

Appendix A: How Language Writing Got Its Period

Poetic theories develop out of choices and assumptions that are neither arbitrary nor inevitable. The Language poets made particular assumptions about the properties and conventions of poetry and its texts that have led to one of the most successful theories to have recently emerged in literature. They posited that the major phenomenon of poetry that needs to be accounted for is the adaptation of poetry to the larger language environment. The effect of language on poetry, especially changes in poetry fashions, was explained in terms of the political affiliations of the poets. No aspect of human life has escaped Language writing theory, modified in various ways to apply to politics, economics, the history of ideas, science, philosophy, and even the other arts.

All theories, however, carry with them a particular viewpoint, a way of seeing phenomena that produces a sharp focus on certain aspects of reality and blurred vision elsewhere. A striking paradox that has emerged from Language writing's way of approaching poetic issues is that poems, which we take to be primary components of the textual environment, have faded away to the point where they no longer exist as fundamental and irreducible units of our art. Much innovative poetry has replaced poems as the central element of poetry with the components of poems. What's more, there is no lack of highly persuasive books whose objective is to demonstrate why poems are not what they seem to be—integrated entities with existence and nature of their own—but complex language machines controlled by the linguistic components carried within them, bearers of the historical record of the literary tendency to which the organism belongs. Though this is certainly not what was anticipated, this is in fact the sharp focus that has developed from the theoretical assumptions of Language Poets about the nature of language, and there is no denying the remarkable insights that have accompanied this illumination of the component level of poems.

There is always a price to pay for excessive preoccupation with one aspect of reality. Contemporary poetry has come to occupy an extreme position in the spectrum of the arts, dominated by political explanations in terms of the development of linguistic properties and an associated single-level polemic reductionism to linguistic products. Visual arts, on the other hand, have developed explanations of different levels of reality, expressive and photographic, in terms of theories appropriate to these levels, such as abstract expressionism for the behavior of mind and minimalism for the behavior of seeing. Even in the presence of New Criticism as a theory of poems as distinctive entities in their own right, with a characteristic type of dynamic order and organization, the rise of Language writing has resulted in the poem's fading (if not disappearance) from the basic conceptual structure of contemporary literature.

Poems have succumbed to the onslaught of an overwhelming linguistic reductionism just as organisms have disappeared from mainstream biological thought. They too have succumbed to the onslaught of an overwhelming linguistic reductionism.

Here we face another curious consequence of new writing's way of looking at poetry: despite the power of language-centered poetry to reveal the grammatical essence of poems, the large-scale aspects of literature remain unexplained, including the value of poetry. There is "no clear evidence...for the gradual emergence of any new poetics," says one of the most eminent of the contemporary Language poets. "New poetries simply appear upon the poetry scene, persist for various periods of time, and then become graduate studies." So Language writing's assumption that the changes to reading, poetic styles, and schools in the political / linguistic environment is a consequence of the differences in poets' political assumptions and reading of prior poetries appears to be without significant support. Some other process is responsible for the emergent properties of a poetic tendency, those distinctive features that separate one group of poets from another—New York School and Beat, San Francisco and Black Mountain, Iowa and other identity poetics. Clearly something is missing from this poetry in that it is not capturing the attention of major media reviewers and readers outside the poets and graduate students who make it their business. (The Language poets' explanation that the reviewers' own political and economic affiliations prevent them from seeing or revealing the truth of the matter is too potentially self-serving to act as proof even to the extent that it is true.) It appears that Language writing theory works for the small-scale aspects of poetry: it can explain the variations and adaptations within a single writer that produce a style. The large-scale difference of form between the groups of writers that are the foundation of literary classification systems seem to require another principle than language writing operating on small variations, some process that gives rise to distinctly different forms of poetry. This is the problem of emergent order in literature, the origins of the novel or the sonnet, which has always been one of the primary foci of attention in literature.

It is here that new theories, themselves recently emerged within mathematics and physics, offer significant insights into the origins of poetic order and form. Whereas physicists have traditionally dealt with "simple" systems in the sense that they are made of few *types* of components, and observed macroscopic (large-scale) order is then explained in terms of uniform interactions between these components, poets deal with systems (languages and grammars) that are hideously complex, with thousands of different types of linguistic structures from different uses of language from poems to ball park insults all interacting in different ways. Or so it seems on the linguistic / grammatical level. However, what is being recognized within the "sciences of complexity" as studies of these highly diverse

systems are called, is that there *are* characteristic types of order that emerge from the interactions of many different components. And the reason is not unlike what happens in “simple” physical systems. Despite the extreme diversity of prosodies, their interactions are limited, so that distinctive types of order arise, especially in relation to the large-scale aspects of structure or morphology (sonnet, ode, haiku), and the patterns over time that constitute poetic tropes and genres which are distinctive (epic, lyric, formal experiment). A particularly striking property of these complex systems is that chaotic behavior at one level of activity—random words selected from the dictionary—can give rise to distinctive order at the next level—morphology, phonemics, or conceptualization. (For example, experiments by Bernstein and myself with the 100 most common English language words show how recognizable and identifiable meaning arises from seemingly random intentions.) This has resulted in one of the primary refrains of complex studies: order emerges out of chaos. The source of large scale order in poetry may therefore be located in a distinctive type of complexity that can be described in terms of the computational capacity of the interacting components rather than their dynamic behavior. These terms, computational and dynamic, actually reflect different emphases and are not in conflict with one another, although prior theories of literature and art have attempted to make a big deal of the distinction to validate artistic epistemology in opposition to the history of science. What has developed from the widespread use of computers to explore the dynamic potential of interacting systems that can process information, such as textual analysis, is a new theory of dynamic systems collectively referred to as the sciences of complexity, from which have developed significant branches of science and art such as digital poetics.

In this book I explore the consequences of these ideas as they apply to our understanding of the emergence of form in poetry, particularly the origin and nature of morphological characteristics that distinguish different types or genres of writing. These questions overlap those addressed by Language poets, but they focus on the large-scale, or global, aspects of poetic form rather than small-scale, local adaptations such as Projective Verse or New Sentences. As a result there is no necessary conflict between the approaches. Neither is there conflict with the insights of modern poetry at the “molecular” levels of poems. These contribute to the construction of dynamic theories from which emerge higher-level properties of poetic form and the integrated behavior of poems. Conflict arises only when there is confusion over what constitutes poetic reality, and this has historically been the basis of battles among poets. I take the position that poems are as real, as fundamental, and as irreducible as the components out of which they are made and the larger systems which they feed. They are a distinct level of emergent literary order, and the one to which we most immediately relate.

The recognition of the fundamental nature of poems, connecting directly with our own natures as irreducible beings (which Language writing and its cultural precursors in Post-Structuralism have brought into question), has significant consequences regarding our attitude toward the literary realm.

It is here that another aspect of poetic theory comes to the fore, one that is often regarded as secondary to the cultural realities poetry uncovers. Language writing, like all theories, has distinct political associations that are familiar from the use of terms such as poetic production, economies of poetry, instrumentality. Such political references are extremely important. They give meaning to poetic theories, and they encourage particular attitudes to the processes described—in the case of Language writing, to the nature of the poetic process predominantly driven by competitive political processes, linguistic fragmentation, political economy, and alienation. This makes sense to us in terms of our experience of our wider culture and its values. Both culture and nature then become rooted in similar ways of seeing the world, which are shaped at a deeper level than politics, by the cultural myths from which the politics arise. The consequences of this perspective have emerged particularly clearly in the post-war period, especially in view of Language writing's significant contribution to prosody, poems as socially constituted collections of prosodic components: technique as content. The criterion of value here is purely functional: either poetry styles work or they don't. They have no intrinsic value.

I shall argue that this view of styles or schools of poetry arises from Language writing's limited and inadequate view of the nature of poems, a too literal understanding of prior writing as a set of signs with their political "l=u=g=g=a=g=e". The sciences of complexity lead to the construction of a dynamic theory of poems as the primary source of emergent properties of poetry that have been revealed throughout literary history, the interaction of one frame of reference with another and the cross pollination of genres of situation, writing, and thought. These properties are generated during the process of writing the poem, the development of the complex form of the completed poem from simple beginnings such as an experience or a quotation from another writer. During the writing process, emergent order is generated by distinctive types of dynamic process in which the linguistic components and social dynamics of the author's condition play a significant but limited role. The act of writing and the life of the writer are sources of emergent literary properties, and it is the absence of a theory of its outcome, poems, that includes this basic generative process that has resulted in both the disappearance of poems from poetry and the failure to account for the origin of the emergent characteristics that identify poems and styles. Many people have recognized this limitation of Language-centered poetics, and my own arguments are utterly dependent on their demonstration of the path to a more balanced poetry. None of these critics to my knowledge have been able to present any significant new alternative, but only hearkened back to other

extremities, such as Modernism, Romanticism, or Classicism, that now seem tame by comparison. And as a result the fragmented poetics of the post-war period have been viewed as competing in a Darwinian set of graduate courses, poetry series, and grumbled asides which have limited poetry to a series of cults. No one has reestablished the poem as the dynamic vehicle of literary emergence now that the poem has been extended beyond its limited New Criticism definition. Once this extended poem is included in a view of the writing process, the focus shifts from the competitive economics of poetry production to creative emergence as the central quality of the evolutionary process of poetry. Because poems are the primary loci of this distinctive quality of poetry, they become again the fundamental units of poetry, as they were for pre-Modernist poetics. Signs and methodology continue to play significant roles in this expanded poetry, but they become parts of a more comprehensive dynamical theory of poetry that is focused on the dynamics of emergent process.

The consequences of this altered perspective are considerable, particularly in relation to the status of poems, their creative potential, and the qualities of poetry for the reader. Poems cease to be mere commodities packaged for consumption and assume an intrinsic value, having worth in and out of themselves, like organisms. Such a realization arises from an altered understanding of the nature of poems as centers of meaning both lexical and grammatical, connected with a causal agency that cannot be described as mechanical or merely the sum of its parts. It is relational order among components, which Language poets have mostly left to genre, automatic mental processes, or a fixed algorithm, that matters as much as phonemic particles in poetic processes, so that emergent qualities can be described as well as quantities. This consequence extends to social structure, where relationships and values are of primary significance. As a result, values enter fundamentally into the appreciation of the nature of writing, and poetry takes on the properties of a science of qualities. This is not in conflict with the art of quantities and evaluation, but it does have a different focus and emphasis. It is their combination which produces poetry.

Language writing criticizes the poetic process in terms that emphasize productivity, social Darwinism, and political process as the driving forces behind the creation of poetic intent. These are certainly aspects of the remarkable drama that includes our own poetry. But it is a very incomplete and limited story, both artistically and politically, based on an inadequate view of poems; and it invites us to act in a limited way as evolved writers in relation to the larger social and artistic environment, which includes other cultures and poetics. These limitations have contributed to some of the positive values of Language writing as well as the difficulties we now face with subjective *and* amorphous poetry emerging from the B-schools (Brown, Bard, Buffalo), decreasing standards of poetic intensity, and loss of communal values. But Language writing shortchanges our poetic aspirations. We are every bit as oriented to product as we are to

process; as intent on content as on non-instrumental grammar and epistemologies. And we are poetically grounded in relationships, which operate at all the different levels of our beings, as the basis of our natures as agents of creative generativity, a property we share with all previous poetries. These are not romantic yearnings and poetic ideals. They arise from a rethinking of our poetic natures that is emerging from the sciences of complexity and is leading toward a poetry of qualities, which may help in our efforts to reach a more balanced relationship with other members of our potential readership.

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The essay above is copied almost word-for-word from the introduction to Brian Goodwin's *How the Leopard Changed Its Spots*. With only about 100 word substitutions (largely nouns) a biology text becomes a poetry text. I invite you to read the original and compare their intentions and results.

Can scientific or artistic disciplines insist on their unique epistemological basis when there is so little separating their descriptions? Does the fact that this piece is written by word substitution from a subject related only by the fact that they are both linguistic systems invalidate its conclusions? Where does originality begin? What is requisite for validity or actuality? Do the apparent rationality of the discourse and reasonableness of its conclusions raise questions about the validity of the Goodwin piece, in that such a job can be done to it? Or does the fact that both systems can, with few modifications, be described in the same way say something about the validity of disciplinary distinctions in the arts and sciences? Can this experiment in substitution be used as a critique of exemplary writing, viz Gertrude Stein, or is it the proof that all human discourse is inevitably related, perhaps more than we in our *special* worlds would like to think? I suspect the latter to be the case.

Whether you agree with all the conclusions of this poetry/biology essay created by an unusual process is not critical. What I think we can agree upon is that the above is a credible essay, originated in one discipline and read in another. While you may agree with only some of the conclusions, the interpenetration or leaking across disciplinary boundaries has to be accepted not as an accidental phenomenon but as a result of the similarity of thought processes, structures, ideas, and conclusions in both disciplines.

Interpenetration (relationship) occurs both intentionally and inadvertently as ideas cross in our minds. Interpenetration highlights the commonality of environmental structures of thought, language, and biosphere that make up human and non-human space. Although interpenetration will not be convincing

for all texts, it will be true for environmentally related themes and I suspect any dynamic interaction. (See the discussion of exosymbiosis in “Tagmosis/Prosody (Extending Parataxis”).) Such thinking is primarily a product of nouns, things and their relations to the rest of the text. In fact, humanity’s relationship to things and the actions that result from those relationships are the central issues for changing the environment. Our focus today on what our actions with things will do for us is what must change. Some verbs will occupy the same dimension in various disciplines, but few modifiers.

Goodwin’s work proposes values from complexity rather than linear thought approximating complexity. He describes the self-organizing composition of life. How far can we take this line of thinking? Arts and sciences have for generations, perhaps since renaissance humanism, focused on differences to create value, but we will benefit now from paying attention to similarities in order to avoid divergent perceptions of conditions that are really the same. The environmental crisis demands such convergence. Yet since difference generates more immediate responses, it will be difficult to create a taxonomy in which both the immediate difference and the longer-term similarity can be accommodated.