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Sonogrammar: Gertrude Stein and the pulse of writing

Abstract:

A material phenomenon that interrelates time with space by way of repetition, rhythm is ‘*a patterning of energy simultaneously produced and perceived [...], tending toward regularity but complicated by constant variations and local inflections*’ (Attridge 1995, 3). French sociologist Henri Lefebvre held that the social world emerges out of rhythm: human bodies, as they circulate within a ‘collision of natural biological and social timescales’ (Elden 2004, xii), are circumscribed and intersected by the continuous and cadenced motion of the other bodies around them. Studying the articulation of bodies with other bodies via rhythmic motion constitutes for Lefebvre (2004 [1992]) a ‘rhythmanalysis’ – but for New Materialist scholars, such as physicist Karen Barad (2007), the communion of bodies at the level of particle is a co-constitution – or ‘intra-relation’ – that occurs not only among human but also non-human bodies; not only with organic matter but also its synthetic counterpart. According to physicists, all matter is structurally governed by ‘an anarchy of vibrations’ (Bachelard 2000 [1950], 137). ‘Matter,’ as Bachelard reminds, ‘is not just sensitive to rhythms but it *exists*, in the fullest sense of the term, on the level of rhythm’ (137).

In a rhythmanalysis, the analyst, who is inextricable from the material conditions of her sociality, deploys her own embodied rhythms as a metronome, both producing and perceiving a measure of external beats. The texts that make up ‘Sonogrammar’ are responses to a New Materialist rhythmanalysis of my reading of Gertrude Stein’s object-portraits from the chapter ‘Objects’ in her *Tender Buttons* (1915). They extend Lefebvre’s analytic mode beyond social studies of human being; or rather, they dilate the concept ‘social’ so that taking measure of the constitution of vitality includes a negotiation with material phenomena of all kinds.

Biographical note:

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My creative works are conceived as a study of rhythm as a material phenomenon that interrelates time with space by way of repetition. Derek Attridge has defined rhythm as ‘*a patterning of energy simultaneously produced and perceived; a series of alternations of build-up and release, movement and*

counter-movement, tending toward regularity but complicated by constant variations and local inflections’ (Attridge 1995: 3). French sociologist Henri Lefebvre was also interested in rhythm, holding that the social world within which human bodies circulate emerges *from* it: it is produced by our patterned movements within a ‘collision of natural biological and social timescales’ (Elden 2004: xii). Bodies are circumscribed and intersected within these timescales by the continuous and cadenced motion of the other bodies around it. For Lefebvre (2004 [1992]), analysing the ways in which rhythmic motion articulates bodies with other bodies can provide ‘a privileged insight into the question of everyday life’ (Elden 2004: xii). He registers such a study as a ‘rhythmanalysis,’ for which the analyst, inextricable from the material conditions of her sociality, must deploy her own embodied rhythms as a metronome, both producing and perceiving a measure of external beats.

But for New Materialist scholars this communion of bodies at the level of particle is a co-constitution or intra-relation that occurs not only among human but also non-human bodies; not only with organic matter but also its synthetic counterpart. Gaston Bachelard reminds that according to physicists all matter is structurally governed by ‘an anarchy of vibrations’; even ‘the most stable patterns owe their stability to rhythmic discord’ (Bachelard 2000 [1950]: 137). ‘Matter,’ he continues:

is not spread out in space and indifferent to time; it does not remain totally constant and totally inert in a uniform duration. [... Matter] is not just sensitive to rhythms but it *exists*, in the fullest sense of the term, on the level of rhythm (137).

Lefebvre’s analytic mode can thus be extended beyond social or cultural studies of human being; or rather, perhaps, the concepts ‘social’ and ‘cultural’ can be dilated to a more capacious definition, so that taking measure of the constitution of vitality includes a negotiation with material phenomena of all kinds.

My creative texts respond to my New Materialist rhythmanalysis of Gertrude Stein’s object-portraits, taken from the chapter ‘Objects’ in her *Tender Buttons* (1914). I wanted to analyse Stein’s use of rhythm in these poetic texts in order to better appreciate their aesthetic effects; specifically, I was interested in thinking about how the *sound* of their rhythms when voiced might be individuated from the concrete manifestations of their sound as print on the page. In this sense, my writing practice interpolated the relatively recent discipline (LaBelle 2006: xii) of sound art. The most important historical force in the development of this form has been the advent of recording technologies, for these devices allowed sound to adopt a physical form: grooved vinyl, magnetically patterned discs, a length of tape, and so on (Buckingham 2013: *n. pag.*). Whereas sound itself is not a ‘thing’ but rather the disturbance of substance by vibrations transmitted from one object to another, recording physicalizes sound so that it can be sculpted as per any other material medium (Buckingham 2013: *n. pag.*). I intended to abstract Stein’s rhythms in order to investigate the extent to which this series of sounds could then be re-concretised and manipulated in alternative textual deployments.

The preliminary procedure, therefore, was to unhook the sound of each of Stein’s object-portraits from its physical anchor – i.e., alphabetic print. Reading aloud detached the text from a physical medium and converted it to rhythmically enacted sound. My reading of the portraits’ verbal rhythms was calibrated by the particularities of *my* speech organs as well as the frequencies and acoustics of the room in which I read, whose objects ‘caught’ and tempered the vibrations of the sound waves that they then passed on: my voice forming an assemblage with these components, I was Lefebvre’s embodied metronome. (Though, of course, the idea of ‘I’ is distended here, to include the room itself.)

In an echo of Paul Valéry’s portrayal of the poem as ‘a prolonged hesitation between sound and sense’ (cited in Agamben 1999: 109), Derek Attridge locates the distinction of poetry in

its exploitation of the fact that spoken language *moves*, and that its movements – which are always movements of meaning at the same time as movements of sound – achieve a varied onward momentum by setting up expectations that are fulfilled, disappointed, or deferred. [...] Speech always

happens, as a process of unfolding sounds and significations, echoing and anticipating each other, and poetry aims at a precision that makes every word count as something experienced meaningfully through the body at the same time as it is understood by the mind (2005: 1).

It is in light of poetry's intensification of this dual aspect of language – its traversal by the rhythms of both sound and meaning – that Attridge develops a method for scanning 'phrasal movement' (Attridge 1995: 182-209). His intention is that this will complement the scansion of metrical movement, much more established in traditional prosody, in comprehending the effect of poetic choices. Meaning conveyed through phrasing, he contends, is equally crucial to rhythmic tension in poetry – a tension that Giorgio Agamben (1999), similarly, has described as stemming from an essential 'opposition of a metrical limit to a semantic limit' (109). While metre heightens the degree of regularity, so that language seems to 'move with deliberateness through *time*, recalling what has happened (by repetition) and projecting itself into the future (by setting up expectations)' (1995: 4), syntax, to equal effect, 'joins or separates words in longer or shorter units, [...contributing] crucially to our experience of language as movement' (Attridge 1995: 21). Attridge holds that the rhythm established by syntactical phrases intersects, enables and circumscribes a poem's metrical movements – *and vice versa*. And it is rhythm that harnesses the energies of the body's linguistic and conceptual apparatuses, imparting to them a level of temporal regularity that allows the economic transmission of both sound and sense (1995: 4). Attridge's incitement to analysing their interrelation, in fact, recalls Lefebvre's call to appreciate the social world as comprised of the rhythms of intersecting timescales.

Attridge's phrasal scansion proposes four basic types of movement available to poetic phrases (183-4): either they will maintain stasis by providing information that does not require elaboration (abbreviated to STA); or they will move forward, away from established information, extending its detail (EXT); or they will provide open-ended information, provoking anticipation of a resolution/extension to come (ANT); or they will terminate the phrasal movement in the phrase's closure and arrival at resolution (ARR).¹ Yet, Stein's phrases frustrate Attridge's approach to appreciating the interrelation of poetic sound and sense, even as the very failure of his suggested technique reveals characteristics of the object-portraits that are useful for the comprehension of Stein's writing. Before detailing these revelations, I will look briefly and for the purposes of comparison at a phrasal scansion of a free verse poem, 'Bells from Ladakh,' (1990: 194) by Beverley Farmer.

You hold two small hats of pale gold
 brocade, the black threads worn –
 old chased brass, hung on a thong –
 and swing them together, make them sound,
 clash, sing their high song
 that pleats with ripple
 on loud ripple the pool of the night
 sky: old bells from a moon-dry king-
 dom send ring on ring now
 round a full falling moon with a
 cold brass ring all its own – unless

your bells themselves

flung up its rim of paler light?

STA You hold two small hats of pale gold brocade,

ANT the black threads worn –

ARR old chased brass, hung on a thong –

EXT and swing them together,

EXT make them sound, clash, sing their high song

ANT that pleats with ripple on loud ripple

ARR the pool of the night sky:

STA old bells from a moon-dry kingdom

EXT send ring on ring now round a full falling moon

EXT with a cold brass ring all its own –

ANT unless your bells themselves

ARR flung up its rim of paler light?

Relinquishing line breaks elucidates, first, how integral enjambment is to guiding the movement of metre. But it moreover enhances the analyst's ability to describe the movement of sense established in the poem, as well as the interaction between the poem's two rhythmic threads, as it were. At the top level, taking the poem's single sentence as a single phrase, the sense can be seen to arc from initial statement of information to arrival at a concluding provocation that loops back to refer to the pale gold circular shapes. Broken down further, sense can be seen to pass through a series of statements and elaborations in an internal to-and-fro of suggestive prompts followed by their resolution. The transitive verb 'pleats,' for instance, generates the anticipation of an object to come, satisfied by 'the pool'; the subordinate clause 'unless your bells themselves' propels an expectation of elaboration, met by the verb phrase beginning 'flung.'² Essentially, Farmer's poem *distils and compresses* the movements of spoken English through its diction and its complex orchestration of a single sentence's parts – it does not break from the basic communicatory structure: information, elaboration and resolution. In Stein's case, her sentences decline to gratify the expectation of either sonic or syntactical rhythm, and they do so not by ignoring the conventions of the poem's two moving threads, but precisely by pitting them against each other.

On the one hand, it is easy to imagine many words in the portraits being replaced with another of the same syntactical kind such that phrasal sense is restored without altering the metre. For instance, the two phrases in the sentence 'a shawl is a wedding, a piece of wax a little build' (Stein 1914: 27) stretch metaphoric credibility but are not structurally impossible: simply interchanging the nouns 'wedding' and 'shawl' and replacing the noun 'build' with, say, 'candle' gives more plausible metaphors. Similarly, the unusual placement of adjectives in relation to the noun 'water' in the sentence 'Water astonishing and difficult altogether makes a meadow and a stroke' (22) is not unimaginable in a poem, and the final two nouns are substitutable for more logical alternatives. Thus, in cases like these, the metre can be read without disruption from disjunctive syntactical movement. On the other hand, however, and more often,

either the metrical rhythm that propels a reading *is* interrupted by a break in grammatical logic, or the installation of metrical regularity comes at the expense of the flow of syntax. Parsing into three phrases a line such as ‘A season in yellow/ sold extra strings/ makes lying places’ (22) shows that though the fairly regular pacing of stressed and unstressed beats renders it relatively easy to read, there are two alternative senses available here, pivoting on the grammatical determination of ‘sold’: the first phrase’s subject establishes the anticipation of a verb, and in the second phrase ‘sold’ indeed can function as the past tense of ‘sell.’ But the final phrase thwarts anticipation and requires a retrospective alteration of syntax: the only grammatically correct use of the word ‘sold’ here is as an adjective made from a past participle. Similarly, ‘Enthusiastically hurting a clouded yellow bud and saucer, enthusiastically so is the bite in the ribbon’ (20) seems to invite conflicting rhythmical readings, one swayed by the punctuation that registers this sentence as, in fact, two non-dependant clauses, and the other by the syntax that short-circuits the expectation of a subject after the comma with, instead, the repeated adverbial phrase ‘enthusiastically so.’ Were this fragment replaced with, for example, a proper noun, the metre would parcel out the breath in balanced portions. Language, as Attridge describes it, initiates movement, finalises it, is driven toward new content or retreats from established content. But here the flow of energy that the reader brings to the text is constricted as her intuitive understanding of sonic rhythm and meaning compels her to move back and forward along the undecidability of the line.

The oddness of reading *Tender Buttons* aloud in my rhythmanalysis came from a sense of the object-portraits as fragments of sense spliced by the noise of natural speech; from the irresolvable nature of the tension that infuses its rhythms, combined with the linear time of its prose lines. I re-transcribed the portraits in a computer spreadsheet, tabulating the semantic fragments I’d detected. I then scanned the phrases, marking them up with x’s for upbeat and y’s for downbeat. The spreadsheet was in a very literal sense a sonogram: a graphical representation of sound, indicating a differential distribution of energy frequencies. This sonogram formed the basis for the elaboration of four series of poetic texts, each one of which communicates an aspect of my understanding of Stein’s portraits resulting from my rhythmanalysis.

Having used Attridge’s method for phrasal scansion to tabulate Stein’s object-portraits led to three insights in relation to their aesthetic effect. First, while cogent phrasing benefits a poem by instating a sense of continuity even across irregularly metred lines, diminishing cogency can, inversely, encourage the kind of heightened attention to detail that would need to be sacrificed in inverse proportion to the maintenance of continuity (170). Attridge compares Walt Whitman’s long, spacious lines with the intense attention received by ordinary objects in the tightly enjambed work of William Carlos Williams, and with Susan Howe’s ‘bursts of utterances interspersed with silences’ (171). Howe presents the more acute case, manipulating syntax into ‘morsels of language [that] demand maximal attention’ (171) and, likewise, Stein’s undermining of syntactical rhythm forces heightened awareness of the interaction of metre and meaning at the level of the word. Second, the stop-start of anticipatory phrases quickly followed by non-extensive and non-arriving phrases grants a sense of urgency. Attridge explains that

if the phrasing of the poem strongly encourages forward movement at the same time as the line comes to an end the effect is [...that] metrical and visual norms [are] overridden by the demands of sense and syntax, as if the exigencies of feeling or thought were making themselves felt with particular urgency (198).

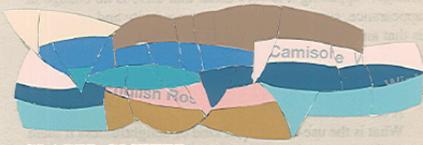
Finally, the frustrated back-and-forth movement between the four identified phrase types destroys the hierarchic patterning typical of ordinary phrasing (201). As a result, Stein provides what could function as a list of articulable sentence parts, a glossary ready to furnish almost endless combinatorics. The spreadsheet indicates, in fact, 931 sentence parts or phrases, whose potentiality for combinatorics I have tried to exploit in various ways in my creative works (see conceptual statement accompanying the creative extracts, below, for particulars on each).

i. Colour ways: still life

Four altered book pages (extract from eight). Mosaics – visual, haptic. May be cubist, a still (more or less) life. Take a cheap *Tender buttons*, tear from it the pages that make up “Objects.” You are about to disassemble the rhythmic patternings of Stein’s object-portraits and reconstitute them as graphic equivalents. Collect from a nation-wide hardware franchise as many free paint swatch cards as self-consciousness allows. Select a restricted palette of colours and arrange across a Cartesian graph – i.e. draw a vertical y -axis and a horizontal x -axis and assemble a spectrum of paint cards across it. You might like to do this digitally, entering the names of the paint swatches into a spreadsheet, you might prefer to allow the cards to colonise your doona. Note: the more restricted your palette and the more even its gradients, the more telling will be your results. Now, distribute the 931 phrases identified in your rhythmanalysis across the graph, according to the predominance of y (stressed) and x (unstressed) syllables that compose their particular rhythm. Thus you will have assigned to each phrase its cardboard counterpart. You are ready to begin your mosaic.

Geometries – Euclidean, hyperbolic or elliptical – they each have a premise to recommend them. Pick your poison, know why you choose it. Rule up lines between the words or the phrases on the *Tender buttons* pages according to your choice. Cut out card shapes of the appropriate colour; it will certainly be possible to get the card shapes to sit neatly and to accommodate each other though how precisely is your riddle.

OBJECTS



GLAZED GLITTER.

Nickel, what is nickel, it is originally rid of a cover. The change has come. There is no search. But there is, there is that hope and that interpretation and sometime, surely any is unwelcome, sometime there is breath and there will be a sincere and charming very charming is that clean and cleansing. Certainly glittering is handsome and convincing.

There is no gratitude in mercy and in medicine. There can be breakages in Japanese. That is no programme. That is no color chosen. It was chosen yesterday, that showed spitting and perhaps washing and polishing. It certainly showed no obligation and perhaps if borrowing is not natural there is some use in giving.

252 TENDER BUTTONS



A RED HAT.

A dark grey, a very dark grey, a quite dark grey is monstrous ordinarily, it is so monstrous because there is no red in it. If red is in everything it is not necessary. Is that not an argument for any use of it and even so is there any place that is better, is there any place that has so much stretched out.

A BLUE COAT.

A blue coat is guided guided away, guided and guided away, that is the particular color that is used for that length and not any width not even more than a shadow.

A PIANO.

If the speed is open, if the color is careless, if the selection of a strong scent is not awkward, if the button holder is held by all the waving color and there is no color, not any color. If there is no dirt in a pin and there can be none scarcely, if there is not then the place is the same as up standing.

This is no dark custom and it even is not acted in any such a way that a restraint is not spread. That is spread, it shuts and it lifts and awkwardly not awkwardly the centre is in standing.

Objects 255

son that there is more snips are the same shining very colored rid of no round color.

A NEW CUP AND SAUCER.

Enthusiastically hurting a clouded yellow bud and saucer, enthusiastically so is the bite in the ribbon.

OBJECTS.

Within, within the cut and slender joint alone, with sudden equals and no more than three, two in the centre make two one side.

If the elbow is long and it is filled so then the best example is all together.

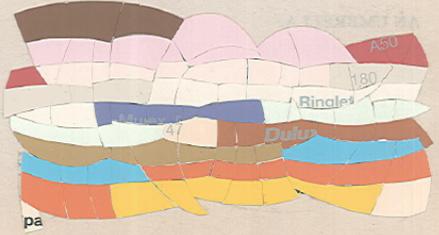
The kind of show is made by squeezing.

EYE GLASSES.

A color in shaving, a saloon is well placed in the centre of an alley.

A CUTLET.

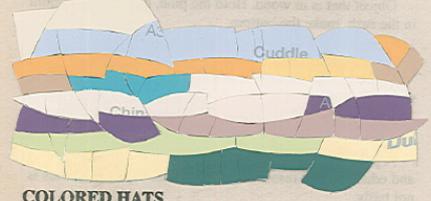
A blind agitation is manly and uttermost.



258 TENDER BUTTONS

RED ROSES.

A cool red rose and a pink cut pink, a collapse and a sold hole, a little less hot.



COLORED HATS.

Colored hats are necessary to show that curls are worn by an addition of blank spaces, this makes the difference between single lines and broad stomachs, the least thing is lightening, the least thing means a little flower and a big delay a big delay that makes more nurses than little women really little women. So clean is a light that nearly all of it shows pearls and little ways. A large hat is tall and me and all custard whole.

A FEATHER.

A feather is trimmed, it is trimmed by the light and the bug and the post, it is trimmed by little leaning and by all sorts of mounted reserves and loud volumes. It is surely cohesive.

A BROWN.

A brown which is not liquid not more so is relaxed and yet there is a change, a news is pressing.

ii. Sorties

Seven poems (extract from set of 50). Cut-ups of a kind, or if not they are skirmishes between phrasal and metrical rhythms. Transpositions of found phrases into the metre of a pre-existing text: "Objects." From a fixed point within any of the spaces in which you usually write – a café, an afternoon train, a pedestrian mall, your kitchen table – transcribe the speech you overhear and the texts you can glimpse. Mark your transcription up prosodically, just as you did with the Steinian object-portraits: *x* for unstressed, *y* for stressed syllables. Ctrl-f the found text's *x*-and-*y* combinations to identify matches with Stein's phrases. (This works best on a word processor since tedium is not avoidable here but neither is it the point.) Replace the words of the original with those of your transcribed phrases, attempting to maintain the original's rhythm. Keep, too, the original titles because sometimes they inadvertently *mean*.

MILDRED'S UMBRELLA.

You want a wet one, you'd have to be on call, congratulations like one eighty a night so crazy, I've since gone up and, okay like blah blah cause there's a bully there just on auto, a big girl no she's still there still, off season now his wife left we kept it open.

A BOX.

It was just automatic because I gave her like twenty months pregnant, but they will never see what, she was a artichoke avocado. They carry on like that but I don't usually carry coins are chili and capsicum friends well I was just about to, will you eat, do you think iddy biddy my virginity might move to close down the Monash, be a lot better about the nose bud gluten free it's the simple things.

A NEW CUP AND SAUCER.

For prolly ten or eleven she's being held by other people, I've since gone up any crazy ideas in the HA-ha.

A DRAWING.

Because it's so really exciting she's mostly middle aged, tens of thousands isn't fair trade organic, up and done aerial, seven for the free hand and was just about to, someone did that vegan laugh.

IT WAS BLACK , BLACK TOOK

Funny Kevin salad.

Trafficking beer and cider, cost like four bucks, enough hello, chalk and cheese chew chew chew got milk?

A LITTLE BIT OF A TUMBLER

Was chair for umpteen caffeine advantage or life in a GARAGE SALE could still be a little better if that will go away or I might ask myself. Having a lift can always find another might get something ten a.m. sat'dy whatevs jibber jibbering one for the gurgler. One into further.

WATER RAINING

Felt really bad because I lives in it my brain space how I'm going to lay more in my tub.

iii. Some basic doubling and a crouch I have let stand

Ten poems (extract from set of 362). Look at the 931 phrases you identified in Stein's object portraits. Some of their rhythms occur more than once. How many rhythms are there? There are 362. Group the phrases together by kind, then order these groups by length: from a single down beat – y (there are 29 phrases like this) – to xyxyxyxxxxxyxxxxxyxxxxxyxyxyx (only one). You may alter the order of the phrases within each group but not the words, you may insert line breaks anywhere. You may change punctuation. You'll want to accentuate further resonances beyond rhythm: semantics, sonic and visual consonance. You earlier assigned each kind of rhythm a colour; use the commercial names of the paint samples as your titles.

spanish cream
yx

please
could
aider
jam it
point it
aider please
could
 stop it
stop it
aider

aider makes:
 a meaning
 longer objects
 dusty water
glasses

summer
 does it
kill her

murray red
xyy

to be sure
it is not
of a cloak
but there is
no precise
a disgrace
if it is
a carafe
and besides
it is there
is relaxed
and a stroke
of the dot
and perhaps
it is pus
and a seat
and a stamp
does it not
it is so
it was there
it was black

featherbed

xyy

and hope rose
the same treat
in rubbed purr

in rubbed purr
a star glide is
so left:
an ink spot
a dark grey
a light white
beside rest
a whole barn was
not found
does this change
a great loss it
does not
it shows shine
no past pearl in no
size

and red shows
a red stamp a red
hat a blue coat
a cold sleeve
a
sad size

a whole few

esplanade

yyyx

they see cover
which
has feeling
so
much really

whipped violet

xyyx

that
is not dusty
to be left pounded

which is not
liquid

endless dusk

xyxyx

why is silver
cloister
hardly more than
ever
really lit-
tle women really lit-
tle spices

makes a steady mid-
night

belly fire
xxyxxyxxy

if
it
is bright-
er is
there
an-
y
re-
sult

camisole
xyxxyxy

supposing
 it is very clean
it shows that there is no mistake

suppose it
 is within a gate
a spectacle
and
 nothing strange

porcelain

yxxyxxxxyxxy

callous is something
that hardening
leaves behind
what will be soft

tea party

xyxxxxyxxxxyxxy

and
a perfectly unprecedented arrangement
between old ladies
and mild colds

iv. Algorhythms

Six poems (extract from 24). You by now share quite an intimacy with these texts. You handle them well. Or, you've become their handle – it is as avatar that you write. Also, your spreadsheet has algorithmic capabilities it seems increasingly negligent not to exploit. Try a sum. What proportion of the writing journal you have kept throughout your process bears an impression of the rhythms you've been manipulating, is my question. Try casually flipping through, re-reading your jottings. Find the lines that seem to have channelled a poet you didn't know yourself to be, find the Steinian lines they converse best with. Make some poems together.

is it a reflected yacht of a city, is it a conspiracy of spires. is
 supposing you do not *the landing strip emerging in the fractal-construction of the*
 like to change *island's leaves, trembling main streets. is it changi.*
 supposing it is very clean *is the city vegetable. is there a cubicle*
 supposing that there is *anywhere for air and its spasming finches.*
 regularity and *is there a mossy foreshore or*
 a costume supposing that there *a baking fragrant tongue of*
 was no reason for *grass in flower, is there a capturing palm.*
 a distress supposing that *is there a falling loop of concrete.*
 there was no *does the air spawn apricot*
 astonishment suppose *fields. do mushrooms gestate, crouched*
 an example is necessary *up inside themselves, do mushrooms have*
 supposing a certain time selected is assured *selves. does batter*
 suppose a collapse suppose a man *know to float*
 suppose no other extract *from chopstick to mouth*
 is permitted suppose this and *unpiloted.*
 an elegant settlement supposing a single piece *does the sky*
 is a hair supposing all this altogether made a dress *lie back*
 and suppose it was actual suppose ear rings *into prawn-*
 supposing more of them are orderly suppose the *pink belly.*
 mean way to state it was occasional if you *does light*
 suppose this even in the necessary incident of there *attract light,*
 certainly being no middle *does*
 in summer and winter suppose the rest of the message *light*
 is mixed with a very long *attract*
 slender needle *a little piece of sail.*

rose-wood and a color
a single hurt color
a sick color that is grey
that is no color chosen
the change of color is likely
and not coal color
never more coal color
a not torn rose-wood color
an established color and cunning
are dust color
what is lead in color
a particular color strangely set
of colored china
rid of no round color
a bow is every color
very colored
not any color
a color in shaving dog
and a colored sky
sky colored grey
the particular color that is
used for that length
dirt and not copper makes
a color darker sooner than
a choice in color
and there is no color
not straw color
and certainly discolor
all the waving color
coloring high
colored hats
more of the same color than
could have been expected

An idle earth. Our dead. The
ground around. Red rose
bushes, trimmed. The fine
state of things
across the grounds, inside
the church. The women
at Montgomerie, crying
but far away. This was the morning.
Kangaroo paws, vertical
prongs, left right left
in the heat, and the scrub
pushed out behind the roses
in rows, but coming
back now. Coming back
now. Have carved out a slice
of cake: took it from
my pocket, fed the
ground. Soil good here
for roses, good
for nothing. ‘A rose is a
dictator.’ What is that. What
is a dictator. The whole sky
is dry.

if red is in everything	then there is a kind of
if the color is careless -----	anchored waiting
if the speed is open	in biology
if the selection of a strong scent is not awkward	then a semiology of constructed pauses
if the button holder is held by all the waving color and there is no color	then linearity fragments too
if there is no more spreading	helpfully no
if there was no chance of ever seeing it come there -----	sense in a libidinal forest of
if there is not	overlooked roots, root systems
if there was to be the kind of thing	then the language of helsinki,
if the elbow is long and it is filled	soft hand claps and thin italian
if borrowing is not natural	men tripping
if it is	
if it is white and black	
if the red is rose	then the ground of moscow
if they dusty will dirt a surface	patched with
if there is no pleasure in not getting tired of it	tubular compartments
if they do this	then eating, a short
if they do this and it is not necessary -----	route to
if dust is washed off	contracting tubes
if it is brighter	then there, here we find
if lilies are lily white	ourselves. bear-
if the party is small	shaped pylons
if there is a genuine interest	crouching in concrete
in there being present as many girls as men	then a creeping gastric
and if there is	resolving in ambiguous
if inside is let in and there places change	liaisons
if you suppose this in August -----	
if they exhaust noise and distance and even dust	then there are birches but more than any other pine

Endnotes

1 ‘Phrase’ may refer to an entire sentence or the clauses and sub-clauses found within a sentence when it is parsed. The only limit to the extent to which a sentence can be broken down into clausal components, Attridge holds, is usefulness: too minute a parsing will obscure the detection of overarching patterns in the poem’s phrasal movement (1995, 201). The further, extensive detail Attridge supplies on how to deploy abbreviations and phrasal divisions during scansion is not relevant to the current statement, though it informed my creative process in this Series. The representation of scansion in my examples differs from Attridge’s notation for reasons of space and simplicity.

2 The final punctuation of end-stopped lines, too, bears significant weight in creating anticipation and resolution: it is tempting, for example, to split the line ‘with a cold brass ring all its own – ‘ into two phrases, an EXT and an ANT, the dash constituting a phrase on its own; likewise the colon in the ARR/ANT line ‘the pool of the night sky:’.

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Research statement

Research background

Internationally, theorisations of Conceptual Writing and interdisciplinary arts stress the role of affect and embodiment in creative practice. The growing field of New Materialist aesthetics similarly positions the creative practitioner as embedded in and conduit for an explicitly material environment, yet little scholarly work has brought these strands together to question the role that quantum physical phenomena (such as sound waves and rhythm) play in the creative act. This creative work intends to dovetail the fields of Creative Writing and New Materialism, engaging the particulate writing environment in order to comment on and evidence its influence on creativity.

Research contribution

This research extends the presence of Conceptualist writing practice – a genre of international renown originating in the United States – into an Australian context that stands to benefit from greater familiarity with its insights. Specifically, drawing on ‘rhythmanalysis,’ a concept devised by Henri Lefebvre, whose materialist philosophy is currently gaining in stature in the English-speaking world, ‘Sonogrammar’ exemplifies the application of his thought: the texts enact the suggestion that language is a material phenomenon communicated rhythmically, and suggest that close, embodied attention to it can yield

original creative insights.

Research significance

This research constructs an important channel between the current raft of science-based, posthumanist and/or New Materialist movements in poetics and the more traditional approaches to theorising the materiality of poetic language and social discursivity. It is significant that these findings are communicated performatively, since they thereby constitute an argument for the place of creative practice in interdisciplinary research on creativity. ‘A Sonogrammar’ forms part of my doctoral research.