The "Experimental" Dilemma

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Contemporary poetic traditions define themselves as experimental when they disrupt either realist representation or semantic realism. Some of these experimental poetic traditions date back to the seventeenth century. They have been widely influential across the world, and are now part of the poetic mainstream. Mainstream poetry in other traditions also works to avoid cliché.

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Always, faced with the topic, I find I want to start by asking what experimental poetry *is*: and by asking what poetry is *not* experimental.

I don't mean to be disingenuous. If we are to measure up to radicalism, something thoroughgoing in us must answer its challenge. Of course, one response to my two questions – addressing both what is and what is not experimental poetry – is that today there exist particular poetic traditions that break the old realistic contract, the "I am a camera" literary project so astutely identified by Christopher Isherwood in *Goodbye to Berlin*. Writing in experimental traditions can break with realist notions of representation or with what we might call grammatical realism – or with both. And so these traditions are what many poets and critics mean when they talk about experimental poetry.

Yet traditions they are. Poetry that goes out of its way to disrupt "realist" representation can be traced back at least as far as the automatic writing prose poems of the Surrealists working in France between the world wars: Max Ernst, Leonora Carrington and David Gascoyne among them. They were being written, in other words, in both English *and French*: important to remember this, when Anglophone Beat poetry was to become so influential just two decades later. *Howl*'s Expressionist disruption of what the English poet Henry Reed calls, in a famous second world war poem of army life, "the naming of parts" (49) remains influential today: still echoing among, for example, contemporary writing from Central and South Eastern Europe.

It's easy to see why. Allen Ginsberg's poetics of momentum and scale is tremendously permission-giving. It remains a triumphant rebuff to the more costive, academic traditions of much literary education in particular, as well as of ornamental, Sunday-afternoon verse. Beat poetry's evident orality – on the page the long sentences, the apparently ceaseless enjambments, become indigestible: out loud, breathing vivifies them – and its characteristically cranked-up register proclaim *this poetry is art, not verse*. Its a-metric rhythmic restlessness implies that it has no patience for attending to tradition, the given – anything beyond itself. It suggests imperative. It suggests immediacy. It implies that it is of this very moment.

That "very moment" may mean *now* but it is a "moment" of more than half a century's duration: *Howl* was written in 1955. Here is the Romanian Mircea Cartarescu bringing it into the twenty-first century:

I loved the streets in San Francisco
and Grant street with its bric-à-brac
and huge palm trees and the rorty girls
in the hair salons
(the patrons
were not looking at themselves in mirrors but in colour TVs)
and the American nights, do you still remember, Mircea T.?
near your house and Melissa's, after
all afternoon long we had been watching Sci-Fi films, eaten tacos
and drank Old Style beer
and when we stepped outside the stars overwhelmed us
and the silent planes moving between them
and in your car, the old Ford, the air was frozen
and you took me, through the deserted city, all the way to
Mayflower Residence Hall.
and the Thanksgiving parade and the Halloween one
with the old bankers dressed as clowns and bears
and that boy of Czech origin who was interested in Faulkner
and the petite Korean in the yellow Cambus
and the melancholy of the yellow leaves in Iowa City
and us two, Gabi and I, shopping, for hours
at Target and K-mart and Goodwill
and at the fantastic Mall downtown. (34)

Here is the Jordanian poet Amjad Nasser writing recently in exile in London:

One more night and the silver branches will be full
for the horizon that inclines on my shoulder. One more night
and the Qahtanite will wear a sword of spring fuzz and lead the horse of his desires through marble pillars toward the renaissance of the body
Seduction leans to the north in this wilderness

that is laurelled with the moon's dew. And the lands – which are in a awe
of copper thunder and ram horns that are painted
with history's fragrant dust – the lands passionately chant: This is Asia!
And since you come from the evening of technology and species
of indigent creatures, you saw Pleiades gleam over camel humps, and saw drawn
daggers in the fear of wolves glisten like an encounter. (53)

The details differ but the helter-skelter construction is similar. And here is the Slovenian poet Iztok Osojnik, writing in 2013, providing his own symbolic vocabulary:

[…] or it is an original glittering language that is not
any of mother tongues
but something between … between teeth?
there should be a tongue there but it is not, it is a cock
as you report it shockingly. and when I come
it is not in your mouth – though somewhat, metaphorically right there –
but in my other myself in you.
a thin muscle jerked in my cranial condominium
stillness, darkness, Mondsee, schonberg in the stubai alps.
an oetzi, burning stars, emmo kant, me woman you man,
savage but not gentle at all.
negritude
is my compass, aimé césaire, a bisexual antilles' volcano.
sugarcane is the history, sugarcane
french revolution lost there, sugarcane the
cock, the juicy alternation of Hegel's spirit and the European *jouissance* bullshit,
the body is alive, not god. my coffee is cold now (78)

It's neither just the rhythm nor just the vision that marks out this kind of writing. It's the rhythm *of* the vision. One of *Howl*'s most seductive tropes is the way it totalizes experience: "I saw the best minds of my generation destroyed by madness, starving hysterical naked…" (5) How much more this shakes and reassures us than if the poem opened, "I saw *some* of the best minds of my generation destroyed…". *Howl* is the poem as witness or prophecy. It is a *public* poem, very different from the room-bound, because writing process- bound, automatic doodles of the earlier generation. In David Gascoyne's 1936 *Man's Life is this Meat*:

there is an explosion of geraniums in the ballroom of the hotel
there is an extremely unpleasant odour of decaying meat
arising from the depetalled flower growing out of her ear
her arms are like pieces of sandpaper
or wings of leprous birds in taxis
and when she sings her hair stands on end

and lights itself with a million little lamps like glowworms
you must always write the last two letters of her christian name
upside down with a blue pencil

she was standing at the window clothed only in a ribbon
she was burning the eyes of snails in a candle
she was eating the excrement of dogs and horses
she was writing a letter to the president of france (25-26)

Gascoyne is "taking the line for a walk", in the phrase of his contemporary, fellow-European Paul Klee. Ginsberg's stakes appear higher than this, at least in the projected space *beyond* the text: he is proclaiming the Great American Poem.

He isn't inventing it, though. The seductive rhythm of a totalizing rhetoric – we might even say a totalizing poetics – is first widely heard in Walt Whitman. *Leaves of Grass* was first published in 1855, a whole century before *Howl*. And if Ginsberg was trying to incant one particular generation into identity, the contribution Whitman was making – writing first before the American Civil War, though he was to revise the work for the rest of his life – was to nation-building on a continental scale.

Leaves of Grass is a doxology, co-opting every part of life in that continent for its praise-song to the USA. Only a longer extract, itself a small part of the whole, can remind us of the cumulative sense this listing creates of a sheer scale that grows out of but is more powerful than the sum of its parts. The original doxology, Psalm 148, the *Benedicite* canticle, works in the same way. Its God is great because he is the author of *all* these things:

The pure contralto sings in the organ loft;
The carpenter dresses his plank—the tongue of his foreplane whistles its wild ascending lisp;
The married and unmarried children ride home to their Thanksgiving dinner;
The pilot seizes the king-pin—he heaves down with a strong arm;
The mate stands braced in the whale-boat—lance and harpoon are ready;
The duck-shooter walks by silent and cautious stretches;
The deacons are ordain'd with cross'd hands at the altar;
The spinning-girl retreats and advances to the hum of the big wheel;
The farmer stops by the bars, as he walks on a First-day loafe, and looks at the oats and rye;
The lunatic is carried at last to the asylum, a confirm'd case,
(He will never sleep any more as he did in the cot in his mother's bed-room;)
The jour printer with gray head and gaunt jaws works at his case,
He turns his quid of tobacco, while his eyes blurr with the manuscript;
The malform'd limbs are tied to the surgeon's table,
What is removed drops horribly in a pail;

The quadroon girl is sold at the auction-stand—the drunkard nods by the bar-room stove;
The machinist rolls up his sleeves—the policeman travels his beat—the gate-keeper marks who pass;
The young fellow drives the express-wagon—(I love him, though I do not know him;)
The half-breed straps on his light boots to complete in the race;
The western turkey-shooting draws old and young—some lean on their rifles, some sit on logs,
Out from the crowd steps the marksman, takes his position, levels his piece;

The groups of newly-come immigrants cover the wharf or levee;
[…]

And these one and all tend inward to me, and I tend outward to them;
And such as it is to be of these, more or less, I am. (9-10)

We can't know hear, though we can understand, how revolutionary this long-lined free verse must have sounded in the mid-nineteenth century. Its form must have worked just as *Howl*'s did in the mid-twentieth: suggesting imperative immediacy, and implying that it was of a "moment" – one that lasted until Ginsberg came along to match it.

And behind Whitman – what? His most obvious predecessor is the eighteenth century English poet Christopher Smart, whose *Jubilate Agno* is as its title suggests another doxology; a call to the created and human worlds, compendiously cited, to "Rejoice in the Lamb" of God:

For I will consider my Cat Jeoffry.
For he is the servant of the Living God duly and daily serving him.
For at the first glance of the glory of God in the East he worships in his way.
For this is done by wreathing his body seven times round with elegant quickness.
For then he leaps up to catch the musk, which is the blessing of God upon his prayer.
For he rolls upon prank to work it in.
For having done duty and received blessing he begins to consider himself.
For this he performs in ten degrees.
For first he looks upon his forepaws to see if they are clean.
For secondly he kicks up behind to clear away there.
For thirdly he works it upon stretch with the forepaws extended.
For fourthly he sharpens his paws by wood.
For fifthly he washes himself.
For sixthly he rolls upon wash.
For seventhly he fleas himself, that he may not be interrupted upon the beat.
For eighthly he rubs himself against a post.
For ninthly he looks up for his instructions.
For tenthly he goes in quest of food.
For having consider'd God and himself he will consider his neighbour.

> For if he meets another cat he will kiss her in kindness.
> For when he takes his prey he plays with it to give it a chance.
> For one mouse in seven escapes by his dallying.
> For when his day's work is done his business more properly begins.
> For he keeps the Lord's watch in the night against the adversary.
> For he counteracts the powers of darkness by his electrical skin and glaring eyes.
> For he counteracts the Devil, who is death, by brisking about the life.
> For in his morning orisons he loves the sun and the sun loves him.
> For he is of the tribe of Tiger.

But as C.K. Williams – another long-lined American poet, but the author not of doxologies but of poems of discussion and transformation – says, "Whitman seems never to have heard of Smart" (6) Instead, it is Ginsberg who claims Smart – and does so in order to deny Whitman:

> The reason I want to lay Smart on you now is (that) his line is basically the same line I used for Howl. I didn't get the Howl line from Whitman and I didn't get it from Robinson Jeffers or Kenneth Fearing, who are the American precursors of long line, nor from the 19th century British poet Edward Carpenter, who was also as a student of Walt Whitman, writing long lines – but from Christopher Smart.

This is not Ginsberg revealing himself as inauthentic. Instead, in one version of poetics, he is revealing how much of a poet he is. He is, to paraphrase Vachel Lindsay (1879-1931) that un-experimental North American reviver of "singing poetry", "learning to be a poet by living among poets". *Singing school,* the term famously appropriated by Seamus Heaney for his Portrait of the Artist in 1975's *North*, is nothing new – and neither is it passé. Ginsberg himself is here *teaching* his poetics to undergraduates. And so Experimental Poetry is widely taught in today's British and American universities, forming new generations of tyro poetry readers and writers.

In Britain, what's taught as "Experimental" includes poetry that doesn't follow the Beat tradition but instead disrupts what we might call grammatical realism. The Cambridge School, centered round Cambridge University and under the leadership of Jeremy Prynne – an exceptionally generous and charismatic *teacher*, by every account – doesn't simply throw off the expectation that it might show, or pretend to show, the world of outer experience as it is: whatever we might take that to mean. It goes further, throwing off the representational expectations we have of language itself. Here, words do not point to anything beyond themselves. Prynne himself writes with a beautiful lyric tone, but it is generally hard to know how and why the words he combines with standard grammatical patterns belong together; and it is the belonging-together of words that grammar,

in standard and non-standard forms, might be said to be *for*. Prynne – whose approach has at times overlapped with that of John Ashbery – is conducting a more thorough-going experiment than the Beat poets:

> Under her brow the snowy wing-case
> delivers truly the surprise
> of days which slide under sunlight
> past loose glass in the door
> into the reflection of honour spread
> through the incomplete, the trusted. So
> darkly the stain skips as a livery
> of your pause like an apple pip,
> the baltic loved one who sleeps. (190)

This experiment compels through the richness of its vocabulary ("wing-case", "brow", "Baltic") and the evanescent accompanying sense of a meaning always just escaping ahead of us down the lines. At the same time, therefore, it lacks the fluency and simplicity that goes with a totalizing rhetoric. It introduces complexity instead of simplification: when no word behaves as expected, no word can be taken for granted. It brings the language up close to the reader, placing it *between* the reader and any possible world of experience beyond that language. To have it another way, this poetry brings radical change into the space between the individual and the very language they think in – brings change into the inner world of individual experience – rather than staging it beyond the individual in the shared space of the reading hall. This privacy and this difficulty, both inherent in the Cambridge project, seem the twin indicators of why it has never been a poetic mass movement as Beat poetry of the Fifities and Sixties in effect was. Yet both traditions are interested in themselves *as* experimental: as engaged in the very moment of transformation. As a result, both largely eschew qualitative judgment of the poems that are their outcome – except *in relation to* that transformation.

Here cynics interpose themselves to suggest that an experimental tradition is a contradiction in terms: that only the various founders of these traditions conducted the experiments from which they got their names and that the rest is mere repetition, the work of a motley of followers. It seems to me that the case is more nuanced than this. Every fine poet has imitators, among other hangers-on (critics, students…groupies!). And over the centuries most fine poets have been not so much initiators of some new style as the synthesizers or protagonists of existing, evolving poetics. Originality is not always radical disruption, and radical disruption is not always original.

But here I'm lapsing into what we might call "Beat logic", simplifying and totalizing a complex, various picture. The individual poet still has to make his or her way through poetry into the particular new poem he or she is writing. Old Masters of Modernist thought, like Frederick Nietzsche, Martin Heidegger and the T.S. Eliot of *Little Gidding*, hold that "Every poem an epitaph. And any action /Is a step to the block, to the fire, down the sea's throat /Or to an illegible stone" (221-222). The poem must fail because it is the inert result of thought not "living" thought-in-process itself. But the post-Modern moment understands that even repetition is refreshment. For after all, is there any decent poetry that isn't experimental? Isn't "poetry" the name *for* precisely those texts in which the word slips free of the old realist contract? Forms, like persons, can continue to move even when they *feel* exhausted. Eliot again, that old radical, in *Burnt Norton*:

> […] Words strain,
> Crack and sometimes break, under the burden,
> Under the tension, slip, slide, perish,
> Decay with imprecision, will not stay in place,
> Will not stay still. […] (194)

In Britain today, so many different poetics co-exist that it would be hard to detect a hegemony that needs to be challenged. (There *are* hegemonies, of course, but they tend to coalesce round extra-textual structures and advantages, not as textual ones.) There is free and formal, narrative and lyric, post-modern and iambic, literal and symbolist, loose-limbed and compact, metaphysical and anecdotal verse within the mainstream alone. Also within that mainstream sits the "experimental" tradition that, though it may wish to hold itself apart, operates in conventional ways within and without disrupting that sphere. It colonises particular publishers, has its own critics and advocates, and is the academic and creative specialism of particular university departments. There are even poets, like Gillian Allnutt, whose work bridges the experimental/other category distinction:

> Delphinium
>
> the heart, fleet, in its large domain
>
> a *grand meaulnes*
>
> summer, recalled, a light blue lent sea
>
> of dust and shadow, now, the house
>
> of doubtfulness (14)

Allnut's touch is light. But each of us who cares about poetry touches the stakes and operations of experiment lightly as we write; perhaps because of a shared anxiety about the distinction between the mechanism and the flight, the technique and the poem. This anxiety is not the exclusive preserve of experimental tradition. The poem is not composed by predictive text, after all, but by some bearing upon on the as-yet unknown – some risk of logic and connection. Isn't it?

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»Eksperimentalna« dilema

Ključne besede: angleška poezija / ameriška poezija / pesniška tradicija / sodobna poezija / eksperimentalna poezija

Članek govori o sodobni anglofoni poeziji. Sodobne pesniške tradicije sebe opredeljujejo kot eksperimentalne, kadar prelamljajo pravila realistične reprezentacije ali »realistične slovnice«. Nobeden od teh postopkov prelamljanja ni nov. Sporazum o realizmu v književnosti je tako v angleškem kot francoskem verzu razdrl nadrealizem. V ameriškem verzu je mogoče zametke beatniške poezije zaznati v devetnajstem stoletju pri Waltu Whitmanu, v britanskem verzu pa v osemnajstem stoletju pri Christopherju Smartu. V Severni Ameriki in Britaniji John Ashbery in Jeremy Prynne že od petdesetih let naprej uporabljata konvencionalne slovnične konstrukcije, zato da na »nesmiselne načine« povezujeta konvencionalne besede.

Omenjene eksperimentalne tradicije proizvajajo tako dela, ki so zgolj neke vrste izpeljave predhodnih del, kot tudi takšna, ki s tradicijo učinkovito prelamljajo ali pa so učinkovita glede na kakšno drugo pesniško merilo. Delujejo na enak način kakor druge sodobne pesniške tradicije. Te porajajo dela, ki so zgolj izpeljave in različice predhodnih del, kakor tudi izvirna dela. Tudi te tradicije, podobno kot eksperimentalne, so vključene v glavni tok sodobne poezije. Določene so z razporeditvijo finančnih sredstev, kritično pozornostjo in zmožnostjo, da se reproducirajo kot predmeti univerzitetnega poučevanja in učenja.

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