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"Post-neo-avant-ism: Is there an 'out there' out there any longer?"

Abstract:

This paper identifies aporias in contemporary critical and anthologizing notice given to new poetry. The assertion of a new de-centred plurality in English literatures, for instance, presents such a vast range that the canon-making selections in major anthologies reduce and absorb this pluralism into an ongoing canonical narrative of historical change. No real revolution or true diversity can arise against such forces. This paper sets out to test whether new forms of poetry incorporated into a modernist history of innovation and formal experimentation will fatally disrupt the unfinished project of modernity as identified by Jurgen Habermas. New print poetry, new live performance poetry and the emerging digital poetry are briefly surveyed, developing an argument for digital poetry as a sign that there has been a cultural disruption which has discarded traditional genre boundaries in literature and historical boundaries between art forms in favour of conceptual explorations of paradoxical possibilities opened by the extremes of modernism. Paradoxically, this utterly new direction for poetry and art, schematized here through the use of a Klein group chart, might re-connect art and literature with a contemporary world and rescue the unfinished project of modernity.

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If, as Jahan Ramazani writes in the introduction to the *Norton Anthology of Contemporary Poetry* (published 2003), 'Our time is characterised by its pluralism, by its welter and crosscurrents', and further that, '[n]o longer can any single group or individual claim centrality, since contemporary poets in English have proliferated a vast array of idioms, forms and movements' (2003 vol. 2: xliii), then the vastness of this plurality (which we might set against notions of an elitist canon embodied in representative anthologies) makes it impossible for an individual to comprehend its range. Selection becomes both necessary and inevitable. This process of selection in the Norton contemporary anthologies of poetry and the recent 1400-page Australian compendium, the *Macquarie PEN Anthology of Australian Literature* (Jose 2009) set for us new chapters in a narrative of the modern canon, a narrative that broadens out, paradoxically, into one of an emerging and bewildering plurality, as Ramazani identifies in his introduction. With Ramazani's confident absorption and accommodation of the new it is as if no revolution can be effective against the continuing project of modernism.

The *avant garde*, the always-new-and-revolutionary, in turn has faced its contradictions bravely, from the brief self-immolating flare of Dadaists to the longer burn of the Surrealists, to the British vortex of *Blast*'s oxymoronic 'violent structure', to Frank O'Hara's self-parodying 1961 stillbirth manifesto of Personism where he asks, 'What can we expect of Personism? (this is getting good, isn't it?) Everything, but we won't get it' (cited in Ramazani 2003 vol. 2: 1072-4). The *avant garde*, in O'Hara's version, has no war to fight except against itself. Is every new movement touted as a revolution doomed to be recognised as another ephemeral, self-obsessed novelty, or at best another historicized change by increment? How post *is* post-modernism?—does it represent a radical shift to a time-after?

In the early 1980s, Jurgen Habermas responded to what he saw as 'an emotional current of our times' (1749), which presented its post-modernity as an anti-modernity, a true break from the past. He drew attention to a history of notions of modernity, noting that its one enduring characteristic has been a call for return to classical values. From the time of the French Enlightenment, however, he argued, the idea of being modern by looking back to the ancients was replaced, first by nineteenth century Romanticism's idealization of a utopian medieval period (an impulse that survives today in the sub-literary realm of fantasy fiction), then by an abstract, radicalised opposition between tradition and the present, epitomised by the Surrealists of the early to mid twentieth century. A new value was placed upon 'the transitory, the elusive and the ephemeral' (1750) for it became of supreme importance to locate oneself in the present moment (the French impressionist and post-impressionist movements in art at the end of the nineteenth century, the stream-of-consciousness writing practised by Breton, Stein and others, New York action painting from the 1940s to the 60s and the existential fictions of Sartre and Camus are perhaps central manifestations of this impulse). In his essay Habermas was responding to the rise of what he considered a neoconservative movement labeling itself as post-modern. This movement exposes the limitations and hypocrisies of the project of modernity, a project so beset by its own idealism that it is unlikely ever to be any more than incomplete. Dating it from the eighteenth century, Habermas delineates the project of modernity in terms that are familiar to us: '… to develop objective science, universal morality and law, and autonomous art [and] to utilize this accumulation of specialized culture for the enrichment of everyday life' (1754). By the twentieth century these aims were rendered feeble and perhaps disabled, devalued and dishonoured partly by the removal of

science, law and art from everyday life (from what Habermas calls our 'life-world') into the distant bureaucratic realms of autonomous experts. Habermas asks if there is a way out for the project of modernity, or whether the Dionysiac force (the ecstatic welter) of post-modern thought will cement a cultural disillusionment.

No living situation is ever as simple or as clear as a schematized view of it suggests, though I intend to launch into just such an exercise towards the end of this paper. In mainstream culture, supported by government, bureaucratic and philanthropic sources, it would seem that the project of modernity does survive, at least as a narrative that shapes perceptions. Ramazani characterises contemporary poetry, that is poetry from the early 1950s onwards, as more personal, engaging in looser, more organic kinds of aesthetic structure, as a poetry showing a more democratic approach to language and models of discourse outside literature, as a poetry exploiting the splintered politics of identity to allow ethnic, national, sexual, and gender-based groups to emerge. The terms he uses (personal, democratic, politics, national, sexual, gender), which avoid the post-modern theoretical jargon of recent literary theory, connect this poetry to a life-world which still involves questions of morality and value. Ramazani's list does seem to be a description of pluralism but it holds this pluralism within a broad history of modernism. As editor of an anthology with global cultural and educational influence, he has no interest in denying an established canon or denying selected new entrants into this elite gathering. Recognizing the new in this manner does not require confronting politics or philosophies of rejection, repression, radical revision or revolutionary destruction. Included in the anthology, nevertheless, are poets and manifestoes that do advocate throwing over the past. It is part of the democratic editorial selection policy to include, for instance, Bernstein's blunt 1995 poem beginning, 'It's not my/business to describe anything' (vol. 2: 914). Revolutions become museum pieces almost before the ink is dry on their manifestoes.

Similarly, in the introduction to the *Macquarie PEN Anthology*, David McCooey describes the most recent poetry included as a 'new lyricism' which demonstrates that 'the lyric mode remains viable in part because it is so often placed under pressure. Poets such as Kinsella, Emma Lew, Anthony Lawrence and Jill Jones routinely offer uncanny versions of the world that are both lyrical and suspicious of the lyrical impulse' (McCooey 2009: 46). This is a reasonable proposition, but dictated not merely by the evidence of the poetry, for it is necessary to such historical anthologies that there be a thread or a narrative of change that holds past and present together.

Dana Gioia attempts a similar task in the *Hudson Review*, writing, like Ramazani and McCooey, in the early years of the twenty-first century and attempting like them to describe the new poetry. Gioia, however, wants us to believe, 'We are currently living in the midst of a massive cultural revolution' (21). Gioia's first claim is that we are at the end of print culture and thus by implication anthologies such as the Norton volumes and the *Macquarie PEN* have become irrelevant. Gioia grounds his claim in a sociological fact that perhaps carries more anecdotal than actual weight, namely that people no longer invest significant time in reading, while they are spending more and more time with electronic and digital visual media. This is not an aesthetic revolution of poetics in the usual sense, because it is not driven by an *avant garde* movement, and it is not driven from within the cultural, academic or critical world of poetry. Gioia identifies the contemporary poetry he has set out to describe as first of all popular, and popular as performance (citing rap, poetry slams, spoken-word events and even 'cowboy poetry'—an American version of bush ballads). Gioia claims these new forms of

poetry comprise a phenomenon marked by diversity, but paradoxically they reveal a movement unified by its concern for traditional matters of rhyme, metre, alliteration and musicality. This popular poetry movement, generated apparently by a new bohemia of unemployed or under-employed graduates from creative writing programs, is having its effect, Gioia argues, on more literary poetry. As a result both speech and print (performance and publication) are now equally important to any serious new poet's career. This will require an ability to communicate with diverse audiences, while the traditional virtues of good poetry will still be the same ones they have always been: the virtues of being 'concise, immediate, emotive, memorable, and musical' (49). Again, this revolution, after Gioia's extended discussion, appears not to be a revolution at all, but a surprisingly predictable mix of the new and the old. The narrative has taken a turn but it is still recognisably part of the same history that produced the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*.

Outside the diversity recognized by the major anthologies and outside the blooming culture of pop, rap, slam and spoken word, there is another mode of contemporary poetry. This is the new world of technology-based poetic creation, where the digital and electronic environment of the internet provides the material, the medium and sometimes the language for poetry. *Media Poetry: An International Anthology* was published in 2007 by Intellect Books in the UK and USA to mark the arrival of another 'radical re-imagining of poetry's expressive power' (8). Again, this radical change is, if Eduardo Kac's introduction is to be believed, not a revolution in the usual sense, for as Kac notes, this new poetry is no more than a continuation of art and literature's enduring interest in formal innovation. 'The poems are the focus of the reader's attention,' he writes, 'but the poems themselves, by the very technological nature that makes them what they are, cannot be directly presented in a print compendium' (9). Eduardo Kac makes the same argument that innovative poets have been making for more than two hundred years, namely that the eruption of a new form of poetry is testament to its relevance to contemporary life, and that the perceived malaises of contemporary life can be transformed and we can be liberated through the poet's application of imagination, 'pushing language into a new and exciting domain of human experience' (Kac 2007: 10). In October 1800, making similar complaints about the malaise of his contemporary life, William Wordsworth declared the need for poets to transform its worst manifestations. Writing capable of purifying and strengthening readers' affections and enlightening their understanding was a service especially needed in his present day, he wrote, 'for a multitude of causes, unknown to former times are now acting with a combined force to blunt the discriminating powers of the mind, and, unfitting it for all voluntary exertion, to reduce it to a state of almost savage torpor' (449). In fact, both Wordsworth and Kac articulate the project of modernity as Habermas has described it. Kac's introduction, like Ramazani's, McCooey's, and like Gioia's long overview of performance-based poetry, proposes that there is still a strong narrative to connect the present with an enduring project of modernity.

I wish to propose here that, despite Eduardo Kac's espousal of a continuing tradition of formal experiment, the new digital poetry has radically altered the meaning and production of poetry, that there has been a significant break with the past, one which has almost gone unnoticed.

Over the past ten years a number of surprising emanations on the world wide web have been called poetry. For example, there are the following sites, which have been chosen almost randomly and do not do justice to what is out there:

http://archives.chbooks.com/online_books/fidget/index.html (a web version of Kenneth Goldsmith's poetic work, *Fidget*, which originates from a written record of bodily sensations through the twenty-four hours of June 16, 1997 [Bloomsday]; Marjorie Perloff has called this *poésie verité* (22))

http://www.bbc.co.uk/arts/poetry/ondisplay/lemonade.html (video poetry: 'Lemonade' by Ingrid Ankerson, an animation of changing shapes with phrases and lines of words floating through a simplified landscape; it proceeds not by word association so much as by visual associations)

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jQEXqlGSikw (ideovideo poetry, from Jorge Luis Antonio, exhibited in 2008 at Cerveira; I am not sure what to make of this hypnotic but indecipherable object spinning as if in anti-gravity)

http://www.spidertangle.net/liquidtext.com/brainstorm.html (Richard Kostelanetz's 'liquidtext': something like a palimpsest or a water damaged book, this poem is as much image as it is text. In fact the slowly transforming text is a visual effect or suggestion, not an invitation to read)

How is it possible that these verbal/visual experiments can be called poetry, unless poetry has become such a loose and fluid term that almost anything goes? Does 'poetry' now have to serve such heterogeneous ends that it is in danger of collapsing as a genre? Is it still possible that these manifestations are part of that narrative of the new, which connects present to past by an evolutionary, incrementally reformist, or even quasi-revolutionary history? That is, can modernism incorporate this new poetry in a narrative that might link it to, for instance, the typographic innovations of Mallarmé and E. E. Cummings, the production of concrete poetry on typewriters, the visual poetry of word processing programs, and the more recent resistant emergence of language poetry, showing that it is an heir to these movements? We look at these digital poems and we both do and don't recognize them as poetry; we come to doubt that we know what poetry is.

Yet we do know what poetry is, don't we? It is a historically and conventionally bounded mode of literature. It has its inner logic. Terry Eagleton does his best to encompass its history and its present practice when he defines poetry thus in his 2007 apology for poetry in our time: A poem is a fictional, verbally inventive moral statement in which it is the author, rather than the printer or word processor, who decides where the lines should end. (25)

He spends the next twenty-two pages of *How to Read a Poem* on explicating this definition, demonstrating both its historical nature and its immersion in the modernist project. Below is an extract from his justification for the inclusion of the term, moral, which points to experience taken from a 'particular angle':

Physiologists, for example, may be interested in the muscular contractions which caused my arm to rise in the air; political scientists in how many other people were voting on my side; aestheticians in the way this sudden motion set the light on my jacket sleeve dappling and shimmering; and philosophers in how free this arm movement could be said to be. But the moralist is interested in the values which informed my decision, the human ends it was intended to serve, the extent to which it might promote human welfare and the like. To this extent, we are all moralists; and artists, who necessarily deal in values and qualities, are no doubt more so than most. (28-9)

Eagleton's definition, so loyal to Habermas's project of modernity, is already a rearguard action, as I wish to argue from the previous examples of web poetry, and the schematic diagram below. The logic of the poetry he describes began to fail with the openly paradoxical form of free verse provocatively stylized by William Carlos Williams and the imagists, and was further undermined by the experiments of the Surrealists and their followers, including Ern Malley. The mid twentieth century calculator-computer printouts from William Burroughs, Edwin Morgan's 1968 sonnet of permutations on a sentence spoken by John Cage, Jackson Mac Low's poems produced by algorithms and the most recent web manifestations of poetry, all add further perplexing possibilities outside Eagleton's hopeful definition.

Poetry at the *avant garde* extremes of modernism's impulses comes to be defined by a set of negatives. It is no longer tied to language as a syntactical system of signs (and thus no longer necessarily verbally inventive within the logic of this descriptor), and no longer tied to communication, understood as socially functional speech (and thus no conscious or intentional author is necessarily responsible), and as a consequence no moral dimension needs to be present. The anagram-ic 1935 poem titled '[r-p-o-p-h-e-s-s-a-g-r]' by E. E. Cummings serves as an example of at its extreme *avant garde* moment:

        [r-p-o-p-h-e-s-s-a-g-r]

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        ,grasshopper;

        (Ramazani 2003 vol. 1: 552)

This poetry is neither syntactical language nor functional speech, and it identifies itself by these negatives. Diagrammatically it could be presented like this:

                Not-language + not-functional speech = poetry

Poetry is in this scheme a combination of exclusions. Poetry appears to be suspended between language, a naturally and universally occurring human behaviour, and its specific cultural use as functional speech. This poetry sought a position outside the opposition or perhaps the uneasy alliance between the natural and the cultural. Why it sought this position is a question beyond the scope of this paper, but one that might have a number of disturbing or manifesto-like answers.

Logically, however, this extreme of modernism leads to an expansion which can be depicted by what is called a Klein group or Klein four group (see Krauss 1998; Barbut 1970), a schematic presentation of the logic of an art form of interest to structuralist critics in the 1970s and 80s, but not as far as I know applied to the phenomenon of poetry before (the structure of the following chart owes its inspiration to a 1979 essay by Rosalind Krauss, titled 'Sculpture in the Expanded Field', reprinted in *The Anti-Aesthetic* (1998), edited by Hal Foster):

LANGUAGE **(a system of signs, and rules of syntax, metaphor, metonymy, etymology…)**	Borrowed modes: Pastiche, quotation, allusion: Louis Zukovsky, "poem beginning 'the'" (1928); Emma Lew, John Tranter	**FUNCTIONAL SPEECH** **(a means of securing knowledge, social organization, formal communication & problem-solving)**
Generative modes (unauthored): 'Language Poetry', sound poetry, algorithmic poetry, machine poetry, computer poetry, digital poetry, video & ideovideo poetry		Public sphere utterances that confound the use of the public sphere: Richard Tipping's poetry of signage; graffiti; spoken word performance
NOT-LANGUAGE / **NATURALLANGUAGE** **(Sounds, phonemes, rhythms, gestures that are not yet a language system)**	Autonomous sphere of modernist & *avant garde* poetry	**NOT-SPEECH SPEECH** **(Slang, argot, gnomic and paradoxical utterances, fragments of speech, self-talk, single words, rhymes, silence: speech without a social purpose …)**

New poetic possibilities are those paradoxical fields of practice that emerge between the extremes of language and not-language, speech and not-speech, not-language and not-speech, language and speech. The basic logical property of this group is that for each element in it there is an inverse element. Its four elements, picked out here in bold, can be understood by the possibilities in flipping your mattress at home (see http://mclaury.blogspot.com/2006/06/klein-four-finite-simple-group.html for an entertaining introduction). Negotiating positions *between* these possibilities are the logical fields of what

we might call extreme art, in this case poetry. A similar transformation has arisen in sculpture (as Krauss demonstrates in her article) and in other art forms.

What appears to be diversity is thus an exploration of the logic of possible positions for poetry given the logical endpoint modernism approached. There is in this view no continuing narrative of modernism, and perhaps there is a transformation of the project of modernity manifested in a movement through or across logical fields, which test concepts rather than genres, logical positions rather than moral values. It would seem that poetry, visual art, installations, happenings and performance art are implicating each other in this exercise, making traditional historical definitions of genres and modes of literature futile. Individual writers move between these logical positions, their commitment not to poetry, nor to a particular critique of it, but as exploratory responses to the possibilities opened by the logic of modernism. There is a strangeness to this, which is beyond descriptions of it as diversity.

One of the fascinating and compelling aspects of work being undertaken on the axis between language and not-language is the use of computers to generate language-like phenomena. The philosopher of consciousness, Daniel Dennett, has noted that the advent of the computer has placed in our hands a machine unlike any other in the history of human tool-making: 'computers are mindlike in ways that no earlier artifacts were: they can control processes that perform tasks that call for discrimination, inference, memory, judgment, anticipation; they are generators of new knowledge, finders of patterns—in poetry, astronomy, and mathematics, for instance—that heretofore only human beings could even hope to find' (6). Strangely enough, it seems to be poets who are working at these leading edges of the possibilities of authorless language.

And yet, for all its apparent chaos, its radical disruption of accepted conventions and genre boundaries, this new art—this new poetry— is perhaps reasserting the uncompromising nature of the project of modernity through its logical and rational purity.

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