Burroughs. Drugs to get to new dimensions of language. Drugs to get to new uses of words.

But also words can be drugs. We are dependent on them. We are language-bearing mammals that maneuver through language. I sit in the afternoon and write. In the afternoon hours when I have to write, when it is as if the world for a moment has slowed down a little and for a moment paused for me to look inward. I have to write. I must. Ten minutes without a program - as Tomas Tranströmer says. Maybe I do it to get that poetry drug into my brain. In any case, I do it not to go insane. For through the drug that poetry is for me, I am able to be in the world. It is as simple as that: poetry makes me be.

The drug that is poetry makes me real, it makes me able to breathe. It keeps me healthy. It gives me access to the reality that I think most people move in. A kind of psychoactive drug. It has struck me that many poets have been doctors. Gotfrid Benn was a doctor, William Carlos Williams, Celine. As if there is a connection between the medical profession and

familiarization with language. A way to get acquainted with life in order to describe it? Before poets were poets they were the shamans or medicine men. With their interest in plants and healing herbs they were early pharmacists. They beat their drums and sang strange songs. Herbs became verbs. They cooked vegetable juices into poems. Or so, at least, I imagine it. It may be fiction. But to be a pharmacist in those days was also to be a poet, and vice versa I'm sure.

Medicine keeps fear and death at bay. We would like not to die, not be sick. We would like to be healthy and alive. We would like to be able to read. Words work in us. They work upon us. Words heal and release. Even on Freud's couch. Something from within is let out through words. With medicine something from without gets in. Poison turns to cure. Today's symbol for Pharmacy is the snake stick, Asclepius. The snake is there to remind you that medicine is about to renew life. The Greeks believed that the snake with its sloughing was born again and again. I think poetry was born as a way to renew life, to renew everyday life, and for me poetry is a way to get access to life. An incantatory effort to keep life alive. Poetry has its roots in magic. And I guess that is why I am deeply addicted to it.

*For more on the Wordpharmacy:* [wordpharmacy.com](http://wordpharmacy.com)

# CONTEMPORARY US POETRY AND ITS NATIONALISMS

JULIANA SPAHR

## 1.

Just weeks after September 11, Charlotte Beers, a prominent adwoman often associated with J. Walter Thompson Co, was hired by the US State Department as undersecretary of state for public diplomacy. Among her projects was the publication of an essay collection to be distributed by US embassies called *Writers on America*. The publication is an unusual example of old-fashioned, government-sponsored literary propaganda. It could not be distributed within the US because of the 1948 Smith-Mundt Act, which forbids domestic distribution of propaganda materials intended for foreign audiences by the State Department.<sup>1</sup> It features fifteen American writers, among them Poet Laureates Robert Pinsky and Billy Collins, writing about and celebrating being an American. George Clack, executive editor of the publication, states in his introduction that the publication “could illuminate in an interesting way certain America values--freedom, diversity, democracy--that may not be well understood in all parts of the world” (Clack). With obvious nationalism, the writers featured in *Writers on America* promote US freedoms. And much of the work omits the negative role that the US government plays in the lives of its citizens and does not reference the hugely detrimental impact that the US government has had on the lives of citizens of other nations. Poet Naomi Shihab Nye, for instance, writes “Everything was possible in the United States--this was not just a rumor, it was *true*. He [her father] might not grow rich overnight, but he could sell insurance, import colorful gifts from around the world, start little stores, become a journalist. He could do *anything*” (Clack).

*Writers on America* is just one example of the George W Bush administration’s peculiar interest in literature. In this article, I will tell the story of this interest through the genre of poetry, affirming T. S. Eliot’s claim that “no art is more stubbornly national than poetry” (8). This story will be full of oxymoronic synergies between nationalism and privatization, the same

oxymoron that so defines contemporary capitalism. It will notice how the Bush administration returned most of the National Endowment for the Arts funding that was cut during the Clinton years and the NEA's partnership with Boeing. And it will focus on the special synergy between the Bush administration and the Poetry Foundation, a not-for-profit foundation that was founded and funded during the reign of Bush. I will also tell a related story about poetry's resistance, which I will locate in the movement poetics of the 60s and 70s and the development within the US of a poetry in English that uses other languages, a formal gesture that I read as contesting poetry's frequent nationalism. As I tell these stories, I rely upon work by Steve Evans, George Yúdice, Mark McGurl, and Pascale Casanova, all theorists who mix close reading with a sort of sociological formalism indebted to Pierre Bourdieu and others. Among the assumptions upon which this article rests is the belief that nationalist US poems are more likely to be well-crafted, English-only explorations of the emotional life of first-world citizens than the obvious explorations of American freedom that comprise *Writers on America* or rousing supports of various wars.

While I will be arguing that there is an intensification of interest in literature's possible nationalism during the Bush years, it is not that the US has completely dismissed the idea that literature and other arts are useful tools in nationalism. During the Cold War, the Central Intelligence Agency established and funded the Congress for Cultural Freedom which published magazines, held cultural events, and provided funds to numerous writers and artists so as to disseminate their work in western Europe.<sup>2</sup> But it is also worth noticing that there is an aura of belatedness and also a lack of interest that shows up again and again in any direct relationship between the US government and the arts. The US government tends to do less direct funding in the arts in comparison to European and South American nations. Unlike many other governments, they do not provide funds for the translation of US literature into other languages. The NEA was not founded until 1965 (by Lyndon Johnson) and its budget was very publicly contested throughout the eighties. There was no poet laureate position in the US until 1986.<sup>3</sup> And the poet laureate of the US is not required to do the one thing that it is assumed poet laureates ought to do: write poems in defense of the government. Although at moments some US poet laureates are asked and some do. Collins, on September 24, 2001, wrote in *USA To-*

*day* that “A poem about mushrooms or about a walk with the dog is a more eloquent response to Sept. 11 than a poem that announces that wholesale murder is a bad thing” (“Poetry and Tragedy”). But when asked by the Library of Congress to write a poem to be read before a special joint session of the Congress that was to commemorate the US victims of September 11, he obliged with “The Names,” a poem about a walk, although there is no dog, with a narrator who sees various names “of citizens, workers, mothers and fathers” inscribed on windows, in the air, on bridges (Schmidt2001, 126). And before Collins, there is a long tradition of poets who write nationalist poems without being asked. Walt Whitman, for instance, wrote many defenses of the imperial mission of the US and received no national funding for it. My favorite example here is Robert Frost who recited from memory his nationalist “The Gift Outright,” a poem that begins “The land was ours before we were the land’s,” at Kennedy’s inauguration, after the glare and the wind made it impossible for him to read “Dedication,” the poem he had written for the occasion (348).<sup>4</sup>

Further complicating this story of literary nationalism, perhaps the largest and most far reaching way the US government supports the arts is through an arcane series of tax breaks to not-for-profit institutions. This is one of the reasons why any discussion of US literary nationalism must at the same time consider the privatization of the arts that happens through support from foundations, arts institutes, poets houses, and other forms of nonprofits. The intensification of this privatization in the eighties and nineties is the focus of George Yúdice’s “The Privatization of Culture.” As he notes, the US government encourages various private partnerships that blur the boundaries between private and public, “a composite arrangement already foreshadowed in the nonprofit corporation, which is simultaneously private and public” (26). (Yúdice does not mention the poet laureate position, but it is exemplary of his analysis as it is nationalist in its title and alliances with the Library of Congress and yet it is privately funded.) Yúdice continues, “It makes no sense to speak of public and private, for they have been pried open to each other in this triangulation” (26).

There is, in short, nothing simple in this story of US literary nationalism. And this story gets even more complicated during the Bush years. Much of this complication can be located in the accident of history that is September 11. It is September 11 that provided the impetus to hire

Beers. And September 11 also brought a renewed interest in poetry in the media and popular imagination. Poetry received an unusual amount of public attention after the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon. It began with W. H. Auden's strangely relevant "September 1, 1939" showing up in everyone's inboxes within minutes of the collapse of the World Trade Center towers.<sup>5</sup> The mainstream press was intent after the attacks on defining poetry's somewhat limited social role. Over and over, articles talked about a supposed renewed interest in poetry. Mark Bibbins in *Publishers Weekly*, in an article titled "Solace and Steady Sales," argued that "people turn to poetry in times of crisis" (29). Mary Karr announced in the *New York Times* that "the events of Sept. 11 nailed home many of my basic convictions, including the notion that lyric poetry dispenses more relief—if not actual salvation—during catastrophic times than perhaps any art form" (E2). In *USA Today*, Collins wrote, "Poetry has always accommodated loss and keening; it may be said to be the original grief counseling center" ("Poetry and Tragedy").

Prior to Bush and prior to September 11, the NEA was much besieged. Basically, each year that Clinton was in office, the NEA budget was cut: when he was inaugurated in 1993, its budget was \$174 million; when he left office in 2001, it was \$104 million. Despite the Bush administration's rhetoric of small government and of cutting subsidiaries to a liberal elite, each year he was in office the NEA's budget went up. By 2009, \$57 million of the \$69 million cut from the NEA under Clinton had been returned.<sup>6</sup> To oversee this largess, the administration appointed Dana Gioia as chairman (in 2003), one of many businessman-poets who are associated with the Bush administration. Gioia immediately declares his agenda to take "the agency beyond the culture wars" (Peterson). Among his attempts, exemplary of that oxymoron of nationalist privatization, is this partnership between the NEA and Boeing. In this NEA organized and Boeing funded fifty writing workshops that were attended by 6,000 troops and their spouses and published the anthology *Operation Homecoming: Iraq, Afghanistan, and the Home Front, in the Words of U.S. Troops and Their Families*.<sup>7</sup>

The partnership with Boeing is an obvious example of how under Gioia the NEA not only supported the development of a national tradition but also a specifically militarized one. A less militarized partnership happens between the Bush administration and the Poetry Foundation. In

2002, Ruth Lilly (the scion of Eli Lilly of Lilly pharmaceutical corporation) bestowed *Poetry* magazine close to \$200 million. By 2004, *Poetry* magazine becomes the Poetry Foundation and hires banker poet John Barr as its president. \$200 million is an unusually large gift for a small literary magazine. Just for the comparison, the net assets in 2009 of the Poetry Project are \$1,422,000 and for the Poetry Society of America are \$2,899,000. Both are established arts organizations with a long history of programming support for poets and significantly more program offerings than the Poetry Foundation. What Barr does with the Poetry Foundation millions during the Bush years is a peculiar model of this public and private overlap. His funding decisions are especially interesting because the Poetry Foundation is so fiscally conservative. In 2009 (this is the year of their most recent released tax returns) the Poetry Foundation's total assets are \$178 million. It spent \$7 million of this. Most of this was spent on infrastructure. In 2004, according to Barr, the mission of the Foundation was to "inaugurate and manage its own programs" ("2004 Annual Letter"). And the organization continues to support the journal *Poetry*, has established its own website (poetryfoundation.org which in its early years used the *Huffington Post* model and had a lot of its content provided by underpaid poets), hosts an annual Printer's Ball, commissioned a \$700,000 survey about what the people want from poetry, and established a Children's Poet Laureate as well as some unusual prizes, such as one for humorous poetry and one for elderly poets. However, once one looks beyond its own limited programs, the Poetry Foundation starts to seem like a granting organization for federal programs—albeit an organization without any clear application process, funding governmental initiatives that blur the line between public and private, such as American Life in Poetry (Ted Kooser's Poet Laureate project; cosponsored by the Library of Congress), Poetry Out Loud (a series of high school poetry recitation contests; cosponsored by the NEA), American Public Media (Garrison Keillor's production company for his National Public Radio and Public Broadcasting Service programs), and the NewsHour Poetry Series (Jim Lehrer's PBS program).<sup>8</sup>

The Lilly bequest got and continues to get a lot of attention. There have been accusations that the bequest was timed to draw media attention away from Lilly Pharmaceutical's failing stock price. Megan O'Rourke in *Slate* alludes to the various accusations that Ruth Lilly's mental state made



her incapable of making the bequest and that the bequest was publicity for Lilly Pharmaceutical: “Ruth Lilly has been mentally incompetent, by law, for some 20 years (few of the major papers bothered to report this). Her estate was managed first by her brother and is now controlled by her lawyer, Thomas Ewbank” (ORourke).<sup>9</sup> In 2006, the Poetry Foundation and Americans for the Arts (also a beneficiary of the Lilly will) sued Ruth Lilly Charitable Remainder Annuity Trust for failure to diversify the trust assets. The Indiana Court of Appeals ruled against the foundations in 2006; there is rumor of an appeal to the Supreme Court of Indiana.<sup>10</sup> More recently, as Christopher Borrelli notes, “He [Barr] immediately rubbed much of the poetry community the wrong way: He announced plans for a building (which some foundation trustees considered wasteful and unnecessary), briefly put his wife on the payroll (drawing cries of nepotism) and was accused of an anti-education approach to outreach. The more benign critics wondered if poetry’s stature could be raised by marketing campaigns; the more damning—including more than half of the dozen trustees who resigned or said they were forced out by Barr—cried allegations of mismanagement” (Borrelli).<sup>11</sup> In addition, several former members the Poetry Foundation’s board have filed a brief with the Illinois attorney general that mentions “possible conflict-of-interest and governance issues that they thought might put the Poetry Foundation in violation of the laws regulating nonprofits” (Isaacs).<sup>12</sup>

It is hard to tell if all of this controversy is just the inevitable growing pains of the suddenly disproportionate wealth of the Poetry Foundation or if it is in response to Barr’s leadership. As much as the Poetry Foundation has had its share of controversy, so has Barr. He has been unusually, at least for a poet, involved in various boom and bust cycles that have had an impact on many ordinary citizens. Barr’s banking career began at Morgan Stanley, where Barr specialized in utility mergers. During this time, he also was founder and chairman of the Natural Gas Clearinghouse, now known as Dynegy. He left Morgan Stanley and, in 1990, cofounded the boutique firm Barr Devlin. Barr Devlin oversaw some 40 percent of the dollar volume on utilities mergers between 1990 and 1996 (Strom). In 1998, Société Générale bought Barr Devlin, giving the firm international reach and support. That same year, the Power Company of America, LP, a firm largely owned by the same people who owned Barr Devlin, was one of

the first power trading companies to default, serving as an early warning of the vulnerability of a deregulated market.<sup>13</sup> Shortly thereafter Dynegy, like Enron, was accused of price manipulation and other fraudulent practices during the California electricity crisis. As if all of this was not enough, Barr was also chairman of the board at Bennington College when it abolished tenure and fired a third of its faculty in 1994, giving it the distinction of being at the forefront of what is now the long march towards an increasingly casualized faculty in the academy.<sup>14</sup>

Steve Evans's in "Free (Market) Verse" also notices the peculiar interest that the Bush administration has in poetry and he charts it through the rise of a group of poets that he calls "Poets for Bush." "Through men like Dana Gioia, John Barr, and Ted Kooser," Evans writes, "Karl Rove's battle-tested blend of unapologetic economic elitism and reactionary cultural populism is now being marketed in the far-off reaches of the poetry world" (25). Evans begins his article with the Lilly endowment and ends with a list of the changes he says "rhymed with the Poetry bequest" (27). These include "the aesthetically conservative poetry insider" Ed Hirsch being picked to preside over the John Simon Guggenheim Foundation in 2002 and the 2003 appointment of Gioia as the NEA chairman (28).

Evans is right that there are deep social and institutional connections between Barr, Gioia, and Kooser. Most obviously, it is not just Barr that has a business background. Gioia was an executive at General Foods for many years and Kooser is a former vice-president of Lincoln Benefit Life Company. These "real" jobs show up prominently in their PR materials and are often presented as a mark of their authenticity, their commitment to the American values of commerce. But that is just the beginning of the connections. As its president, Barr put the Poetry Foundation's monetary muscle behind Kooser and it often feels as if Kooser sprang out of obscurity because of a combination of the poet laureate position (he, like Collins, held the position twice under Bush) and the Foundation. It is not as if Kooser had done nothing before 2004—the year he was awarded the poet laureate position, the first year of the Poetry Foundation's operations, and the year that Kooser's Pulitzer-winning *Delights & Shadows* was published. At the time, he was in his mid-sixties and had published a number of books with undistinguished presses to minimal critical attention. Gioia, one of few people to write about Kooser prior to 2004, argues in "The An-

onymity of the Regional Poet” that Kooser was invisible because he was a regional poet and, as a result, the system is stacked against him: “His fellow poets look on him as an anomaly or an anachronism. Reviewers find him eminently unnewsworthy. Publishers see little prestige attached to printing his work. Critics, who have been trained to celebrate complexity, consider him an amiable simpleton” (84). For its part, the Poetry Foundation invested a lot in proving that Kooser’s “unnewsworthiness” was no longer true. One of the Foundation’s inaugural programs was the founding of “American Life in Poetry,” a website that featured a “brief” and “enjoyable” poem by a poet and an even shorter commentary about the poem by Poet Laureate Kooser. The program’s mission, for reasons that remain unclear, was to get poetry into midsized and rural newspapers.<sup>15</sup>

It is Barr and Gioia who seem the most entangled and the most representative of the alliances between private and public agencies. They both control millions of arts intended dollars during the Bush years. They both tend to use the same rhetoric of populist, anti-intellectualism in their claim to be for the common man against a literary, often academic, elite. In “Can Poetry Matter?,” Gioia argues that poetry does not matter anymore, in part because, “once poets began moving into universities, they abandoned the working-class heterogeneity of Greenwich Village and North Beach for the professional homogeneity of academia” (10). He implies that this move into the academy has made them especially susceptible to modernist influences. Barr echoes Gioia in his early essay “American Poetry in the New Century” when he writes: “Modernism has passed into the DNA of the MFA programs. For all its schools and experiments, contemporary poetry is still written in the rain shadow thrown by Modernism. It is the engine that drives what is written today. And it is a tired engine” (433).<sup>16</sup> And in their fight against poetic elites, self-declared common men Barr and Gioia use significant funds to commission big “state of the art” surveys. Gioia’s *Reading at Risk: A Survey of Literary Reading in America*, “showed literary reading rates falling precipitously in every demographic group—all ages, incomes, education levels, races, regions, and genders” (Bauerlein, 156). It received a lot of press and was used to justify Gioia’s emphasis on putting more money into “populist” programming, such as Poetry Out Loud.<sup>17</sup> Barr’s survey was less alarmist, declaring things like “poetry readers tend to be sociable and lead active lives” and “more than 80 percent of former

poetry readers find poetry difficult to understand, [but] only 2 percent of respondents don't read poetry because they feel it is 'too hard'" (Schwartz).

Evans's big three are Barr, Gioia, and Kooser. Although he tends to present as a democrat, I might add Garrison Keillor to Evans's troika. Keillor presents his folksy defenses of white ethnicity in his various government funded cultural institutions such as NPR's A Prairie Home Companion and The Writers' Almanac, the Public Broadcasting Service's short film series Poetry Everywhere, and his *Good Poems* series of anthologies. Barr lists in his 2006 "annual report to the poetry community" that the Poetry Foundation is "a major sponsor" of The Writers' Almanac ("2006 Annual Letter"). Keillor has returned a favor as a judge for the NEA/Poetry Foundations's Poetry Out Loud. And Keillor's various projects provide an interesting example of how these writers often overlap in print publications. Barr, Gioia, and Kooser have all had poems (sometimes numerous poems) featured in The Writers' Almanac; Gioia and Kooser have also been prominently included in various *Good Poems* anthologies. Barr was on the editorial panel of *Operation Homecoming*, the publication created out of the NEA-Boeing partnership Gioia orchestrated.

In describing these overlapping concerns, I do not intend to present them as conspiracy. I want instead to describe a sort of constellation that gets configured through a relationship to literary nationalism. Barr-Gioia-Kooser-Keillor, and Collins also, are doing the sorts of things that a nationalist poet might do in this moment of private and public funding synergy.<sup>18</sup> This Bush moment is interesting because we live in a contemporary moment that is used to literature being an irrelevant genre, one that requires impassioned defenses such as Giorgio Agamben's *The End of the Poem* or Susan Stewart's *Poetry and the Fate of the Senses* (to name just two in a possible long list) or a resistant genre that actively opposes the government. That literature, even and especially poetry, might matter to the military industrial complex that is well represented by Boeing and the Bush administration verges on being at least counterintuitive and perhaps even surprising.

## 2.

I do not want to suggest that there was no dissent among poets during the Bush years. I have only been talking about three or four men among

the thousands, millions?, of US poets. Most of Barr-Gioia-Kooser-Keillor's poetic contemporaries were not supportive of the Bush administration and some took Shelley's line about poets being the unacknowledged legislators of the world as a mandate. There is a long tradition of the White House hosting a poetry event. And there is a long tradition of pointed refusals to read at them. Adrienne Rich notably refused the National Medal for the Arts in 1997 (under the Clinton administration).<sup>19</sup> In 2003, when Laura Bush attempted to set up an event honoring Hughes, Dickinson, and Whitman, it was eventually cancelled after several of the poets she had invited made their distaste with the various wars of the Bush administration clear and declared their intentions to further clarify this at the event and/or refused to attend. Among these was the poet Sam Hamill, who declined his invitation and encouraged poets to send antiwar poems to Laura Bush. He then set up the popular Poets Against War website that invited individuals to submit "a poem or statement of conscience" ("Poets Against War"). Over 30,000 poems were submitted before the site stopped accepting new poems.

This is business as usual for the motley crew that is US poets. What makes poetry during the reign of Bush so peculiar and interesting is that, as many before me have noted, in the last half of the twentieth century, poetry decentralizes and localizes so as to separate itself from explorations of national identity, often so as to critique the government. Instead of writing a poetry that claims to speak for or unite all US citizens, many poets—even the most prominent and important—align themselves with specific forms of resistant activism, often grouping together by their ethnicity or race or gender or sexuality or class and writing from and about that position. Many, although not all, of these groups are formed in dialogue with minority cultural activist movements. And many of these cultural activist movements have a special interest in the arts as they can represent and preserve cultures and their values. Many notable poets come out of these movements. John Trudell, for instance, was part of the occupation of Alcatraz Island and credits his activism for his turn to poetry. Alurista is so tied into the origins of Chicano nationalism that one of his early poems opens the "Plan Espiritual de Aztlán." Few of these poets present themselves as representatives of a national aesthetic or voice. Amira Baraka's, and Umbra's, black nationalism is willfully separatist. Baraka's poem "Black Art"

proclaims “We want a black poem. And a / Black World” (220). Many late twentieth century poets forcefully declare their opposition of the US government. Some, like Kenneth Rexroth and Jackson Mac Low, identify as anarchists.<sup>20</sup>

These movements cultivate community-based patronage systems such as publishing houses, journals, anthologies, and reading series to distribute and promote the work. The creation of the Black Arts Repertory Theatre/School in 1965 by Baraka is often seen as a foundational moment here. But it is just one among many. Bamboo Ridge, the workshop and the press that publishes mainly literature written by Asian Americans in Hawai‘i was founded in 1978 and has preserved and cultivated a literature in Pidgin. Arte Público, with its claim of providing a national forum for Hispanic literature, was founded in 1979. I would also include the avant-garde-based, “experimental” US traditions such as beat and language writing as parallel movements with activist-support models that intersect, although not consistently, with various sorts of anticapitalist political claims.

It is not so easy though to say that the disorganized and decentralized Baraka-Hamill-Rich-Trudell-etc constellation, when juxtaposed to the well-connected, well-funded, and well-organized Barr-Gioia-Kooser-Keil-lor contingent, are necessarily anti-nationalist. As Pascale Casanova points out in *The World Republic of Letters*, the nationalist or resistant resonances of aesthetic forms are not fixed: one era’s formal resistance to national literary traditions is another’s example of national values and expression. Casanova analyzes how national traditions globally compete for literary dominance and they often absorb the very literatures written to oppose them. Her analysis is provocative. She writes “since language is not purely a literary tool, but an inescapably political instrument as well, it is through language that the literary world remains subject to political power” (115). As she notes, some writers, not to be beholden to what they view as an ossified national tradition, or an occupying government, or simply a government gone wrong, attempt to free their writing from nationalism through linguistic innovation, perhaps by using a vernacular or by misusing the national language. She gives many examples: Dante, the English romantics, the modernists. And then, as she notes, the story that comes after is usually one where these literatures written in resistance become the new national tradition. It is this very constant process of resistance and cooptation that makes written language into literature.

Much of *World Republic of Letters* is about linguistic resistance to dominant national traditions. Casanova spends little time on the reverse, on linguistic policing to the resistance, which is what I will argue is one of the goals of these poets with close ties to the Bush administration. But still, Casanova's analysis is an illuminating model for thinking about contemporary US poetry up to September 11.<sup>21</sup> From the mid-century, US poetry is a series of linguistically distinctive schools or groupings. I am thinking here of how Chicano/a poets tend to use Spanish or Spanglish and Hawaiian poets tend to use Hawaiian, etc. It isn't all that simple, of course. But there is a fairly significant tendency by poets who write poetry about their ethnic and/or racial identity and/or culture to write in English and yet also include the language associated with their identity and/or cultural tradition. Gloria Anzaldúa sums up this position in 1987 in *Borderlands* with her rallying cry that "Ethnic identity is twin skin to linguistic identity—I am my language" (81).

Rodolfo Gonzales' *I am Joaquín* is an early, interesting example of this closeness that poetry had to cultural and language activism. Gonzales wrote the poem in an English that includes Spanish. In its 1967 edition—published by Crusade for Justice, the activist organization that Gonzales founded—it also appears with a Spanish version.<sup>22</sup> So it pointedly circulates in both languages. And it was written as "an organizing tool," as Rafael Pérez-Torres notes. "Written in 1967 for the Crusade for Justice, distributed by mimeographed copy, recited at rallies and strikes, the poem functions within a system of economic and political resistance" (47). In the introduction to the 1972 Bantam edition Gonzales writes "ultimately, there are no revolutions without poets" (1). This same edition, which has a lot of ancillary material, in a section called "About *I am Joaquín*," also states: "The poem was written first and foremost for the Chicano movement" (3). What this means is that the poem's reason for being was to support struggles over things like access to land, worker's rights, and educational access. And Gonzales was, finally, more a militant who saw poetry as a useful tool than a poet for poetry's sake (this is not a dismissal of the poem; I am talking here about how he lived his life).

Gonzales' rhetorical choices in *I am Joaquín* are well thought out. He begins by suggesting to his audience, the workers he wishes to organize, that they are not a part of that national "we" that so defines Frost's "The

Gift Outright.” Joaquin, for instance, confesses that he is “caught up in a whirl of an [sic] gringo society” and his cure for that, he states, is to “withdraw to the safety within the circle of life... / MY OWN PEOPLE” (3). Then *I am Joaquin* develops the multivalent and heroic identity of “Joaquin.” Joaquin is many things, mainly many Latino things. He is Cuauhtémoc and Nezahualcoyotl; he rides with Don Benito Juarez and Pancho Villa; he is “the black shawled / faithful women”; he is “Aztec Prince and Christian Christ” (11, 20).

Gonzales did not invent the “I am...” poem. As I am sure he was well aware, it has long been a nationalist form. Whitman is, obviously, the founding father of this sort of poem and in his hands, it is an articulation of an inclusive US national identity. “Song of Myself” includes the claims “I am the hounded slave”; “I am an old artillerist”: “I am the mash’d fireman with breast-bone broken” (102, 102, 103). Carl Sandberg similarly and famously writes a poem that begins “I am the people--the mob--the crowd--the mass” (71). Gonzales’s decision to use a Whitmanesque form to delineate Chicano identity is pointed. It is similar to Langston Hughes’s use of the same form to articulate an inclusive yet specific, and pointedly not national, identity in “Negro” which begins “I am a Negro” and then goes through a series of different qualifying identities such as slave, worker, singer, victim (24).

Movement poetry begins with radical intents and desires. *I am Joaquin* pointedly is a poem about identity, but a collective cultural identity that contains within it a call to action. But movement poetry had a brief moment and its form evolved as the century goes on into what I will call “identity poetry.” There is much to be gained from separating out “movement poetry” (poetry with ties to anti-national activism, even if often focused on cultural uplift) from “identity poetry” (poetry that explores individual and personal identity and often becomes exemplary of that sticky mess of privatization and nationalism). What I am calling “identity poetry” is the sort of writing that Mark McGurl, in his groundbreaking study *The Program Era*, describes as literatures of institutional individualisms. In his discussion of Chicano/a literature, McGurl suggests that it might serve “the increasingly paramount value of cultural diversity in U.S. educational institutions” and is yet another example of “a new way of accumulating symbolic capital in the fervently globalizing U.S. academy, pointing scholars toward valuable



bodies of expertise they might claim as their own and offering a rationale for the inclusion of certain creative writers in an emergent canon of world literature” (332, 333). I have focused here on Chicano/a literature. But what I am talking about is no way limited to it. Spoken word poetry, for instance, starts out with a similar radical, often activist intent, but eventually morphs into a form that is unusually concerned with personal identity. Indicative yet again of that synergy between privatization and nationalism, by 2011 the rapper Common performs at the White House for the Obama administration. There are endless other examples.

I want to return to Casanova’s claim that writers attempt to free their writing from nationalist recuperation by refusing the dominant language practices of the nation. One way late twentieth-century US writers continue to wrestle their work away from nationalism (and also from purely private concerns) is by refusing to write only in English. They do this for various reasons. Some of them are personal and realist (i.e. they live in multilingual environments). But as Walter Mignolo notes, numerous language preservation movements come to activist prominence in the last third of the century, along with a “clear and forceful articulation of a politics and philosophy of language that supplants the (al)location to which minor languages had been attributed by the philosophy of language underlying the civilizing mission and the politics of language enacted by the state both within the nation and the colonies” (296). The way *I am Joaquin* both includes Spanish in its English version and also circulates from the very beginning in a Spanish version is one example of this “clear and forceful articulation.” US movement poetics are very obviously under the influence of the decolonization movements of the time, which themselves not only had a special interest in how literature can be used for uplift and representation and calls for action but also had a conviction that the language in which it was written matters. It makes sense to see the doubled Spanish in *I am Joaquin* as a continuation of the very prominent debates about what it means to write in English that happened in the 1960s in decolonizing nations. The most obvious example here is the huge debate in African literature that begins with Obiajunwa Wali’s “The Dead End of African Literature?” and culminates in Ngūgĩ wa Thiong’o pledging, in 1978, to say farewell to the cultural bomb of English and to write mainly in Kikuyu. But unlike Ngūgĩ wa Thiong’o, many writers

in the US who are concerned about literature's and English's role in globalization turn away from standard English-only literary practices not by abandoning English (which, no matter how ahistorical this belief, tends to not connote as a colonial language that often in the contemporary US), but by including other languages and/or writing mainly in the pidgins or creoles that resulted from English language colonialism and that are often seen as resistant to standard English.

By the end of the century, a somewhat paradoxical situation has developed. By the nineties, English is the dominant or official language in over sixty countries and is represented in every continent and on three major oceans. And because of English's ties with colonialism and globalization, as Alastair Pennycook writes, it "poses a direct threat to the very existence of other languages. More generally, however, if not actually threatening linguistic genocide, it poses the less dramatic but far more widespread danger of what we might call linguistic curtailment. When English becomes the first choice as a second language, when it is the language in which so much is written and in which so much of the visual media occur, it is constantly pushing other languages out of the way, curtailing their usage in both qualitative and quantitative terms" (14). This has had a huge impact on the development of a global English literature, and many writers from cultures and nations new to English write in English. And at the same time, within the US, a peculiar anxiety that English is "at risk" develops and this provokes many states to adopt English First and English Only laws.<sup>23</sup> The reasons for this misconception are too various and complicated to enumerate in detail, but could have something to do with the increase in immigration during the last half of the twentieth century.<sup>24</sup> But if these state legislatures happened, oddly, to be reading extensively in the US poetry written in the nineties, they would be right to be so anxious. For more and more poetry written in English at the time begins to include other languages. An easy way to see this increasing use of a language other than English is through the poetries that develop in the last half of the twentieth century in Hawai'i. In the late seventies to early eighties, a sort of Hawaiian-American literature develops. At first, this literature is mainly written in English with at most a sprinkling of Hawaiian words (I am using the term Hawaiian-American literature to distinguish from the Hawaiian literary traditions established before European contact). By the

end of the century, however, especially if one looks at the Native Hawaiian journal *‘Ōiwi* (which begins publication in 1999), one sees more and more Hawaiian being used and fewer English only poems.

Hawai‘i provides a micro example of the increasing intensified use of languages other than English within US English-language literature, but one can see this happening on a more macro scale in the nineties. A number of writers who come to prominence in the nineties such as Francisco X. Alarcón, Alani Apio, Joe Balaz, Eric Chock, Guillermo Gómez-Peña, Myung Mi Kim, Walter Lew, Mark Nowak, M. NourbeSe Philip, James Thomas Stevens, Robert Sullivan, Anne Tardos, Teresia Kieuea Teaiwa, Lee Tonouchi, Edwin Torres, Haunani-Kay Trask, and Lois Ann Yamanaka include languages other than English in their work. And a number of writers previously who had been writing in standard English begin in the nineties to publish works that include other languages or intensify their use of other languages. These include Kamau Brathwaite, Juan Felipe Herrera, Diane Glancy, Harryette Mullen, and Rosemarie Waldrop. That this form—the use of languages other than English in English language literature—comes to prominence in the nineties is probably not a coincidence. The inclusion of languages other than English in much of this work is a pointed attempt by these writers to free themselves from the nationalist and imperialist expansionism of English, a way of “othering” English that points out how its growth is not natural, not inevitable, and not dictated by need or a supposed linguistic superiority.<sup>25</sup>

The story I have been telling up to this point fits the Casanovian model. Writers, wanting to separate themselves from US literary national traditions and from US economic, cultural, and/or linguistic imperialism (all of which contribute to the ever expanding reach of the English language) politicize that already political instrument of language and include other languages in their work so as to challenge English-only hegemonies. In the nineties, I would have bet that, down the road, work that includes languages other than English would become part of US literary nationalism, seen as representative of a certain sort of US freedom, emblematic of a unique democracy and yet another justification for US imperialism. This hasn’t really happened. It is true that by the late nineties, a select few of the (mainly white and middle class) avant garde innovators began to be included in the category of “American literature,” rather than being seen

as oppositional to it. Charles Bernstein, who sometimes writes in idiolect, might be the best example here. Kaplan Harris in his review of Bernstein's recent selected poems notices "a thirty-year development that arguably represents the full privatization of the avant-garde" ("Zine Ecology"). Even an old-school anarchist like Mac Low was awarded the Wallace Stevens Prize from the Academy of American Poets in 1999. And it is also true that many of the writers doing this sort of work enter into the academic canon through the category of multicultural literature, but this literature does not become a part of US literary nationalism during the Bush years. Instead, Gioia pointedly excludes this sort of literature when he says he wants to take the NEA beyond the cultural wars.

It is Barr though who has the most peculiar, and provocative, response. Barr published an epic poem *Grace* with Story Line Press in 1999.<sup>26</sup> It is, like much of the writing of the time, written in another English, in what the ancillary materials to the book call "a Caribbean-like speech." But it has very different intent than the anti-imperialism of someone like say Gómez-Peña. It is a puzzling, complicated work in the context of this increased use of languages other than English within US literature. *Grace* tells the story of Ibn Opcit, a character who well exemplifies the happy-go-lucky darky stereotype of the minstrel tradition. Ibn Opcit is a gardener of the Overruth estate who is condemned to die by the court system of what is called the "Carib Kingdom." His crime was witnessing the husband of "ballbuster of de first magnitude" Mistress Hepatica Overruth kill her lover Flavian Wyoming after he walks in on them having anal sex. Or that is how I am reading the phrase "den he settle his equipment in de lady's outback" (11). The language here is loaded and bawdy, sexualized and racialized. Barr writes of Wyoming and Overruth, "De gentlemen, he produce his produce / like a corporate salami, and she hers, / like a surgery scar still angry red wid healing" (11). At another moment, when Ibn Opcit describes how he was watering the plants when he saw the murder, the judge asks "was de hose / you holdin' in your hand a garden hose / or was it your black natural own?" (15).

This happens in the first six pages of the book. The rest of the book seems to be Ibn Opcit's prison ramblings to someone named Geode. The six chapters that follow have Ibn Opcit talking mainly about America and how great it is. Although there is undeniably a parodic element to Ibn Ob-

cit's proclamations, Barr rarely has him say anything in critique, parodic or otherwise about the empire that is America. The America that he describes is unfaltering. It has "an economy that hums / like a hamper of flies, where the top line and the bottom / are in easy walking distance" (41). In the first chapter, Ibn Opcit briefly sketches a series of male figures that represent America: Eddy Ubbjer, a businessman of some sort, Engarde Monocutter, a poet, Spillman Sponneker, a politician, and Contemptible Bede, a pastor. Barr follows this with a brief chapter of "The Opposite Number" in which Ibn Opcit shares his thoughts on women. In this Carib Kingdom, women do not seem to have professions. And Ibn Opcit's observations rarely go deeper than observations that wives lose interest in sex: "you happen like thunder over her; / she happen like earthquake under you / ...Pretty soon, though, she prone to a natural disinterest" (75, 76). If this "natural disinterest" does not happen, apparently they become whorish and likely to grab their riding teacher's "Walcott." Yes, Barr does use the name of a much respected Caribbean national poet as a euphemism for the penis. All of this ends with Ibn Opcit asking the profound questions of "How many men marry an ass? / How many women, a portfolio?" (82). In the chapters that follow, more stories of various male figures are told. The poem concludes with Ibn Opcit perhaps escaping from jail; it is unclear if it should be read as fantasy or as actual.

I confess that it is hard to read *Grace* with anything but open-mouthed wonder. The poem is a peculiar assertion of empire that is unique in late twentieth-century US letters. Nationalist poems in the US tend to be more subtle defenses of late-capitalist bourgeois lifestyles. Barr's *Grace*, though, is something else entirely. It is a bold defense of empire, one that indulges in blackface in order to do so.

According to Barr "poets should be imperialists." And he continues, "I think they should be importers; I think they should be exploiters of external experience, without apology" ("Poetry and Investment Banking"). And *Grace* is a perfect example of exploitation without apology. It is provocative and telling that Barr decides to use not only blackface but also an aestheticized dialect as the language of composition, a form that is more or less, despite its early associations with minstrel traditions, mainly used in the last half of the twentieth century by writers such as Brathwaite or Yamanaka or Gómez-Peña as a signifier for inclusive linguistic rights, for

imperial critique. Barr says he wants to take back poetry from the rain shadow of modernism; the way that he does so in *Grace* is by demeaning and mocking. Ibn Opcit like many blackface characters not only is in awe of empire but he demeans all things not of empire. Not only does he demean his own national literary traditions with the Walcott-penis joke, he also manages to demean through sexual euphemism those with similar histories of colonization, such as Native Americans of the continental US and the Pacific, with lines like “Perhaps he tickle her in de snickly abode / until she Sakajaweha. Maybe she hold him / by de long-neck until he Eniwetok” (91). One has to wonder what region Rick Moody has in mind when he suggests in his blurb that *Grace* is “attempting sympathy” and is “crucial for the regional literature.”<sup>27</sup> While the slide between values of an author and the values of a character are often complicated, Barr willingly admits to corking his face when he states in an interview that *Grace* was his “opportunity to take a fresh look at everything I wanted to talk about when I was approaching the age of 50” (Singer).

Part of me wants to apologize for spending so much time on *Grace*. It is not as if the book has been prized or well received. I feel a bit stupid taking it so seriously. With the exception of a four-paragraph blog post by Kent Johnson and a mention of it in Dana Goodyear’s article in the *New Yorker* on the Poetry Foundation, there is almost no discussion of it.<sup>28</sup> I began by describing a nationalist contingent through the social relationships that define the overlapping national and private funding of poetry during the Bush administration. Overlapping interests, obviously, are not unique to the Bush administration. What is unique is the large amount of money these overlapping interests control and then the rigor with which these interests exclude and/or demean a thriving and important multicultural, often anti-imperial, and globally astute literature. And I don’t think one can understand the aesthetics of this contingent without taking Barr’s provocations in *Grace* seriously. *Grace* is interesting because it is unusually explicit in its racism. It clarifies the language politics of plain speech that these poets champion and pretend is for the common man by making its arguments from the reverse direction, by refusing a standard English, by mocking a literature concerned with linguistic independence.

Barr’s *Grace* is undeniably an extreme example. Most of the time, an English only agenda is presented in a poetry of mundane subject matter

and folksy language. Kooser's Pulitzer Prize winning *Delights & Shadows*, for instance, begins with a poem about walking on tiptoe, a poem about a faded tattoo, a poem about a woman with cancer walking into a cancer clinic, and a poem about a student walking into a library. These are also the sorts of concerns that define the poems that Kooser puts in newspaper through *American Life in Poetry*. And there might be nothing wrong with this poetry if it was not being presented as more egalitarian, more popular, as representing the aesthetic concerns of the common man.

Keillor's *Good Poems* anthologies are also full of this sort of poem. And again, one could just notice the attention to the everyday, to the mundane moment in these poems if a rhetoric of populism was not being used to cover over a sort of nationalist cronyism. There is no clearer example than Gioia's review of Keillor's *Good Poems* anthology that was published in *Poetry*. Exemplary of this cronyism, *Good Poems* includes Gioia's "Summer Storm," which would disqualify him from being a reviewer at most publications. But this conflict of interest does not stop Gioia from repeatedly setting Keillor's anthology against an imagined elitism that would dismiss it. The anthology "*épater la bourgeoisie*, at least academic bourgeoisie," he claims; "The politesse and meekness of Po-Biz insiders is blissfully absent from his lively assessments of American poets"; "not a volume aimed at academic pursuits but at ordinary human purposes"; it "restores faith in the possibilities of public culture" (45, 45, 47, 49). Putting aside the lack of economic analysis that lets Gioia present Keillor and himself as saving poetry from the bourgeoisie, the claim of faith in public culture is particularly dissimulating for this is for an anthology that, as Rita Dove points out in a letter to the editor of *Poetry*, has two hundred and ninety-four poems, yet includes "only three Black poets—all of them dead, no less, and the one woman actually a blues singer" (248). Dove's analysis, of course, is only the start of any accounting one might do of who is included in the definition of "public" here. Kooser also uses a narrow and exclusionary definition of "public culture" in much of his work. This not only defines his newspaper poems project, but also in his patriotically titled *Writing Brave and Free* (written with Steve Cox), a book of writing advice for those new to writing, he states that "Writing doesn't use another language, but the language we're already using" (3). The statement feels as if it could be as mundane as the poem about walking on tiptoe except behind its pur-

ported populist advice is a dismissal not only an entire literary tradition but also of how languages other than English might be a constitutive part of many immigrant and native US citizens.

### 3.

This story is still in progress. I am writing this three years into the reign of Obama. When I look for points of alliance between the Poetry Foundation and the Obama administration, I strangely find them clustered around Conceptual Writing. The various house organs of the Poetry Foundation have somewhat embraced Conceptual Writing (and vice versa). By “somewhat,” I mean that, in 2009, *Poetry* magazine published a forum on Flarf and Conceptual Writing. (My guess is that the “forum” indicates that *Poetry* is not yet ready to include this sort of writing regularly in its pages and wants to keep it segregated from *Poetry*’s more conventional aesthetic practice.) At the website poetryfoundation.org, Kenneth Goldsmith, one of the main proponents and practitioners of Conceptual Writing, published a large number of position statements about the form (and about “uncreative writing,” his term for what has conventionally been called “found poetry”). Goldsmith was invited to perform at the Obama White House in 2011 with Elizabeth Alexander, Collins, Common, Dove, Alison Knowles, Aimee Mann, Jill Scott, Steve Martin and the Steep Canyon Rangers.

I could, and I confess that in earlier drafts of this article I did, conclude that the apolitical nature of Conceptual Writing makes it safe for nationalism (even as I am sure Goldsmith knows the old line about how an apolitics is a politics). I could point out how Conceptual Writing is not threatening to an organization like the Poetry Foundation. Those who self-identify as a Conceptual Writer do not spend time attacking the agendas of various governmental administrations (as poets like Hammill and Rich do). They do not align themselves with various cultural activist movements (as “movement” and “identity” poets do). And they seem uninterested in how literature can be a form of linguistic activism (as the various poets who include other languages in their work do).

But the more I thought about it, the more I became convinced that there is a constitutive difference. The Obama administration does not have the same peculiar interest in poetry that the Bush administration had, does not have the faith that poetry might be usefully exemplary of national



values and freedoms. Poetry has, during the reign of Obama, returned to its usual status of benign aesthetic practice, as part of the nation, but not a meaningful part of a national agenda. My guess is that we are likely to see a rollback on NEA funding soon.

I feel as if I should, in conclusion, admit that I am also a poet. I have thought of this essay as a sort of auto-ethnographic project, an attempt to describe the way literature circulates in the very scenes in which I also circulate. I have been guilty at times of writing as if I have been visiting a foreign land. But this land is familiar. An important mentor of mine, Robert Creeley, was included in *Writers on America*. A colleague and several other literary associates are also in the anthology. I respect Goldsmith's uncreativity. I am not arguing that poets could be, or should be, pure, could ever make pure choices, should not publish in *Poetry* or at the poetryfoundation.org, should not read at the White House. (A piece I co-wrote has appeared in *Poetry*.) Figures like Hamill or Rich are fascinating in their rigors and their refusals. But they are, like myself, first-world writers of literature and their literature, like my own, is undeniably a nationalist practice, caught in a series of ever forming relations with state agendas. My goal in this article is to begin to understand how nationalism works on literature in this contemporary moment, not to suggest one could easily refuse one's way out of it.

So I am interested in how this narrative has inflected my own work. In the nineties, I also wrote some works that used languages other than English. My second book of poems, *Fuck You-Aloha-I Love You*, uses pidgin and Hawaiian words. I did it for many of the reasons that I associate with those writers in the nineties. I lived in Hawai'i, a multilingual state, a place where writing in English felt very fraught. I felt that it was important to use these other languages, to acknowledge them as part of my life. In *World Republic of Letters*, Casanova talks about wanting her work to be "a sort of critical weapon in the service of all deprived and dominated writers on the periphery of the literary world" (354-55). I think I had similar, if more modest, thoughts of wanting to see my work as in alliance with, even if not a part of, the discussions about language that were happening in post- and anti-colonial literatures. But these other languages disappear from my work at the turn of the century. If I were a biographical self-critic, I could attribute this to moving from Hawai'i. But I moved to two places

that also are richly multilingual and full of colonial histories, New York City and the Bay Area. So it is not that. I think there was, and is, something different in the aesthetic air. I continue to ask myself about this air and whether it, and my work, might also have been part of the turn to plain speech during the reign of Bush.

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## Notes

- 1 I received extensive help with and argumentation about this article from David Buuck, Steve Evans, Bill Luoma, Sandra Simonds, Charles Weigl, Danielle Igra, and Stephanie Young. My biggest debt is to Eirik Steinhoff, who challenged much in an earlier draft and provoked a lot of last minute rewriting. A first draft of this paper was written for Capital Poetics at Cornell U; thank you Joshua Clover for the incentive to begin. None of these people should be held responsible for any errors.  
See “Ego Pluribus Unum” by Robert Lalasz for more discussion about the international distribution and US reception of this publication.
- 2 Frances Stonor Saunders in *The Cultural Cold War: The CIA and the World of Arts and Letters* documents this in great detail.
- 3 Although this too is complicated. The position “Consultant in Poetry to the Library of Congress,” in existence since 1937, became “Poet Laureate Consultant in Poetry to the Library of Congress” in 1985.
- 4 There are few meaningful poems in US literature that are as much about the complicated intersection between nationalism and privatization as “The Gift Outright,” which overwrites Native American presence and naturalizes the relationship between European immigrants and land ownership.
- 5 Dana Gioia in *Disappearing Ink* talks of beginning a reading on September 12 with Auden’s poem.
- 6 See *National Endowment for the Arts Appropriations History*.
- 7 Gioia’s preface states at least three times that the book is not an “official” government publication. He writes: “It is not an official publication” (xi); “The Department of Defense played no role in selecting the contents of the book” (xiv); “Someone suggested the book be marketed as the first ‘official’ account of the war, but ‘official’ is exactly what *Operation Homecoming* is not” (xv). He also claims that “there is something in *Operation Homecoming* to support every viewpoint on the war—whatever the political stance” (xiv). But he is, as one might imagine, exaggerating. While there is some talk about the horrors of war, there is little analysis that connects the recent wars to US imperialism, an analysis that one might expect from an anthology promising to represent every viewpoint on the war.
- 8 The Poetry Foundation has released their 2009 tax returns on their website. The numbers are somewhat fascinating, although I am unable to draw many conclusions from them. Barr made \$237,749 (which is high for a president of a not for profit, especially one who does not have to raise money but unsurprising in the context of the Poetry Foundation’s budget). The support staff for the Foundation

- is about \$403,000. Otherwise, the largest of their expenditures was \$1,835,000 which was spent on “educational and public programs.” Poetry Out Loud received a major part of this money. Other notable donations: The Academy of American Poets at \$10,000; American Public Media (they produce Keillor’s products) at \$84,000; Poetry Society of America at \$10,000; Friends of Lorine Niedecker at \$10,000; and WETA (producers of The NewsHour with Jim Lehrer) at \$200,197.
- 9 John Stehr in “Ruth Lilly’s relatives seek new financial controls” also mentions this. And C J Laity writes on his blog: “Questions would soon arise whether or not Lilly indeed intended to give such an outrageous amount of money to one single poetry organization, since she couldn’t walk, had a feeding tube and had trouble comprehending when her “guardian” signed off on it. It has been speculated that she actually intended to give one million dollars to one hundred different ‘poetry magazines’ but that her family, who would eventually be awarded guardianship, misunderstood what she was trying to communicate. One source, who quotes an Appellate Court’s published opinion, claims that there were actually as many as twenty different sophisticated wills drafted for Ruth Lilly, wills that involved charitable trusts and limited liability companies, but her guardians believed that executing the most recent will would be too complicated and would involve too much work and too much risk. According to the source, her guardians took advantage of an Indiana law that allows for the creation of an estate plan for a ‘protected person.’ They honored only one will, a will that was written in 1982. When the will that *was* honored was written, Lilly’s intention was to donate a percentage of her estate estimated at \$5 million to Poetry Magazine. However, when it was finally put into motion, it was twenty years later, and Lilly’s fortune had grown by 1000%, thus turning Poetry Magazine’s percentage into an unintended, shocking amount of money.”
- 10 There is an interesting discussion of this case in an anonymous pamphlet called *This Rhymeless Nation*.
- 11 Also hired was Danielle Chapman, editor of *Poetry* Christian Wiman’s wife. See the Poetry Foundation’s “Related Parties Statement.”
- 12 This is also discussed in Ron Grossman’s “A poetic clash over millions in cash.”
- 13 Kathryn Kranhold discusses this in “Big Electricity Trader Defaulted in June.”
- 14 In “Bennington Means Business.” (letter response) in the *New York Times*, Barr takes responsibility for this decision.
- 15 In a 2005 press release, the Poetry Foundation claims that over seventy newspapers ran the column. <http://www.poetryfoundation.org/downloads/121205.pdf>.

- 16 This is an aside, but I think Barr is wrong here. The legacy of modernism shows up in contemporary experimental traditions such as language writing which has had limited impact upon MFA programs.
- 17 Weirdly, an NEA follow up study, "Reading on Rise," shows reading rising dramatically. The NEA uses this as evidence of the success of Gioia's programs like Poetry Out Loud. See "Data and Methodology" in the *Reading on the Rise* publication for some discussion about how the two surveys differed.
- 18 Collins also regularly intersects with Barr and the Poetry Foundation. Barr and Collins have been on the board of the Poetry Society of America (before the Poetry Foundation the PSA was the most prominent atheistically conservative poetry arts organization). Collins blurbed Barr's second book, *Grace*. Collins, Poet Laureate for two terms during the Bush administration, also has a long history of prizes from *Poetry* magazine. His agent's website lists the Oscar Blumenthal Prize, the Bess Hokin Prize, the Frederick Bock Prize, and the Levinson Prize, all from *Poetry*. Collins is also the inaugural recipient of the Mark Twain Prize for Humor in Poetry from the Poetry Foundation.
- 19 See her "Why I Refused the National Medal for the Arts."
- 20 Kaplan Page Harris, for instance, in "Causes, Movements, Poets," points to another example of poetry's activist possibility at the time: the "benefit" readings that are advertised in the seventies in the bay area journal *Poetry Flash*. Harris lists around twenty-two benefit readings between 1973-1980 in the bay area alone. There were readings for farm workers, for women, for the People's Community School, for the Greek resistance, for stricter regulation of nuclear power plants, for the prisoners of San Quentin, etc.
- 21 And yet Casanova's analysis does not entirely describe the complications of US literary nationalism and its oxymoronic relationship with privatization. Her focus is so on Europe, with its more singular and distinctive national traditions. It does not give much attention to the way that immigrant or cultural nationalist traditions might also be competing within a nation for global attention, even as they define themselves against a dominant national tradition. James English, in *The Economy of Prestige*, like Casanova, examines the global fight for various literary spoils and cultural capital with a focus on the literary prize (rather than the national tradition, although these, of course, overlap). English argues that Casanova's model does not directly apply to the US. He writes, "The game now involves strategies of subnational and extranational articulation, with success falling to those who manage to take up positions of double and redoubled advantage: positions of local prestige



- bringing them global prestige of the sort that reaffirms and reinforces their local standing” (312). I like English’s use of the terms subnational and extranational because for the most part these poetries do not really earn the term antinationalist. Indicative of how complicated the nuances can be in this relationship between poetry and nationalism is that many of the cultural institutions created to support and cultivate movement poetries end up dependent on funds from not only the NEA but also from various state governments.
- 22 There are several versions of this poem (and when it is reprinted *Message to Aztlán : selected writings of Rodolfo “Corky” Gonzales* it is with a different Spanish version). In this article, I am citing the 1967 edition. I have, thus, used “Joaquin,” not “Joaquín,” except when I am citing the 1972 Bantam edition. And I am calling the poem *I am Joaquin* (Crusade for Justice edition), not *I am Joaquín/Yo Soy Joaquín* (Bantam edition).
- 23 Before 1987, seven states have some sort of legislation that privileges English. By 1990, another ten have joined the trend. Currently twenty-six states have some sort of Official English legislation (thirty if you count “English plus”). What all this legislation means finally is not much more than a statement of support for racism and xenophobia, since most of these states still have to produce government documents in other languages. I am indebted to James Crawford’s work in *Hold Your Tongue: Bilingualism and the Politics of English Only* (New York: Addison-Wesley Company, 1992) and *At War with Diversity: U. S. Language Policy in an Age of Anxiety* (Bristol: Multilingual Matters, 2000) for this data.
- 24 Immigration rises dramatically in the 90s. Foreign born residents are at a low of 4.7 percent in 1970. After 1970, this number steadily rises. And with it the number of US residents who declare that they speak a language other than English at home increases dramatically. In 1990 that number is 32 million. By 2000, that number is 47 million.
- 25 I have discussed these developments in greater detail in “The 90s” *boundary 2* (2009), 36.3, 159-182.
- 26 Thomas Byers in “The *Closing of the American Line*: Expansive Poetry and Ideology” points out that Story Line and its crowd as having “both in aesthetics and cultural criticism, both implicitly, and surprisingly often, explicitly, the preponderance of its utterances range from moderately conservative to virulently reactionary” (398).
- 27 Collins in his blurb calls *Grace* “a funky *Finnegans Wake* in verse with palm trees.” But I think Collins is missing the point. *Finnegans Wake* is, if it is anything, a

thoughtful and complicated exploration of localism in a time of globalism. It is a defense of linguistic independence, not an attack on it.

- 28 See Dana Goodyear, “The Moneyed Muse” and Kent Johnson’s “Blackface and the Poetry Foundation?”



## CONTRIBUTORS

**Rebecca Beasley** (b. 1971), Associate Professor, Faculty of English Language and Literature, University of Oxford

**Claudia Benthien** (b. 1965), Full Professor, Department of Language, Literature and Media I, Hamburg University

**Caspar Eric Christensen** (b. 1987), poet and MA in Comparative literature, University of Copenhagen

**James Day** (b. 1985), Postdoctoral Fellow, Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts

**Peter Dayan** (b. 1958), Professor of Word and Music Studies, University of Edinburgh, and Visiting (Obel) Professor, Department of Culture and Global Studies, University of Aalborg

**Mikkel Krause Frantzen** (b. 1983), PhD and external lecturer, Department of Arts and Cultural Studies, University of Copenhagen

**Matti Kangaskoski** (b. 1983), PhD, University of Helsinki

**Anne Karhio** (b. 1975), Irish Research Council/Marie Marie Skłodowska-Curie ELEVATE postdoctoral fellow, Moore Institute, National University of Ireland Galway

**Ole Karlsen** (b. 1954), Full Professor, Department of Scandinavian Studies, Inland Norway University of Applied Sciences

**Stefan Kjerkegaard** (b. 1973), Associate Professor, School of Communication and Culture, Aarhus University

**Peter Stein Larsen** (b. 1959), Full Professor, Department of Culture and Global Studies, Aalborg University

**Louise Mønster** (b. 1972), Associate Professor, Department of Culture and Global Studies, Aalborg University

**Michael Karlsson Pedersen** (b. 1984), Part-time Lecturer, Department for the Study of Culture, University of Southern Denmark

**Dan Ringgaard** (b. 1963), Full Professor, School of Communication and Culture, Aarhus University

**Andrew Michael Roberts** (b. 1958), Professor of Modern Literature, School of Humanities, University of Dundee

**Hans Kristian S. Rustad** (b. 1973), Associate Professor, Department of Linguistics and Scandinavian Studies, University of Oslo

**Juliana Spahr** (b. 1969), poet

**Morten Søndergaard** (b. 1964), poet

**Mette-Marie Zacher Sørensen** (b. 1983), Assistant Professor, School of Communication and Culture, Aarhus University

This book's inquiry into contemporary poetry takes two directions. The first direction leads to several close examinations of digital, multi-modal and performative poetry, and how perspectives or perhaps just an awareness of a new media landscape recondition our understanding of an old literary genre. The second direction expands into considerations of contextual theories of affect and atmosphere, to materiality studies and towards the heterogenic field of politics, for example feminism, minority studies, digital and environmental humanities or cosmopolitanism.

Hence, the question the articles in this volume pose is whether this match of *mediatization* and *new sensibilities* can be seen as a major novel development in the history of poetry. With the title *Dialogues on Poetry* we wish to signal that the answer to this question can only be pursued through the ongoing process involved in defining, discussing and describing how poetry responds to the substantial changes of our media-saturated circumstances and environments.