Discourse Practices and the Linguistic Resources of Poetry

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Close attention to the language of literature has been a part of critical practice throughout its history. However, in the Twentieth Century, the language of literature has come under an intensity of critical focus which is altogether an obsession of our own. The critic's return to the linguistic text -- forsaking speculation on the author's biography and psychology, on literature's heritage as a social institution, and on the reader's moral, social and/or psychological advantage in reading it-- was inaugurated by the aesthetic theories of the Russian Formalists at the beginning of the century and this critical attitude has prevailed through the domesticated versions we find in the work of Anglo-American New Critics and European Structuralists. The common ground of each of these critical movements (and there are many squabbles between them) is in the importance they place on the formal properties of the language of the texts they examine as 'literature'.

Discourse analysis of the literary use of language enters the critical debates on the basis of its theoretical power to facilitate the analyses of linguistic forms. It adds to the scope of debate through its ability to relate the literary use of language to other uses of language. Recognizing that literature, auto-repair, law, all our 'knowledges' exist in language, discourse analysis sets out to discover how these 'knowledges' (or discourse practices) differ. And the differences are expected to manifest themselves as characteristic features of language use. Poems, academic treatises, fashion magazines, how-to manuals embody assumptions about, intentions for, and formal constraints on their language which may be shared with or distinctive for given discourses. Discourse analysis is itself a discourse practice, one which problematizes 'the language of discourses' upon which it then broods.

This paper examines two poems in terms of the ways each poem draws upon other discourses as resources for constituting its own textuality. The two means are antithetical and each are claimed to be symptomatic of antithetical assumptions about language, society and literature. We call these assumptions embodied by the texts the 'poetics' under which the poems were written. The two poetics contrasted in the discussion below are termed 'the poetics of unity' and 'the poetics of heterogeneity'. The analysis of each poem, I hope, will lead to a fuller characterization of these terms. I begin by offering the following poem which will serve as our example of poetry written under the poetics of unity:

Poem using lines spoken by Suzanne

What you feel as your body
is only a dream. The mind also
is a slave. You are asleep.
You are asleep, what you feel
as your mind is only a dream. The
dream also, is only a slave.
You are a dream, what you feel
as your slave is only a mind.
The body also is a mind. You
are asleep
in the gentle theft of time. (time)
This poem by Christopher Dewdney makes compelling use of cohesive devices through which paragraphs of expository prose are able to articulate logically sound arguments. The movement from sentence to sentence mimics the movement of propositions in a syllogism. Cohesion is ensured by lexical collocation, weaving 'body', 'dream', 'slave', 'mind' and 'asleep' through the predicative force of two insistently repeated verbs: 'to be' and 'to feel'. Syllogistic structuration in an expository use of language results in a decisive progression of information from the assumed to the new. The allure of the Dewdney poem lies in its suggestion of such a progression of assertions, counterpointed with their curious eddying back. This paradoxical effect can be attributed to the interaction of several linguistic features of the poem. Its sense of moving forward is sustained by the cohesive collocation strands already noted but this progression is created, in the first place, by the combination of the poem's active, declarative syntax and the formulaic reiteration of the subordinate clause "What you feel as your body/mind/slave". The effect of progression imparted by a sequence of active, declarative sentences is by no means guaranteed empirically but a potential one realized on the strength of typological equivalence. The 'reading' of progression into a sequence of such syntax depends upon our familiarity with the use of similar forms in other kinds of discourses. For example, active, declarative syntax with few subordinate clauses to clutter the way is typical of narration in which a plot event unfolds rapidly. This narrativity is one potential of many available to the forms under discussion and its realization in the poem as a sense of progression is finally determined by the concurrence of other formal features with the same potential effect. We shall examine these other features shortly.

The general claim being made here is that though different discourses have different grammatical characteristics which define what Halliday and Hasan (1976, p.22) call the register of a discourse, registers themselves are allusive, always evocative of several other contexts of situation. Whereas the field, mode and tenor of a given situational context is specifiable, the associated register, by comparison always remains open-ended, beyond precise definition. The register of a discourse, a (large) set of grammatical features occasioned by a particular situational context, is by nature plastic, tending to run over the bounds of its context. Formulating the notion of register in this way enables us to explain the modelling property of language, the way in which language shapes thought and behaviour, providing a means of experiencing situations that are always (though to varying degrees) novel. At each unprecedented social encounter, the grammatical forms of the familiar solicit us to write ourselves a script. In terms of Halliday's (1973, p.51) notion of language constituting a meaning potential, a system conditioning what a speaker can mean, where 'meaning' is 'doing' (a behaviour), our formulation of register is meant to suggest that this potential is not an undifferentiated set of grammatical options but rather a differentiated one wherein one choice among grammatical options come associated with certain other choices. Register, then is to be thought of as both a partially implemented system and a partially decontextualized text. This provides us with a highly useful concept for the analyses of cultural texts, particularly those which deliberately try to initiate their own contexts of enunciation such as some instances of advertising, popular songs and 'literature' and, in this attempt, must draw upon established discourses as a resource for the ways in which they can create meaning.

Our notion of register was developed from the observation that the effect of progression in Dewdney's poem is partly due to its series of active, declarative sentences which typologically relate them to narrative progress which certain other kinds of discourses emphasize. We can now express this in terms of one register echoing another. However, our reading of progression as a significant effect of the poem, as yet, rests on slim evidence. There are other features of the language of the poem which coincide to determine this reading. One such feature, we noted, was the formulaic reiteration of the phrase "what you feel as your X" where the term 'X' is given as "body", "mind" and finally "slave" on each successive occasion. This variation on the formula is a complex locus of effects. The
substitution of terms in the formula itself is forward moving as the formula each time steps into the domain of a new topic. We may typologically trace this effect to the registers of (legislative, religious) proclamation which frame their announcements within the assuring warranty of formulaic phrasing. However, the repetition of "What you feel as your..." participates in the contrary reading of effect which notices that the poem fails to go anywhere, to reach a conclusion, a point of summation. In this reading, the repetition strikes the ear as a refrain which, in a ballad, is a point at which the audience, story and story-teller are gathered together in a phatic speech act that transcends the temporal and dramatic procession of the narrative. There is another linguistic feature that is responsible for placing the forward stride of the poem on a treadmill but we shall postpone our discussion of it to consider one last device contributing to the effect of progression.

The poem employs the adverbial elements 'also' and 'only' in a structure of opposition based on syntactic parallelism. One analysis of the syntax might suppose that it is base generated as 'is NP only/also' and the surface structure derived by a movement transformation which must include the two lexical items in the same category (say of adverbs) in its structural description. Whatever the analysis, the parallelism invoked here refers to the items' analogous syntactic roles. The structure of opposition arising from this parallelism, however, complicates the semantics of 'also' and 'only' in the poem. 'Also' has a cohesive function in the text. It is a term of comparative, anaphoric reference, implying some kind of similarity or analogy in the propositional content of the sentence in which it occurs with that of a previous sentence. In this way, it ties together successive sentences into a relation of propositional development. Now, 'only' - if we take the sentences in which it occurs out of the context of the poem - means something equivalent with 'merely'. In the poem, however, it has been systematized with 'also' and thus comes to interact with the latter's semantics. 'Only' has an adjectival homograph which bears an antonymous relation to the synonomic range of 'also'. We can express this relation through the opposition: one of a kind/many of a kind. The syntactic parallelism foregrounds this opposition, drawing 'only' into the cohesive logic of 'also'. Our impression of a propositional development from sentence to sentence, of syllogistic movement, is enhanced by the intimation of opposing assertions embedded within the alternation of 'also' and 'only' through the poem.

The poem's momentum is sent slipping back by the way the poem organizes its transmission of new information. Linguists of the Prague Circle have noted that a characteristic of the expository use of language is its organization of 'new' and 'given' information. Part of a sentence that contains information that has been previously given in the text is called the 'theme' of the sentence and the part of a sentence that contains new information is called its 'rheté'. The general tendency in exposition is for the theme to precede the rheté (Vachek, 1966, p.89). The third through sixth sentences in the poem illustrate what we may call the expository norm of theme/rheté structure:

You are asleep.
You are asleep, what you feel
as your mind is only a dream. The
dream also, is only a slave.

The sentence "You are asleep, what you feel" repeats the information of the previous sentence ("You are asleep") and the first part of the next sentence ("The dream") picks up on the previous rheté. This is typical of exposition and considered to be responsible for the fluency of exposition. In Dewdney's poem, we find an overwhelming precedence of
rhemes to themes. In the following examples, first-part rhemes (in place of themes) have been underlined: a) What you feel as your body is only a dream. The mind also is a slave; b) The dream also, is only a slave. You are a dream; c) What you feel as your slave is only a mind. The body also is a mind. You are asleep.... The effect is disruptive as each successive sentence introduces a new point of departure rather than beginning on the ground laid out by the previous assertion. The violation of the theme/rheme norm forces us to keep reaching backward to find the point of relevance of each new assertion. In this context of the poem's manner of introducing new information, contiguous repetitions such as "You are asleep/ You are asleep, what you feel..." produce a sense of stagnation rather than smoothing out sentence transitions.

The poem is remarkable because of the complexity of its effects, not only because it creates an impression of its arguing toward a conclusion but also because this impression is in juxtaposition with our impression of the poem's circularity, its failure to reason its way to a conclusion. In the perspective of Anglo-American New Criticism, this juxtaposition of impressions would be commended as the poem's organic tension. Such tensions are commendable, in their view, because they are tolerable and structural tensions are tolerable because one transcends them by finding their pertinence to the work's 'ultimate' meaning. We can recapitulate the moves typical of a New Critic in our analysis of Dewdney's poem. Notice that the entire range of action available to the world of the poem is circumscribed by 'being' and 'feeling', the only verbs in the poem. We have already commented on the fact that the nouns 'body', 'mind', 'dream', and 'slave' are permuted as subjects and objects of these verbs. The poem suggests, then, that being and feeling involve (and we have spent the past several pages looking at how quite literally) trying to sort out just what being and feeling really is and just how they are related. We keep trying over and over to figure all this out but we don't get anywhere. Here, one of the terms of the permutation, 'slave', takes on its significance. We are captives of our minds, bodies, and dreams and, as such, we are captivated by feeling and being. However, in the course of our wandering about our 'true' condition, to which we have not yet wakened, time is stealing by. And we can't even be sure of our arriving at this conclusion from the way Dewdney ends the poem, employing as he does, a trick of typography to set the evidence of our eyes against the evidence of our ears. The word 'time' is repeated at the end, the second occasion in parentheses. The second instance is an echo of the first, fainter, receding away from us in time forever. But we also see the word definitely enclosed by the circle of the parenthesis as though time itself was bound up in the circuit of our experience. The juxtaposition of effects argued for by attending to the linguistic features of the poem is thus taken up into this narrative of reconciliation which states the meaning of the poem in terms of the way the poem means. We are now able to leave the poem, having shown that form is content and content form, as any New Critic would.

The interpenetration of form and content which our analysis has 'discovered' reflects a particular stance toward the relations between 'art', 'language', 'meaning' and the social world of which they are a part. Such a stance constitutes a particular 'poetics', a set of beliefs about these relations that are somehow assumed in the making of the poem. Taking Dewdney's poem as an example, our analysis has elicited a poetics of unity: Form and content are enjoined in a unity - the content of the poem is in its form and the form of the poem is its content. This, however, is a misleading characterization of what has actually occurred in the 'act of analysis'. Our method has been to subordinate formal (grammatical) details of the poem to the function of holding up its meaning. Notice that we did not begin by stating that 'the poem means X' and therefore conclude that 'it has the grammatical features Y and Z'. Poems and their analyses written under a poetics of unity always privilege 'the produced meaning' (what a person can know) over 'the production of meaning' (what a person can do). Put another way, one of the beliefs embodied by the poetics of unity is that the relation between grammatical form (the signifier) and semantic content (the signified) is hierarchical.
Over the course of this century, certain writers have tried to write their way beyond a poetics of unity. For various reasons, some philosophical others also political, these writers wish to put the assumptions behind such a poetic into crisis. Their works cannot be read in the same way as we read Christopher Dewdney’s poem. In reading their work, we must rethink our assumptions about language, meaning, society and, of course, art; in other words we must rethink our ‘poetics’. Famous examples of literature that places such a requirement on us are James Joyce’s Finnegans Wake, Ezra Pound's Cantos, as well as the works of Canadian writers such as Dewdney himself, Daphne Marlatt and Robert Kroetsch (whose poem Seed Catalogue we will examine in a moment). The works of these writers may be described as operating a poetics of heterogeneity. The description is meant to emphasize the opposing relation these works bear to the poetics of unity. The relation between these two kinds of literature is also a historical one and for this reason our ability to read heterogenous texts cannot evolve in isolation but must refer also to the assumptions with which we read poems like Dewdney's.

In the following remarks on the first poem of Robert Kroetsch's Seed Catalogue, we will contrast the way in which the registers of other discourses are brought together by Kroetsch with what we have seen in Dewdney’s poem. The text of Kroetsch’s poem is given in the appendix.

The way the poem brings together a multitude of registers from various sources (commercial prose, colloquial speech characteristic of different genders and classes, such speech transposed in writing, literary tradition, and children's rhymes) is akin to Levi-Strauss’ notion of bricolage with a significant difference arising through the fact that the resulting code is neither coherent nor culturally integrated. The poem is accessible only to an educated elite. And we will try to characterize its incoherence in the course of these remarks.

The different registers the poem draws into itself may be contrasted with each other in terms of their diction and syntax. The only instances of paratactic clause conjunction and clause coordination occur in the citations of written language--in the excerpts from a seed catalogue and W.W. Lyon's testimonial--distinguishing them from the oral reports (including, the poet's narrative). Several other syntactic contrasts are distinctive with respect to the registers we can hear in the poem:

(i) seed purchased of you          (archaism)
(ii) just about planted the little bugger  (colloquial speech - low)
(iii) how in hell                  (colloquial speech - low
(iv) if/ spring should come
(v) This is what happened -at my mother's wake. This is a fact-
(vi) Then it was spring. Or, no:then winter was ending (conversational - middle)

Contrasts of diction can also be noted. The excerpts from the seed catalogue employ the characteristic excesses of commercial descriptive prose lurching, as it does, back and forth between the self-important ('strictly speaking', 'every respect a thoroughbred', 'professional gardeners') and the vogue ('creating considerable flurry'). We can compare

1cf. "If Winter comes, can Spring be far behind?" - Shelley "Ode to the West Wind"
these word choices with the quaint 'dandy' of the testimonial, the jargon of '1/4-section' and 'N.E.17-42-16-W4th Meridian', the idiomatic expression of 'grow cabbages/in those ears', the literariness of 'terrible symmetry' (cf. "terrible beauty" - Yeats "Easter 1916", and "fearful symmetry" -Blake "The Tyger".), and the ironic bookishness of the poet's use of 'with illustrations'.

Furthermore, we can contrast the lists in the poem. Consider the simplicity and succinctness of description in:

No trees
around the house.
Only the wind.
Only the January snow.
Only the summer sun.
The home place:
a terrible symmetry.

And compare it with the bizarre and sometimes ostentatious names in:

Telephone Peas
Garden Gem Carrots
Early Snowcap Cauliflower
Perfection Globe Onions
Hubbard Squash
Early Ohio Potatoes

Your commonly sophisticated, and most likely urban, student of the humanities -whom the poem addresses with its coy allusions to Romantic Poetry- buys peas, carrots, cauliflower, onions, squash, and potatoes. The proper nouns of the list belong to a jargon which lies beyond the vocabulary of at least this reader. Consequently the list is for me an invitation to notice the linguistic forms (signifiers) for their own sake. We can say this of the poem in general, that its rhetorical strategy is to foreground its language so that in reading we are compelled to notice the clashing diversity of language itself. The contrasts of register echoes we noted earlier do not fit together to produce the unity of a paradoxical effect as they did in Dewdney's poem but remain in obtrusive discord. This is the commendable tension of Kroetsch's poem, however, unlike poems written under a poetics of unity, we cannot resolve the tension by turning away from the linguistic forms and pursuing a narrative of reconciliation about the meaning or content of the poem. (Our reading, an activity, cannot act at the level of the poem's signified). Instead, the poem drives us the other way. Appealing to Frege's distinction between the 'sense' and 'reference' of a linguistic form, we can-say that the poem denies us its sense and sends us in the direction of its referents. Consider the multitude of proper names in the poem: "Detroit Tigers", "Cincinnati Reds", "Heisler, Alberta", "W.W. Lyon, South Junction, Man.", "Copenhagen Market Cabbage". The rhetorical thrust of the poem, deflected by the dense and thematically fragmented mosaic of its linguistic forms, is ultimately out to the world of
facts. We ask who is W.W. Lyon? When did "seed purchased of you" become archaic, if indeed it has? What is a "Telephone Pea"? The questions which arise in our reading of the poem are frequently sociological or historical ones. The contrasts between the diverse registers of the poem are also realized as part of the world of facts. The poem bids us to hear the various conflicting discourses, registers, dialects and jargons around us, to hear the clamour of our effort to communicate. Yet for all its extroversion, the poem does not reduce to a sociological document. It maintains a deeply personal tone and does this in a very traditionally literary way. The poet's anecdote about falling of a horse that was standing still loses its innocence when it is invoked a second time:

This is what happened - at my mother's wake. This is a fact- the World Series was in progress. The Cincinnati Reds were playing the Detroit Tigers. It was raining. The road to the graveyard was barely passable. The horse was standing still. Bring me the radish seeds, my mother whispered.

Repeated in this context, the phrase "the horse was standing still" is enriched with a significance beyond its literal meaning and becomes symbolically suggestive of the poet's relation to "the home place".

This paper has endeavoured to describe two kinds of poems each of which assumes a poetics that is antithetical to the other. The two poems, assumed to be symptomatic of each poetic, were analyzed in terms of their use of other discourse registers. In Christopher Dewdney's poem, which we claimed is written under a poetics of unity, we saw the diversity of discourses that constitutes the poet's linguistic resources come under the government of the poem's thematic imperatives. Different registers are appropriated in that poem and homogenized into a unique idiom. By comparison, the poem from Robert Kroetsch's Seed Catalogue, does not erase the sources of the registers it brings together: The language of the poem retains the clashing heterogeneity of the poem's sources. Thematic coherence is abdicated in favour of granting the registers echoed in the poem their autonomy so that our reading of the poem involves a return to the various contexts of situations which supplied the raw materials of the text.
Bibliography


Appendix

1.

No. 176—Copenhagen Market Cabbage: "This new introduction, strictly speaking, is in every respect a thoroughbred, a cabbage of highest pedigree, and is creating considerable flurry among professional gardeners all over the world."

We took the storm windows off
the south side of the house
and put them on the hotbed.
Then it was spring. Or, no:
then winter was ending.

"I wish to say we had lovely success
this summer with the seed purchased
of you. We had the finest Sweet
Corn in the country, and Cabbage
were dandy."
—W.W. Lyon, South Junction, Man.

My mother said:
Did you wash your ears?
You could grow cabbages
in those ears.

Winter was ending.
This is what happened:
we were harrowing the garden.
You've got to understand this:
I was sitting on the horse.
The horse was standing still.
I fell off.
The hired man laughed: how
in hell did you manage to
fall off a horse that was
standing still?

Bring me the radish seeds,
my mother whispered.

Into the dark of January
the seed catalogue bloomed

a winter proposition, if
spring should come, then,

with illustrations:

No. 25—McKenzie's Improved Golden Wax Bean: "THE
MOST PRIZED OF ALL BEANS. Virtue is its own reward.
We have had many expressions from keen discriminating
gardeners extolling our seed and this variety."

Beans, beans,
the musical fruit;
the more you eat,
the more you virtue.

My mother was marking the first row
with a piece of binder twine, stretched
between two pegs.

The hired man laughed: just
about planted the little bugger.
Cover him up and see what grows.
My father didn't laugh. He was puzzled by any garden that was smaller than a ¼-section of wheat and summerfallow.

the home place: N.E. 17-42-16-W4th Meridian.

the home place: 1½ miles west of Heisler, Alberta, on the correction line road and 3 miles south.

No trees around the house.
Only the wind.
Only the January snow.
Only the summer sun.
The home place:
a terrible symmetry.

How do you grow a gardener?

Telephone Peas
Garden Gem Carrots
Early Snowcap Cauliflower
Perfection Globe Onions
Hubbard Squash
Early Ohio Potatoes

This is what happened—at my mother's wake. This is a fact—the World Series was in progress. The Cincinnati Reds were playing the Detroit Tigers. It was raining. The road to the graveyard was barely passable. The horse was standing still. Bring me the radish seeds, my mother whispered.

(The Seed Catalogue)