LANGUAGE, TEXT AND CONTEXT

Essays in stylistics

Edited by
Michael Toolan

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Edited by
MICHAEL TOOLAN

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Preface and acknowledgements

The thematic focus for this collection is the principle of contextualization. These essays show a variety of stylisticians considering the contextualizations that ground interpretation, description, theorizing and reading, as they see relevant. In this way we hope to dispel the myth that stylistics envisages and rests upon certain radical binarisms – the text vs. the context; and linguistic description vs. discourse interpretation. There are interdependencies between theory, analysis, text and situation, which require acknowledgement and exploration. Stylisticians have a particular expertise with the form, function and structure of language in discourse, and this should never (have) become unfashionable. If we have been displaced, in the pantheon of approaches to literature, by feminist, new historicist, Marxist and psychoanalytic perspectives, then this in part reflects a misunderstanding of stylistics – as purely formalist, treating the text as autonomous, 'delimited', and so on. On the contrary, there is nothing to prevent – and much to recommend – incorporating literary linguistic procedures into the prosecution of those and other interpretative contextualizations.

All these essays address literary topics, broadly understood, but some concentrate on some stylistic phenomenon in a single text while others consider a principle or technique as it applies to a range of texts. All demonstrate the vitality and diversity of current practices of stylistic analysis; all show an awareness of and engagement with theories and frameworks other than those simply in the mainstream of orthodox linguistics. They should make suggestive, challenging and even inspiring reading.

I have supplied a preface to each of the chapters. These prefaces are partly an introduction, partly a foreword, and partly an afterword to the essay that follows. I try to specify what I see as the main concerns and arguments of each essay, but I additionally hazard some

reactions to those concerns and arguments, mentioning connections with other approaches included here or influential in contemporary literary linguistics. These prefaces are, then, fairly speculative, and attempt to chip into the conversation between the author and the reader, in a spirit of dialogism.

The essays have been grouped into four parts, but in a highly provisional spirit. The cross-linkages are numerous: Bhaya Nair's chapter is certainly about the strategic representation of men and marriage and cultural values, rather than solely about women, so could fit in Part II; Simpson's on Colemanballs is clearly a dissection of an unintentionally hilarious 'fashion of speaking', so could fit in Part I, and so on. Nevertheless, I believe the essays within each part do more particularly speak to one another, or to some shared preoccupations, than to the remainder, as I attempt to indicate in my prefaces.

My thanks go to all the contributors, who generously made their work available, and bore with delays in editing and compiling.

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Part I

Situated fashions of speaking and writing: from nonsense to common sense

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Editor's preface

Brian McHale, who has written extensively on postmodernism as an artistic and literary phenomenon, considers what it might mean to view postmodernist poetry as 'nonsense' – in a positive rather than pejorative sense of that term. Significantly, the question of context is directly relevant here: as McHale reminds us, readers – and language-users generally – are ordinarily remarkably resourceful in the business of contextualizing seeming gobbledegook, random lines, and so on. Our sense-making, or framing of signs, may be characterized as integrative acts at three most basic levels: in terms of the world, the voice or speaker, and the overarching theme that a poem invokes for a reader. Attentive to such levels or criteria, we are immensely creative at adducing some hospitable semantic environment, within which the 'word-salad' will appear to be at least a semi-coherent verbal meal. Accordingly, 'making nonsense' is no small achievement, and greater acknowledgement needs to be paid here to the 'making' aspect. To make nonsense, as in postmodern poetry, is carefully to block our interpretative acts of naturalizing conceptualization; postmodernist nonsense is 'antiabsorptive' discourse. We are driven back, by such poems as those by Berryman and Prynne which McHale discusses, to reference to that unsatisfactory device of the theorist, the 'no (integrated) context' context.

As Stewart (1979) has argued, a culture's nonsense is defined and understood in relation to its sense: the one is a construction whose perception is made possible by the concomitant postulation of the other. *Mutatis mutandis*, analogous remarks apply also to two other hierarchized binary pairs relevant here: text and context, and the literal and metaphorical. Indeed the interrelations between these binarisms are numerous and provocative. Certainly, the path from text/context to metaphor/literal is relatively direct, once two further pairs are invoked: figure/ground, vehicle/tenor. And clearly

what makes all these viable at all are the structuralist prerequisites, perceived difference, perceived relation.

But as McHale shows, all this business-as-usual is noticeably disrupted in postmodernism, where we have no great confidence as to which elements (in a poem, for example) are literal, which are metaphorical, or what is figure and what is ground. The one pair that might seem most stable here is that of text and context, but as indicated, context seems impossible to retrieve at all satisfactorily. The consequence, uncanny though it may appear at first consideration, is that even the category we label 'text' becomes provisional or attenuated: we read the text before us, but experience a diminished confidence as to whether this is a single text, the real text, the whole text, or 'really a text'. Ever intent on rationalizing, the analyst confronted by this discoursal mess may take the predictable absorptive step of declaring 'Yes, the text is a mess, but that "being/doing mess" is the point, is the theme.' Such a manoeuvre is considered by McHale when he explores the degree to which his selected poems work as metapoetry: poetry about poetry, and particularly, poetry that displays and rejects the mystificatory powers of 'normal' language. Again, though, this is rather a thin conclusion, still only a negative definition of such writing, in terms of what it is not, rather than a positive valuation in terms of what it actually is.

McHale proposes, as a richer solution, that these postmodern poems be seen in the context of architect Frank Gehry's extraordinary 'postmodernist' house, which comprises a traditional cottage structure wrapped in a heterogeneity of modern shapes, materials, and junk. Both house and poems are attempts at a 'cognitive mapping' of the postmodern world. Both are maps less in the familiar aesthetic sense of models or representations of, say, a psyche or way of living; but in the more innovative sense of signposts along a possible way, a possible direction, for the reader to engage with dialogically and interactively (perhaps more compass than map). Teasing out the contrast is not easy, but it may be worth reflecting on the difference between consulting a map in a study (where we think of looking at a map of Germany as looking *at* Germany), and using a map in the course of an actual journey, already begun. In the latter case, the map may be a helpful guide (though it may equally be a distraction or hindrance) but it will hardly be so without the active efforts of the mapreader.

It is significant, also, that McHale's essay – even while addressing the most contemporary topic of postmodernism – finds insight on matters of nonsense and context in the brilliant work of a theorist

of an earlier age, William Empson (together with the equally brilliant work, cut short by her untimely death, of a theorist of our own age, Veronica Forrest-Thomson). In particular, Empson's *Seven Types of Ambiguity*, together with the work of, for example, Bally, Spitzer, and Jakobson, constitute a canon of pathbreaking, issue-confronting texts in stylistics.

1 Making (non)sense of postmodernist poetry

Brian McHale

> We do not want more poems about everyday life; there are enough and more than enough poems that do that; but never today enough Dada poems.
>
> (Forrest-Thomson 1978)

TALKING NONSENSE

Accusations of nonsense put literary people on the defensive. 'This is not nonsense talk', writes Marjorie Perloff (1987: 231), defensively, of a passage from a poem she admires by the postmodernist 'language' poet Charles Bernstein. She is right to get defensive, for the passage in question (from a poem called 'Dysraphism') certainly *looks* like nonsense, and a sustainable charge of nonsense is normally fatal to a poem's claims on our serious readerly attention. A stronger defence, however, would have involved turning the accusation into a description, that is, admitting the charge of nonsense while denying that the label 'nonsense' must inevitably be pejorative. 'Nonsense' can just as well identify a valuable, and valued, quality. It has functioned that way historically, and not only in marginalized poetry ('children's classics': Dodgson, Lear), but, more pertinently, in Russian futurist *zaum* and Dada poetry. Many postmodernist poems might appropriately be described as 'neo-Dada' or 'nonsense', and part of the process by which we might come to understand why such poems could be worth writing and reading involves coming to understand the possible uses and value of nonsense.[1] In recognition of this, the present essay uses the term 'nonsense' neither pejoratively nor dismissively, but as a neutral descriptive category.

Why might one value nonsense? First, nonsense, far from being only too easy to fall into, as one might infer from the pejorative contexts of the term's use, proves to be quite difficult to make. This is because

readers or hearers of sentences are such resourceful sense-makers, able to extract sense from the least tractable materials. Anecdotal evidence of such resourcefulness is to be found, for instance, in Stanley Fish's by now notorious experiment in which well-drilled students of religious poetry were able to develop a plausible interpretation for a cryptic (to all appearances nonsensical) pseudo-poem – in fact a list of linguists' names left on the blackboard from a previous class (Fish 1980: 322–37).[2]

Philosophers of language and philosophically oriented linguists often assume that certain grammatically well-formed expressions are 'inherently nonsensical', e.g. 'Colorless green ideas sleep furiously'. But J. F. Ross has persuasively argued that, on the contrary, 'there is no grammatically well-formed string of words that is in all environments semantically impossible or semantically unacceptable. . . . Something is nonsense only relative to an environment' (Ross 1981: 55). Consequently, nonsense arises only when extraordinary efforts are made to render an environment semantically inhospitable to sense: 'Meaninglessness [i.e. nonsense] occurs only when meaning is environmentally *prevented*' (172).

If this is so, and nonsense really is as difficult to produce as Ross contends, and as Fish's experiment seems to corroborate, then it might be valued precisely for this quality of difficulty surmounted. Of course, the value attached to difficulty surmounted is not by any means a universal; it is, we might suppose, a modernist value, but not necessarily a postmodernist value. In any case, the evidence of nonsense's difficulty would lead us, at the very least, to assume that nonsense must be motivated; in other words, it would lead us to ask why, if nonsense is so difficult to achieve, would someone have bothered to produce it?

Second, nonsense might be valued precisely for the light it throws on its antithesis: sense-making. Nonsense yields valuable insight into how sense is made, giving us access to the sense-making process in a way, perhaps, that nothing else can. This is because of the intimate relationship between nonsense and common sense: nonsense depends on common sense. 'Our ways of making nonsense will depend upon our ways of making common sense', writes Susan Stewart (1979: viii); 'the nature of nonsense will always be contingent upon the nature of its corresponding common sense' (51). 'Where there is a common sense, there will be a common nonsense' (52); consequently, 'There will be as many varieties of nonsense as there are varieties of sense' (16). Now this is, in effect, a negative value: nonsense is to be valued for what it tells us about what it is not. Whether it can acquire some

positive value in its own right, and if so what, is a question to which we shall return later.

The best and most economical way to investigate how nonsense is made and common sense resisted in postmodernist poetry is to analyse specific texts. Thus, the bulk of this chapter will be devoted to readings of three poems: John Ashbery's 'Metamorphosis' (1979); J. H. Prynne's 'Of Movement Towards a Natural Place' (1974); and Charles Bernstein's 'Live Acts' (1986). But before we can undertake these readings, we will need to equip ourselves with an appropriate descriptive apparatus, one designed to capture Stewart's insight into the dependency of nonsense on common sense. We will need, in other words, to give some account of how we typically make sense of difficult or obscure poetry, as a preliminary to accounting for how we fail to make sense of postmodernist nonsense poetry.

MAKING SENSE

The most attractive and persuasive account of sense-making I know of, for all its incompleteness and eccentricities, is the one proposed by Veronica Forrest-Thomson (1978; see also Forrest-Thomson 1971, 1972, and 1973). Her approach to literary intelligibility might be characterized as a 'strong misreading' of William Empson, especially the Empson of *Seven Types of Ambiguity*.[3] What in particular Forrest-Thomson retains from Empson is his emphasis on the reader's resourcefulness in rationalizing (Forrest-Thomson says 'naturalizing') the text's semantic anomalies, cruxes, and 'ambiguities' (in Empson's extended sense of the term).

How do we make poems, especially 'difficult' or 'obscure' or apparently 'nonsensical' poems, intelligible?[4] We do so, according to Forrest-Thomson, by identifying pertinent levels (we might just as properly say frames) of coherence or integration. Identifying a level of coherence or integration (or what Forrest-Thomson somewhat anomalously calls an 'image-complex') enables us 'to assimilate features of various kinds, to distinguish the relevant from the irrelevant, and to control the importation of external contexts' (1978: xii). In other words, it enables us to integrate a range of features, both semantic and non-semantic,[5] under the same explanatory rubric; it enables us to establish, relative to this rubric, a hierarchy or priority of features, some of them judged to be relevant, others irrelevant; and, finally, it enables us to decide which, if any, external frames of

reference (in the sense of Hrushovski 1979, 1984a, and 1984b) might relevantly be referred to.

The actual frames or levels of coherence which might be pertinent to specific poems are, of course, very various, but we can propose three basic frame types or conventional levels of integration which have served readers well in their naturalizations of (at least) western poetry since (at least) the Renaissance.

1 The level of world, which Forrest-Thomson calls the 'empirical image-complex'. This involves the reader's reconstructing a situation, scene, event, etc., at the extreme limit an entire cosmology.
2 The level of voice, Forrest-Thomson's 'discursive image-complex'. At this level the reader reconstructs for the poem a 'speaker' or source persona, in some cases a more or less fully personified 'character', in others a supra-personal or conventional source, a register, discourse, or level of style keyed to a specific genre or topic.
3 The level of theme, Forrest-Thomson's 'thematic synthesis'.[6] This involves identifying an 'idea' sufficiently abstract to allow for the assimilation of other local 'ideas' identified in the text.[7]

In reading most poems, all three frames come into play and interact; in some types of poetry, one frame is clearly dominant (e.g. 'world' in topographical-descriptive poetry, or 'voice' in dramatic monologue poems), the others subordinate (or inapplicable). In the process of naturalizing or rationalizing poems, 'feedback loops' typically function among these three levels: thus, the identification of a world (situation, scene, event) helps us to integrate a speaker at the level of voice, and vice versa; identification of a speaker helps us to integrate a situation at the level of world; while identification of a theme may guide us in reconstructing a world and/or a voice, and vice versa; reconstruction of a world, a voice, and/or the interaction between them, may guide us in identifying a theme.

Forrest-Thomson's approach to sense-making in terms of the assimilation of textual features at different levels of coherence finds interesting corroboration in the work of others who have investigated these processes from other perspectives. For example, J. F. Ross has proposed an account of disambiguation and semantic coherence whereby the relatively intransigent words in a sentence (the ones whose range of meanings is most narrowly prescribed) coerce (or 'dominate', to use Ross's own term) the less intransigent words, weeding out their irrelevant meanings ('differentiating' them,

as Ross puts it) and assimilating these words to the semantic context (Ross 1981; cf. Thompson and Thompson 1987). This, it seems to me, amounts to a version of Forrest-Thomson's account of assimilation and hierarchies of relevance and irrelevance, but pitched at the sentence-level rather than, like Forrest-Thomson's, at the text-level. Similarly, Alex McHoul's (1982) 'Cumulex' exercise tends to corroborate not only Forrest-Thomson's general approach, but even the levels of coherence which she specifies. In grappling with a semantically diffuse and enigmatic text (in fact, a synthetic 'pseudo-poem'), McHoul's student readers construct 'scenes' or fragments of a world (1982: 22, 30), often importing external frames of reference to 'flesh out' these world-fragments (32); they try to identify voices or personas, and routinely assume that the text has been 'authored', that is, that it emanates from a single source and intention (18, 29); and above all, they strive for thematic synthesis, easily the most conspicuous and dynamic of the sense-making operations they apply.

If Forrest-Thomson is, as we have noted, a faithful Empsonian in her general orientation towards sense-making, she nevertheless parts company with him at one important juncture. For Empson, the resolvability of semantic anomalies is a positive value; texts which successfully resist rational resolution are described as 'decadent', and are said to 'misuse' ambiguity (1947: 165, 160). Empson's negative valuation of unresolvable ambiguities is explained by his anxiety about control: texts which do not contextually limit or constrain ambiguity give the reader too much interpretative freedom. Forrest-Thomson exactly reverses Empson's valuation. Where he regards the resolvability of semantic cruxes as the mark of poetic success, she regards it as a measure of overly facile sense-making, premature or 'bad' naturalization; while the texts which in Empson's view 'misuse' ambiguity Forrest-Thomson regards as encouraging suspended or 'good' naturalization.

The poet Charles Bernstein, who has read Forrest-Thomson as carefully and sympathetically as she has read Empson, proposes a concept of 'absorption' to cover much the same ground as Forrest-Thomson's assimilation and levels of coherence. Texts may be 'absorptive' in two interrelated senses: they absorb diverse materials, that is, they integrate or assimilate them and make them cohere, in roughly Forrest-Thomson's sense; and in the process of absorbing materials they may also absorb the reader, in the sense of engrossing or fascinating him or her. Bernstein describes approvingly a range of 'antiabsorptive' strategies by which his postmodernist contemporaries' poems counteract the absorptive tendencies of sense-making.[8] These

strategies might just as readily be called nonsense strategies, and it is their operation, and the resistance they present to the operations of sense-making, that we will observe in action in the analyses which follow.[9]

BUILDING WORLDS

Some working hypothesis about the reconstructed world of a poetic text is often essential for distinguishing between the two frames of reference whose interaction constitutes a metaphor (see Hrushovski 1984a; McHale 1987: 133–47). Metaphor is not always or inevitably signalled grammatically, so in many cases we must operate with a semantic hypothesis about which frame is 'present' and 'literal' (i.e. the tenor of the metaphor) and which is 'absent' and 'figurative' (i.e. its vehicle). This hypothesis about the reconstructed world establishes the literal frame; any anomaly or deviation within that frame must be processed as metaphor. This is the operation we apply when making sense of elliptical metaphor, e.g. Imagist juxtaposition. Consider the paradigmatic case of Pound's 'In a Station of the Metro'. Here the literal frame is established (as in many poems) by semantic coherence between the text's title and its first line ('The apparition of these faces in the crowd'); consequently the anomalous second line ('Petals on a wet, black bough') must be understood as the vehicle of a metaphor.[10] It is this operation of contextualization, or what Forrest-Thomson calls naturalization, that rescues metaphor from nonsense: 'Metaphors make "common sense" so long as they are taken as metaphors and contextualized as such' (Stewart 1979: 35). Without a working world-hypothesis to distinguish the literal from the figurative frame, the tenor from the vehicle, metaphor lapses into nonsensical literalness: 'In nonsense, metaphor "runs rampant" until there is wall-to-wall metaphor and thus wall-to-wall literalness' (ibid.).

In John Ashbery's 'Metamorphosis' (see Appendix 1 for the full text), unlike in the case of 'In a Station of the Metro', the title offers little help in establishing a world-hypothesis. Is there any discernible scene or situation? We can identify certain fragments of landscape: 'The barges and light they conflict with against/ The sweep of low-lying, cattle-sheared hills' (ll. 17–18); 'the unmapped sky over the sunset' (l. 40). Perhaps we can guess at a bucolic setting, on the strength of such details as the hammock and the straw (l. 31). Perhaps, too, we detect a literal event involving a ladder (perhaps a fall from one? ll. 43–4). Having identified such fragments, however, we

remain unable to integrate them into a single scene, or, alternatively, to motivate their selection and juxtaposition.

Worse, some of these world-fragments are just as likely to function figuratively (as the vehicles of metaphors) as they are to function literally. This evidently is the case with the first landscape fragment, which seems to belong to the figurative frame of a kind of epic simile:

> . . . the nutty context isn't just there on a page
> But rolling toward you like a pig just over
> The barges and light they conflict with against
> The sweep of low-lying, cattle-sheared hills,
> Our plight in progress.
>
> (ll. 15–19)

On the other hand, the sunset-scene fragment and the event involving the ladder seem likely to belong to literary allusions, i.e. to what Forrest-Thomson would call 'discursive images' as distinct from 'empirical' ones. If the 'stitches' of l. 38 are the antecedent for the pronoun 'they' of l. 39 (but pronoun antecedence is notoriously elusive in Ashbery), then this entire passage would seem to make a witty, revisionist allusion to the paradigmatically modernist figure at the beginning of Eliot's 'Prufrock':

> . . . the stitches ceased to make sense.
> They climb now, gravely, with each day's decline
> Farther into the unmapped sky over the sunset
> And prolong it indelicately.
>
> (ll. 38–41)

> Let us go then, you and I,
> When the evening is spread out against the sky
> Like a patient etherised upon a table [.]
>
> ('The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock', ll. 1–3)

The event involving the ladder would seem to allude either to the famous final proposition (6.54) of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*, or (if we allow the fragmentary bucolic context to exert some pressure) to Robert Frost's 'After Apple Picking'; or conceivably, of course, to both at once. In any case, the world of 'Metamorphosis', minimal as it is, disperses into metaphor and allusion, and we find integration at this level fatally blocked.

In the case of J. H. Prynne's 'Of Movement Towards a Natural Place' (see Appendix 2 for the full text), once again the poem's title proves to be unhelpful. However, here we might have recourse

to the title of the volume in which this poem originally appeared: *Wound Response*. This, like much of the diction of the poem 'Of Movement', is ambiguous between two frames of reference, that of medical pathology and that of the emotional life, where terms such as hurt, wound, bruise, etc. function as long-dead metaphors. Which of these frames is literal, which figurative in 'Of Movement'? When we read 'Remorse is a pathology' (l. 11), or 'the/ input of "blame" [. . .] patters like scar tissue' (ll. 12–13), syntax seems decisively to disambiguate whatever potential ambiguity there might be in the diction. What we have before us, it would appear, is a species of metaphysical conceit: the emotion of remorse (the literal frame) is being elaborately compared to a physical wound (the figurative frame).

If the discourse of medical pathology is conclusively figurative, can we identify a literal scene, a situation, characters? A *day* is specified (the one on which the event for which someone is remorseful occurred? l. 1); so are a *he* and a *she*. Certain events, presumably literal, seem to be narrated: 'He sees his left wrist rise to tell him the time' (l. 9); 'she tells/ him by a shout down the staircase' (ll. 25–6). But the literalness of this fragmentary situation proves to be problematic; for, apart from the unambiguously metaphorical expressions in ll. 11–13, cited above, the vehicle of this presumed conceit is syntactically out of control, free-floating, as it were. This free-floating medical discourse threatens to overwhelm the fragments of the (hypothetical) literal world, exerting contextual pressure which tends to convert 'remorse', and consequently the fragmentary scenes and characters evidently associated with it, into figures of speech for literal situations in the realm of medical pathology. We are left with two competing literal frames, each seeking to subordinate the other as figurative vehicle to its own tenor. This is, in other words, precisely a case of the type of Empsonian ambiguity in which two worlds or universes of discourse are juxtaposed and neither dominates the other, so that each world functions reciprocally as a metaphor of the other (Empson 1947: 211–12, 217–18; cf. McHale 1987: 133–7).

As unstable as the world is in 'Of Movement', it is, if possible, even less stable in Charles Bernstein's 'Live Acts' (see Appendix 3 for the full text). Here again we might start with the title in order tentatively to establish a level of integration. The 'live' of 'Live Acts' presumably indicates a stage performance in contrast to a filmed or videotaped one. Nowadays the likeliest context for such an expression might be one in which it referred to topless or nude dancers, or even 'live'

sexual acts on stage. Perhaps the title is a 'found' text, citing a newspaper advertisement or a sign outside a nightclub, thus evoking the external frame of reference of urban red-light districts.

Equipped with this working world-hypothesis, we might scan the text for segments that could be construed as corroborating it. 'You want always the other' (l. 1) and 'another person' (l. 3) might be construed as referring to sexual cruising. Perhaps the 'encounter,/ in which I hold you' (ll. 5–6) is a sexual encounter; if so, then 'a passion made of cups' (l. 6) might qualify it as a drunken encounter. Are 'Crayons of immaculate warmth' (l. 7) phallic symbols? Is 'this purpose alone' (l. 8) the sex act itself? No doubt we could continue in this vein to the end of the text, isolating likely segments and manhandling them semantically until they made an approximate fit with our working hypothesis. But clearly there is a good deal of strain involved, and eventually our hypothesis begins to buckle under it. Moreover, we can only proceed in this way at the cost of ignoring the segments which resist assimilation to our world-hypothesis: for instance, the baffling, fragmentary phrases of ll. 2–5, or the opaque metaphor of ll. 6–7.

Suppose we return to the title for reorientation. This time we might note its grammatical ambiguity: 'live' could be either adjective or verb, its vowel changing value accordingly; 'acts', similarly, could be either plural noun or verb. This double ambiguity yields four possible combinations for the phrase, some of them less grammatical than others, no doubt, but all construable if we want badly enough to construe them. In short, this is hardly a stable foundation on which to attempt to construct a world. The very title of 'Live Acts' neatly exemplifies the quality of 'confused dominance' which Bernstein himself has ascribed to his poetry (Perelman 1985: 17).

TRACING VOICES

Failing to integrate these texts at the level of world, we shift to the level of voice. Here we ask not 'What world is this?' but 'Who speaks?' In other words, can a consistent 'voice', register, discourse, or level of style be discerned, on the basis of which the image of a 'speaker', a persona, could be reconstructed? If so, we might then be able to loop back to the level of world to construct a speech situation, a fragment of world for that persona to inhabit. Alternatively, if no single consistent voice can be identified, can the juxtapositions of voices, registers, discourses and/or styles in the text

be motivated in terms of some reconstructed image of interacting speakers? Lacking such a motivating hypothesis, the discourse must lapse into discontinuity, and, as Susan Stewart writes, 'The more extreme the discontinuities of discourse, the more nonsensical the discourse' (1979: 158).

Stylistically, Ashbery's 'Metamorphosis' is schizophrenic: its stylistic profile is distinctly dissimilar in the two halves of the poem. Its first half, running from the beginning to l. 22 (i.e. the first two verse paragraphs), is comprised of (at least) three juxtaposed registers:

1 an archaic register, functioning as a marker of 'high style' or 'poetical' language: 'Its pleasaunce an urn' (l. 3), the poetical 'O' in the apostrophe ('O marauding beast', l. 4) and emotive outburst ('O farewell grief and welcome joy!', l. 11), the pseudo-Shakespearian iambs of ll. 12–13 ('Yet stay,/ Say how we are to be delivered' etc.), 'blessed decoction' (l. 21), and so on.
2 American colloquialisms: 'Around the clock' (l. 6), 'a breather' (l. 7), 'Gosh!' (l. 11; the colloquial equivalent of the poetical 'O'), 'nutty' (l. 15), and so on.
3 a parody of formal written language, perhaps of bureaucratese or of an academic/pedantic register: 'Testimonials/ To its not enduring crispness notwithstanding' (l. 8), and so on.

To complicate the stylistic situation further, throughout these first two verse paragraphs certain segments seem to owe a double stylistic allegiance. For instance, the words 'term' and 'elect' in the phrase, 'And for what term/ Should I elect you . . . ?' (ll. 3–4), certainly evoke the register of contemporary electoral politics (and thus perhaps cohere with the bureaucratese of ll. 7–8). But there are also competing archaic senses for these words: 'term', in the sense of goal, end, object (an obsolete or rare usage, according to the *OED*);[11] 'elect', in the sense of pick out, choose (again, obsolete according to the *OED*). Similarly, 'the fair content' (l. 13) could be construed in an archaic sense, as 'con*tent*', accenting the second syllable (the accent favoured by the iambic scansion of this line), meaning a satisfaction, pleasure, or source of satisfaction;[12] or of course it could be construed in a more modern sense, with the accent on the first syllable, as '*con*tent', a thing contained, especially contained in a text.[13] In all these cases we have instances of what J. F. Ross calls 'conflicting dominance'. Context pulls, or pushes, these words in conflicting directions, causing the entire passage to hover indecisively between different registers and different senses:

> Equivocation caused by conflicting dominant environmental factors generates nonsense because it can prevent sense . . . the words can join together in twos and threes but not *all* together . . . there is no one scheme pattern in which the *whole* sentence can be linked together, even inconsistently, because one of the words behaves like a duck-rabbit picture, jumping to one scheme as it hooks to one word and to another as it hooks to the next. Because dominating words *capture* a common word the sentence is torn apart.
>
> (Ross 1981: 172–3)

The effect, as Susan Stewart writes, is that of 'a text that splits itself into simultaneous texts with every step' (1979: 162; cf. Empson 1947: 180–9, 111, 124).

By contrast, the second half of 'Metamorphosis' (its third and fourth verse paragraphs, ll. 23–48) is distinctly more homogeneous in style. Here the stylistic strategy involves not the juxtaposition of competing registers, as in the first half, but a proliferation of intertextual allusions. We have already noted certain probable allusions to Eliot's 'Prufrock' (ll. 38–41), and to Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* and/or Frost's 'After Apple Picking' (ll. 43–4). There is at least one other, in ll. 45–8:

> . . . you
> Had built the colossal staircase in my flesh that armies
> Were using now, their command a curse
> As all my living swept by, the flags curved with stars.

The allusion here would seem to be to a recurrent Renaissance sonnet conceit, that of love as an army occupying the lover's body. The *locus classicus* is Petrarch's 'Sonnetto in Vita', 91; English versions include both Wyatt's and Surrey's respective translations of this sonnet (Wyatt, 'The long love that in my thought doth harbor'; Surrey, 'Love, that doth reign and live within my thought').

Thus, each half of 'Metamorphosis' separately resists integration in terms of a consistent voice or persona, the first half by multiplying and juxtaposing registers, the second half by multiplying intertextual allusions. Furthermore, the two halves, with their distinctly different stylistic strategies, resist integration with one another. It is almost as if 'Metamorphosis' were a hybrid text consisting of two separate poems collaged together. Finally, even after we have fully taken into account the heterogeneity of this text, a certain unassimilable residue still remains, a froth of verbal junk on the surface of the poem. We

encounter certain infelicities, inexplicable but evidently deliberate, reminiscent of Joyce's 'Eumaeus' chapter, of Gertrude Stein, or of Donald Barthelme (see McHale 1987: 151–6): 'The barges and light they conflict with against' (l. 17), 'Us and our vigilance who [that?]' (l. 26), 'wherever straw was' (l. 31), 'got abated' (l. 43), and so on. There are also instances of Ashbery's trademark pronouns lacking specifiable antecedents (*he*, l. 25; *it*, l. 32; *it*, l. 36; etc.), as well as a number of semantically ungainly mixed metaphors (ll. 19–21, 24–5). All these incidental infelicities seem to function to block assimilation of the language of 'Metamorphosis' to any voice or register or speaker-position whatsoever; they are intractably 'antiabsorptive' elements, in Bernstein's sense.

If 'Metamorphosis' is a stylistic collage, defying integration in terms of a single consistent voice or speaker, then Prynne's 'Of Movement Towards a Natural Place' is even more radically plurivocal, approaching the condition of a macaronic text. Literally a tissue of quotations, some of them explicitly marked, others not, it includes two quoted passages (ll. 6–7, 18–20) that would seem to belong to medical or scientific discourse; several words or phrases ('nothing much', l. 3; 'blame', l. 13; 'excited', l. 17) set off by quotation marks as though someone were disavowing responsibility for them (but who, and why?); an italicized phrase in Latin (ll. 22–3), source unknown;[14] another passage (ll. 17–18) italicized rather than placed between quotation marks, for no apparent reason; and a quoted passage (ll. 24–5) which lacks quotation marks, so that one cannot be certain where exactly the quoted material begins or (especially) where it ends.

At the very least, then, this is a highly diversified text, from the point of view of 'who speaks' in it. Like 'Metamorphosis', it is also a text of juxtaposed and competing registers. It is saturated, as we have already seen, with language from the register of medicine, in particular medical pathology: 'the/ bruise . . . drains' (ll. 2–3), 'neural space' (l. 5), 'white rate' (i.e. white blood-cell count, l. 10), 'scar tissue' (l. 13), 'contre-coup' (l. 20),[15] 'neuroleptic' (i.e. able to reduce nervous tension, tranquillizing, l. 24), 'plaque' (i.e. blood-platelet, l. 28), 'blood levels' (l. 29), 'immune reflection' (l. 30), etc. Cohering with this medical register is a scattering of more generally scientific (or quasi-scientific) diction: 'damage control' (l. 10), 'expanded time-display' (l. 12), 'depletes/ the input' (ll. 12–13), 'flux link' (l. 15), 'cognition' (l. 23), 'granular' (l. 24), etc. In addition there are two deictic phrases – 'at top left' (l. 2), 'top right' (l. 16) – which might be construed as captions to a picture or diagram (perhaps, in this context, from a medical textbook?).

Juxtaposed with this technical medical and scientific discourse we find a register of everyday vocabulary from the semantic fields of the emotions and moral judgement: e.g. 'recall' (ll. 1, 4, 25), 'moral' (ll. 1, 21), 'false' (l. 4), 'remorse' (l. 11), 'blame' (l. 13), 'intentions' (l. 14), 'need' (l. 25), 'benevolence' (l. 27), 'charity' (l. 27), etc. As in the case of 'Metamorphosis', there are a number of instances of conflicting dominance, words or phrases for which two registers in effect 'compete'. Competition arises between medical discourse and everyday discourse, as we have already seen, over such terms as 'hurt', 'bruise', 'cut', 'excitement, excited', and, particularly strikingly, over the ambiguously moral/electrical term 'charge' ('His recall is false but the charge/ is still there', ll. 4–5). Or consider the fragment 'What mean square error' (l. 11). Each word here (apart from 'what') owes a double stylistic allegiance.[16]

In addition to this competition between technical medical and everyday moral or emotional discourse, 'Of Movement' is also the site of competition between medical discourse and conventionally lyrical, poetic discourse. 'Pearly blue with a/ touch of crimson' (ll. 5–6) is both a poetic image and, perhaps, a medical description (as in a coroner's report, say?). 'Godly suffusion' (l. 22) and 'starry and granular' (l. 24) seem similarly to collapse into one the medical or scientific and the poetic. Most striking of all is the phrase, 'at the same white rate' (l. 10). A fragment of medical discourse, this phrase seems also to allude to Dylan Thomas's 'The Force that through the Green Fuse Drives the Flower' (1934):

> . . .
> And I am dumb to tell the crooked rose
> My youth is bent by the same wintry fever.
> . . .
>
> (ll. 4–5)
>
> And I am dumb to mouth unto my veins
> How at the mountain spring the same mouth sucks.
>
> (ll. 9–10)
>
> . . .
> And I am dumb to tell the lover's tomb
> How at my sheet goes the same crooked worm.
>
> (ll. 19–20)

Intertextual allusion here serves to intensify the conflict of dominance between the two discourses.

Who speaks in 'Of Movement Towards a Natural Place'? A

multitude, and, consequently, no one in particular. 'The macaronic', writes Susan Stewart,

> does not effect a synthesis – it is a simultaneity of examinable elements, a conjunction that, like all nonsensical simultaneity, is the sum of its parts and no more. Its movement is perpetual but not hierarchical; it does not rise to a conclusion, it simply keeps going. (1979: 166)

Charles Bernstein aspires, he says, to write a 'multidiscourse text' – 'a work that would involve many different types & styles & modes of language in the same "hyperspace". Such a textual practice would have a dialogic or polylogic rather than monologic method' (1986: 227). 'Live Acts' would seem to be a poem in which Bernstein undertakes to produce the multidiscursive, polylogical text to which he aspires. Stylistically highly heterogeneous, 'Live Acts' is a patchwork or mosaic of discourses, some of them traceable to specific discourse practices in the everyday world, others elusive or untraceable. It features, as we have already noted, a passage (ll. 2–5) of conspicuously non-fluent, abstract language characterized by a proliferation of 'floating' prepositions and fragmentary prepositional phrases. This passage offers the same resistance to 'absorption' as the deliberate infelicities we observed in Ashbery's 'Metamorphosis'. Do we detect here a parody of academic or pedantic discourse, perhaps, or of bureaucratese? Next (ll. 7–8) we encounter what seems to be a parody of the densely figurative language typical of, say, Shakespearian poetry, or that of high modernism (e.g. Hart Crane?). Having reached this lyrical peak, the text promptly (ll. 10–11) stages a bathetic collapse into American colloquialism, reminiscent of similar collapses in 'Metamorphosis':

> . . . Essentially a hypnotic referral, like
> I can't get with you on that, buzzes by real fast . . .

The latter half of 'Live Acts' is characterized by a kind of lexical exhibitionism, a display of various forms of lexical playfulness and innovation, as though the text were reflecting metalinguistically on the potential for innovation in the English lexicon itself. Thus we find, for instance, the phrase 'aquafloral hideaway' (l. 12), a kind of demonstration of the capacities for word-formation in English, the first word (a nonce-formation modelled on aquacade, aquadrama, aquadrome, etc.) exploiting latinate lexical resources, the second ('hideaway') exploiting Anglo-Saxon resources. Similarly, the word 'pigeoning' (l. 14) seems designed to demonstrate the freedom to

change a word's grammatical function: from the noun 'pigeon' we are free to coin a verb, 'to pigeon',[17] hence the gerund form 'pigeoning'. 'Owns', in the phrase, 'the/ answer which never owns what it's really about' (ll. 14–15), illustrates verbal polysemy, ambiguity in the classic Empsonian sense: in this context, 'owns' may mean either (or both) 'to possess' and 'to admit, acknowledge, confess'. Finally, the phrase 'Gum sole shoes' (l. 16) seems to lay bare the process of etymological derivation: from gum sole shoes, or galoshes, in which (presumably) the wearer can move stealthily about, we derive (at any rate according to this etymology) the American colloquial 'gumshoe', for detective, someone for whom moving stealthily about is a professional skill.

By mingling in this way heterogeneous, elusive discourses – untraceable echoes, parodies and pastiches, forms of lexical exhibitionism – 'Live Acts' effectively frustrates integration at the level of voice. Resistance to the category of 'voice' in poetry is a major ideological position of the so-called 'language' poets, including Bernstein.[18] Both in their many polemical writings and manifestos and through their own poetic practice, the 'language' poets expose and critique the ideological underpinnings of 'voice', its implications of a centred, unified self and of full authorial presence in the poem. 'The voice of the poet', writes Bernstein in one of his polemical texts,

> is an easy way of contextualizing poetry so that it can be more readily understood (indiscriminately plugged into) as listening to someone talking in their distinctive manner (i.e., listen for the person beyond or underneath the poem); but this theatricalization does not necessarily do the individual poem any service & has the tendency to reduce the body of a poet's work to little more than personality
>
> (Bernstein and Andrews 1984: 41)

In articulating this principle, Bernstein makes explicit what is implicit not only in 'Live Acts' and other 'language' poets' texts, but also in texts like Ashbery's 'Metamorphosis' and Prynne's 'Of Movement Towards a Natural Place': namely, the text's resistance to assimilation to any single unifying speaker, speaking-position, or speech situation.

ABSTRACTING THEMES

Having failed to integrate these texts at the levels of world and voice, we shift next to the level of theme. Integrating at this level involves identifying thematic rubrics of appropriate scope and importance;

collecting textual segments and features capable of being interpreted in terms of these rubrics; and allowing textual evidence to act upon themes and themes to act upon textual evidence, dialectically, to achieve an ever-tighter feedback loop and what Forrest-Thomson calls a 'thematic synthesis'.[19]

A thematic synthesis of Ashbery's 'Metamorphosis' might begin with the metaphor in ll.4–5: 'O marauding beast of Self-consciousness'. This supplies an appropriately large abstraction, a good candidate for thematic integration. Next we could return once more to the poem's title. Coherent with nothing at the level of world, the title 'Metamorphosis' perhaps ought to be understood more abstractly, as naming a theme. Thus we might propose a working thematic hypothesis: 'Metamorphosis' is 'about' the metamorphosis of self-consciousness, that is, change in the quality or degree of self-consciousness from, say, lesser to greater, or from none to some. This is at least a plausible theme for a poem, if for no other reason, because it belongs to the postromantic repertoire of privileged poetic themes. In other words, according to our hypothesis, 'Metamorphosis' instantiates the familiar thematic *topos* of the 'fall' from innocence into experience.

Scanning the text, we readily identify corroborating evidence for this theme. The entire poem is structured around a 'now' vs. 'then' opposition: the present-tense verbs of its first half (recurring briefly in ll. 37–9) contrast with the past-tense verbs of the second half. This contrast of tenses can be construed as corresponding to an opposition between anxious self-consciousness (the poem's 'now') and a lost pastoral idyll (its 'then'). Evidently the loss of this state of pastoral innocence has been a painful one (as the fall-from-innocence *topos* prescribes): 'The penchant for growing . . ./ Has left us bereft' (ll. 23–4). 'Just then/ It [what?] all turned the corner into a tiny want ad' (ll. 35–6): perhaps this can be read as a metaphor (somewhat trivializing and ironic in tone) for the transition from innocence to experience. If the 'fall' into self-consciousness involves erotic experience (as it often does in poems belonging to this *topos*), then that might explain the allusion to the Petrarcan conceit of the 'colossal staircase in my flesh' (ll. 45–8), and perhaps even make sense of the mysterious fall from the ladder (ll. 41–6), which can now be understood as a metaphor for the (erotic) fall from innocence.

If the evidence for this reading seems thin, we only need to shift our ground somewhat to make our reading more comprehensive. So far we have been considering the theme of self-consciousness as it applies to a human self (the poet's persona, presumably); but this theme can