

Paweł Marcinkiewicz

Opole University

American Poetry's Late Abundance: Stylistic Profusion as the Language Game

Abstract: In “The Historical Genesis of a Pure Aesthetic,” Pierre Bourdieu, the great continuator of Wittgenstein’s philosophical practice of interrogation, tries to characterize the fallacious grounds of artistic tastes and comes to a conclusion that they depend on the “entire set of agents engaged in the field,” which include artists, art critics, collectors, curators, etc. “who have ties with art, who live for art and, to varying degrees, from it.” Similarly in literature, the meaning of a particular poem or a novel results from an intricate web of activities and reactions, with so many different groups involved — publishers, interpretive communities (*pace* Stanley Fish), individual readers, booksellers — trying to use their own slippery criteria. The author, of course, is an active participant, and the rhetorical razzmatazz of contemporary American poetry might be understood as a Wittgensteinian language-game of the late American avant-garde, descending from Gertrude Stein, whose purpose is to resist — as it has always been — the literary mediocrity of the official verse culture and the marginalizing influence of the mass media.

It seems that in the last two or three decades of the twentieth century American poetry entered a new phase. Both the official verse culture and avant-garde coteries of language poets — whose opposition was so vital in the previous decades for such important critics as Marjorie Perloff — started to be shaped according to the patterns of celebrity-based popular culture. At first *arrière-gardes* and *avant-gardes* were soaked up by pop culture in visual arts, in the 1970s, when many artists became celebrities and pop culture icons — Andy Warhol and Damien Hirst being the prime examples — and writers soon shared their fate. What is of interest for the mass media is not so much the creative process of writing, but being a writer itself, which is synonymous with being a celebrity. The sociological mechanisms that create and promote stars have remained the same throughout the twentieth and the twenty-first centuries, from the star system in the early Hollywood to contemporary media moguls, such as Jerry Falwell or Oral Roberts: fame gets detached from the actual person and becomes a pure image of, as Sara Mills has it, the “dominant discourse” (Mills 1997: 19).

The popular celebrity-oriented culture is fostered by interviews. Yet, paradoxically, instead of facilitating the contact between the reader and the writer, the interview marks a breakdown of communication. What attracts the interviewer is the aura of the poet's importance while his or her poetry is marginalized, vanishing from critical considerations. One way to avoid this process for a writer is to resist canonization, never exposing one's art to the devastating tensions. As Ashbery observes in his "The Invisible Avant-Garde," when it is no longer possible "for an important avant-garde artist to go unrecognized ... his creative life expectancy has dwindled correspondingly, since artists are no fun once they have been discovered" (1989: 392). In a conversation with Marjorie Perloff, Charles Bernstein addresses the issue of cultural impoverishment brought about by the contemporary one-size-fits-all aesthetics, quoting one of his own poems: "We have no poetry wars, no aesthetic crimes;/ At last, we are all one big family/ Under the tent of art and harmony" (Perloff 2003: 57).

In this situation, it was natural for poets more immersed in the social sphere to use rhetorical strategies opposing the dominating, unequivocal discourse on literature and arts — the discourse which otherwise could absorb the *arrière-gardes* and *avant-gardes* into its undifferentiated and devaluating continuum. The first and most obvious rhetorical strategy defending poetry against the carefully designed but simplifying candor of the media was the poetics of what has to be called stylistic exaggeration according to more traditional criteria — the poetics, which saves individual texts from a literal reading or paraphrase. The transpersonal profusion of literary tropes, intertextual references, and stylistic figures is the opposite of the anecdotal, celebrity-oriented, tabloid culture founded on superficial emotions.

The most obvious aspect of the poetics of excess is the sheer number of collections published by individual poets. The average pace of publishing poetry books has increased significantly in the previous decade, between 2002 and 2012: for example, Paul Muldoon scored six individual collections while the most celebrated poet of the American post-war generation, Jorie Graham, published four volumes; the eminent language poets Charles Bernstein and Rae Armantrout boast the same number of poetry books; Mary Jo Bang published one volume less; however, the previously sparing Robert Hass published two four-hundred-page compilations of his previous and new works, plus one volume of criticism, which is much more than in the preceding thirty years of his career. In comparison with the great modernists, such as T.S. Eliot (five volumes in total) or Wallace Stevens (eight volumes), contemporary poets publish their collections at least twice as often. Moreover, it is not just the number of their publications, but also their volume that has increased significantly.

Additionally, contemporary poetry's logorrhea operates on the level of individual poems: it seems that now most poets have aspirations to continue the epic tradition of American poetry started by Walt Whitman in his *Songs of Myself* and continued in the twentieth century first by W.C. Williams or Ezra Pound. However,

in the first half of the twentieth century, relatively few American poets tried their hand at writing book-length poems. True, Eliot wrote *The Waste Land*, but it was rather a mocking epic with its nineteen pages, while Wallace Stevens, Robert Frost, Marianne Moore, or Elizabeth Bishop — all of whom happened to write lyric sequences/series — had no book-length verse publications. Now it seems that writing an epic poem is a necessary confirmation of the poet's status, a proof of his or her legitimacy as an artist, and a *sine qua non* in a successful academic career, proudly announced in one's publication list or C.V. As a result, not only do Ammons, Ashbery, Bernstein, Silliman, Hejinian, and Muldoon have their book-length poems, but less known authors do as well. Bernadette Mayer wrote *Midwinter Day* (1999), a book-length poem composed during a single day in Lenox, Massachusetts; Marcella Durand produced *Traffic & Weather* (2008) a site-specific book-length poem; professor John Erwin boasts an epic poem *As Long As It's Big* (2005); professor-emeritus Jacqueline Vaught Brogan published an experimental epic poem *ta(l)king eyes* (2009).

All in all, we have more poets writing more and more extensive poems, which get published more and more often in a cultural context that makes poetry inaudible for general public and peripheral to academic study. The gargantuan volume of published poems is matched by rhetorical strategies that try to make the generic poem of our day more conspicuous and also as expressively distant as possible from the modernist paradigms of the scenic mode. The poem's large stature is most often produced by cataloging, which makes the speaker's claims more inclusive and unpredictable. The above feature of the poetics of excess can be traced back to the 1950s and authors faithful to the avant-garde tradition of Gertrude Stein (the New York School poets) as well as those developing the all-encompassing Whitmanian verset (the Beats). The major difference between the early poetics of excess and its contemporary articulation is that today's forms of excess have become generic, and they are common for most writers, not just literary underground.

Perhaps the best early example of cataloging as a poetic method is Ashbery's 1975 volume, *The Vermont Notebook*. Younger poets, such as Mary Jo Bang or Timothy Donnelly, use cataloging in a different way: items in lists are not separate entities, but they are grouped into larger semantic units that often convey bits and pieces of narration. It seems that this is the main poetic strategy in Bang's 2010 volume, *The Bride of E*, which consists of 54 poems, alphabetically ordered. Alphabet plays one more important role in Bang's collection: many poems are extended puns or alliterations, where a particular letter mentioned or suggested in the title recurs as many times as possible. As a result, words containing a particular letter constitute a list or a catalog, which is arbitrary and far more disjunctive than a regular list of items with a particular quality. Additionally, such a list — made of items of different grammatical categories — is prone to produce allegorical meanings inherent in narration. "U As in Futile Pursuit" is a good example of this strategy. The poem consists of seven nearly-iambic tercets that collect words or

names with various forms of the letter “u,” or the vowel “ju:”, starting with the name of Freud and ending with the final “umbrella,” which poetically develops its initial reference to the founding father of psychoanalysis. Moreover, Freud’s name combined with the title “U As in Futile Pursuit,” structures the reading of the poem as an interpretation of a logocentric truth theory in the mode of a dream interpretation: the incongruity of the series functions as a direct proof debunking egocentric usurpations of the reason.

Accretion of poetic material produced by cataloging is accompanied by the use of other attributes of seriality, such as formal or thematic repetitiveness, best visible on the level of the book. This occurs in John Ashbery’s later collections, which often consist of texts with identical or similar stanzaic patterns (for example, *April Galleons* is made exclusively of tetrastichs) and evolve around defined topics (for example, *Planisphere* plays with various discourses connected with economy and the American Dream). A similar design is perceptible in recent volumes by younger poets, such as Joshua Clover (b. 1962) and Kenneth Goldsmith (b. 1961). Most poems in Clover’s *Totality for Kids* (2006) use sprawling Whitmanian lines, divided by spaces, and — as Charles Altieri points out — they struggle “to reclaim the popular” in a “Situationist-inspired realism” (2007: 164). Goldsmith’s poetic project seems to be more radical: his *Soliloquy* (2001) is an unedited collection of every word he spoke for a week; his 900-page *Day* (2003) retypes a day’s copy of the *New York Times*; *The Weather* (2005) groups a year of transcribed weather reports. The last poem is divided into four parts, “Winter,” “Spring,” “Summer,” and “Fall,” which are made of prose blocks of varying length. Obviously, *The Weather*’s seriality results from its concept: the idea of the poem was to transcribe weather reports for a year, and the poem’s repetitiveness depends on the limited number of natural phenomena and the customary way of reporting them. Moreover, the volume has a circular structure, starting and ending with the weather report for Christmas time, which enhances its rereading. Goldsmith seems to be extremely creative within his narrow thematic range: his speakers often make comments exceeding weather reports and containing subtle social and political criticism: “Oh, we are looking at, uh, weather, uh, across, uh, Iraq obviously here for the next several days” (Goldsmith 2005: 1).

On top of that, poetic texts are stylistically polarized, and the main opposition is between the written and spoken discourses. In Ashbery, contrastive juxtapositions of high and low registers produce bathos — ludicrous banality — which is often a means of transport for the sublime. Timothy Donnelly’s most recent volume *The Cloud Corporation* (2010) mixes the Stevensian diction of “An Ordinary Evening in New Haven” with harsh, contemporary American vernacular. According to Stephen Burt, the result is often comical, but it also gives an impression that Donnelly’s vision of human life is “positively Lucretian in its atomized meaninglessness” (Burt, 1). Donnelly’s and other contemporary poets’ excessive structural and

formal complexity, which often disregards or ignores the reader, may point out that the generic poem of our day functions in a totally different way than did the post-Eliotean scenic-mode model, and it also requires a different type of reading. Kenneth Goldsmith observes that his books are “impossible to read straight through”; moreover, as he adds, it is not really necessary to read [them] to get the idea what they’re like” because what counts is their “general concept” (361). In fact, this may be true about most poetry volumes published nowadays. Due to the excess of cataloging, remastering, and retyping, writing becomes less and less expressive, and it also achieves a greater degree of literalness. The text resembles an opaque object to be moved around the white space of the page. “Uncreative” writing also proves that all writing is an act of performance, involving the whole body in a physically demanding operation. Perhaps contemporary literature is better thought about than read, as it is rather a catalyst for other types of social actions that reading enhances and not an end in itself. As a result, poetry more and more often bears resemblance to what Ludwig Wittgenstein referred to as the “language-game.”

The concept of the “language-game,” which is central to Wittgenstein’s mature *Philosophical Investigations* (1953), allows interesting analogies between Wittgenstein’s poetics and the poetics of the twenty- and twenty-first-century avant-gardes. As Marjorie Perloff points out, the language game is not a genre or a particular form of discourse, but a “paradigm,” which is a “set of sentences selected from the language we actually use” (1996: 60). Furthermore, the social structure involved in a game implies that there is no unique “I,” as subjectivity always depends on a historically rooted language. The cultural character of the language game implies that neither propositions nor causal/temporal explanations can possess absolute value. Moreover, such oppositions as signifier/signified are irrelevant because “language is not contiguous to anything else” and as such has none of the fundamentals that structuralists would like to impose on it (Perloff 1996: 60). In the later set of lectures, collected in what is known as *The Blue Book*, Wittgenstein contends that language games form families on the principle of likeness: “Some of them have the same nose, others the same eyebrows and others again the same way of walking; and these likenesses overlap” (qtd in Perloff 1996: 61).

The language-game of contemporary poetry belongs to the same family as the language-games of other contemporary arts. In “The Historical Genesis of a Pure Aesthetic,” Pierre Bourdieu, the great continuator of Wittgenstein’s philosophical practice of interrogation, tries to characterize the fallacious grounds of artistic tastes and comes to a conclusion that they depend on the “entire set of agents engaged in the field,” which include artists, art critics, collectors, curators, etc. “who have ties with art, who live for art and, to varying degrees, from it” (qtd. in Perloff 1996: 62). Similarly in literature, the meaning of a particular poem or a novel results from an intricate web of activities and reactions, with so many different groups — publishers, “interpretive communities” (*pace* Stanley Fish), celebrities and other individual readers, booksellers — trying to use their own

slippery criteria. The writer, of course, is an active participant, and contemporary poetry's dependence on excess might be read as a dissident practice, whose aim is to resist — as it has always been — the marginalizing influence of popular culture. Finally, contemporary poets do not use various types of formal and stylistic abundance just to present the banal seriality of their reader's quotidian existence, but they are striving for the reader's more active participation in the ideologically controlled exchange of meanings.

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