Empirical and Non-Empirical Identifiers

Jeffrey Side

This book is drawn from material in my PhD thesis 'Wordsworth's Empiricist Poetic and its Influence in the Twentieth Century', and much of the book's content appeared as an essay in *Jacket* magazine in 2008.

Empirical and Non-Empirical Identifiers

Introduction

In this book, I will look at certain aspects of language that I call Empirical Identifiers because of the ways in which they encourage exegetical closure through their functioning as referents to phenomena. I will also look at their opposites, which I call Non-Empirical Identifiers because of the ways in which they invite readers to participate in the creation of individual meaning and significance from language, which is autonomous and non-referential. These identifiers, by enabling a ready recognition of empirical and non-empirical writing procedures in poetry, may prove useful as diagnostic devices for future criticism.

Aside from suggesting some further critical tools that may be of use to criticism, there is also the possibility that this undertaking will have artistic value in that it may encourage the individual reader to ultimately decide upon the meaning of a poetic text, either unconsciously or by volition. By "volition" I mean the conscious determination of the reader to decide upon any one of a number of associations the words and phrases of any given sentence suggest, and to choose this particular association as the constituent of meaning despite its being the less obvious or appropriate choice (in comparison to the others) given the complete denotative meaning the sentence's lexis implies. This sort of practice is possible because the poetic text is arguably without intentionality: in the sense of having no distinct meaning inherently.

Empirical Identifiers

By Empirical Identifiers, I mean those aspects of a poem that function as controlling agents to limit ambiguity. There are seven of these in all:

> 1. Paraphrasable Sentences.
> 2. Grammatical Syntax.
> 3. Conventional Punctuation.
> 4. Sense-Data Descriptions of Events and Objects.
> 5. Absence of Ellipsis.
> 6. Absence of Metonymy.
> 7. Use of Simile and Metaphor.

The first three do not inhibit plural interpretation by themselves but do so only when used in conjunction with the four remaining ones. It is these four I would like now to discuss. I will deal with the former three as the need arises.

Empirical Identifier No. 4:
Sense-Data Descriptions of Events and Objects

Sense-data descriptions of events and objects attempt to make knowable that which cannot be known. Delineating the objects of perception using language is bound to be a failed enterprise if it is motivated by the desire to make the experience, or "essence", of these objects more palpable (and hence knowable) than perception alone can render them. In a passage on Locke, which appears in J. P. Ward's *Wordsworth's Language of Men*, it is explained that Locke doubts the ability of language to express the "essences" of objects:

> Locke argues that 'the greatest parts of words are general'. But we never apprehend the general
> as sense experience. We only apprehend the particular, and this therefore has to be expressed

verbally not in single words but in their combination. Thus 'tree' is general but 'tall red tree' is more particular and nearer to what might be an actual experience. But if the total reality is a continuous single substance, as science seemed now to have confirmed, it follows that no particular substance has an 'essence' unique to itself, and therefore no word can be expressing such an essence. Rather, says Locke, it is the general abstraction that expresses the only 'essence' there can be, namely, the essence of the species. But, as said, we can never sense that general essence. We can never sense the only thing the word can express.[1]

Empirical Identifier No. 5:
Absence of Ellipsis

An absence of ellipses while not inhibiting indeterminacy of meaning, nevertheless, greatly reduces the possibility of it occurring. In Robert C. Holub's *Reception Theory: A Critical Introduction*, the importance of "gaps" in a text and their relation to indeterminacy is discussed in a section on the phenomonologist Roman Ingarden who,

> considers the literary work to be a purely intentional or heteronomous object, i.e. [...] dependent on an act of consciousness. It consists of four layers or strata, each of which affects the others, and two distinct dimensions. [...] What is particularly important for Ingarden's theory of cognition of the literary work is the notion that these layers and dimensions form a skeleton or 'schematized structure' to be completed by the reader. [...] The objects represented in a literary work exhibit 'spots' or 'points' or 'places' of indeterminacy [...]. All objects, according to phenomenological theory, have an infinite number of determinants, and no act of cognition can take into account every determinant of any particular object. But while a real object must have a *particular* determinant—a real object cannot be merely colored; it must have a particular color—the objects in a literary work, because they are intentionally projected from meaning units and aspects, must retain some degree of indeterminacy. For example, if we read the sentence, 'The child bounced the ball', we are confronted with a myriad of 'gaps' in the represented object. Whether the child in this case is 10 or 6 years old, whether it is male or female, brown or white, red-haired or blond—all of these features are not contained in this sentence and thus constitute 'gaps' or points of indeterminacy.[2]

From this we can gather that if even non-elliptical sentences contain indeterminate gaps then certainly elliptical sentences will guarantee them.

Empirical Identifier No. 6:
Absence of Metonymy

Metonymy is the replacement of one word for another with which it is associated. Examples are: "The press" for the news media, and "The Crown" for the monarchy. Metonymy operates through a connectedness to a thing rather than a resemblance to it. For instance, the metonym "The press", which stands for news media, derives from the fact that a printing press creates newspapers; and the metonym "The Crown", standing for the monarchy, derives from the crown that royalty historically wore. Metonymy is not used to transfer qualities to things, as is the case with metaphor; instead metonymy transfers an entire set of associations that may or may not be essential to the meaning.

Absence of metonymy in poetry written from an empiricist perspective is indicative of an attempt at a

confirmation of reality: confirmation being rendered via sense-data descriptions of phenomena and experiences. Metonymy is not dependent upon sense-data descriptions but on the production of abstractions from particulars. Abstractions are mental formulations of associated ideas independent of sense-data and relying, instead, upon language's ability to connote meaning without reference to signifieds.

<div align="center">

Empirical Identifier No. 7:
Use of Simile and Metaphor

</div>

Simile and, to a lesser extent, metaphor are contingent upon a recognition of comparisons. In the former, the comparison is explicit, in the latter it is implied. Both are dependent upon vision and the rendering of the objects of vision into language. Ted Hughes says of these devices:

> It is one of those curious facts that when two things are compared in a metaphor or a simile, we see both of them much more distinctly than if they were mentioned separately as having nothing to do with each other […] You are forced to look more closely […] How is a dragonfly like a helicopter? [3]

The question 'How is a dragonfly like a helicopter?' can only be asked if one assumes that the metaphor representing the dragonfly is, indeed, representing a dragonfly and not some other creature or thing. That such an assumption *is* made indicates the restrictive nature of metaphor as an agent of indeterminacy, and demonstrates its effectiveness as a device that encourages closure and draws attention away from the syntactical to the referent. We see this also in Kate Rhode's 'Out of Water':

> Not far away a man fishes,
> shirtless and glimmering.
>
> He spreads his small net
> as a waiter casts his cloth
> deftly, with one smart flick.
> It comes back shaking with life,
>
> Silver beads in a fancy choker [4]

Here the comparison of the fishing net with the waiter's cloth renders both more palpable. The use of defamilarization on the image of the fish in the net achieves the same result.

<div align="center">

An Example and Analysis of Empiricist Poetry

</div>

The following is an account of Anthony Easthope's analysis of Edward Thomas's, 'Adlestrop':

> Yes, I remember Adlestrop—
> The name, because one afternoon
> Of heat the express-train drew up there
> Unwontedly. It was late June.
> The steam hissed. Someone cleared his throat
> No one left and no one came
> On the bare platform. What I saw
> Was Adlestrop—only the name.

> And willows, willow-herb, and grass,
> And meadowsweet, and haycocks dry,
> No whit less still and lonely fair
> Than the high cloudlets in the sky.
> And for that minute a blackbird sang
> Close by, and round him, mistier,
> Farther and farther, all the birds
> Of Oxfordshire and Gloucestershire.[5]

Easthope sees the poem's opening as confronting the speaker with a disturbing sense of a separation between the accustomed unity of subject and object:

> At first, when the train stops and there is no sign of life on the bare platform, the speaker feels a little crisis of subjectivity, as though meaning has dropped out of his world leaving him separated from it, facing only writing, a name, Adlestrop.[6]

This 'crisis', though, is soon dispelled by his experiencing natural phenomena as being connected with his own feelings. Seeing the willows, grass and meadows as,

> No whit less still and lonely fair
> Than the high cloudlets in the sky

The disconnection between subject and object is now restored: and he is able to confirm both his independent existence and that of phenomena. For Easthope, 'Adlestrop',

> represents an 'I' who is coherent and self-possessed, a unified subject, secure in its ability to affirm 'I remember', 'I saw'. The speaker does have a moment of loss—silence except for hissing steam, emptiness, the strange writing—but this is quickly recuperated into imaginary plenitude [...]. And though the language of the poem is elaborate at certain points ('Unwontedly', 'No whit', 'cloudlets') this does not interfere with the overall clarity of the statement—initial hesitations and hiatuses are overcome in the fluent syntax and confident tone of the ending. This is a speaker who is sure that language can represent the real.[7]

Easthope's methodology is to draw attention to the suppressed existential insecurities that he believes motivate the sort of poetic aesthetic subscribed to by Thomas. Easthope's hypothesis implies that the speaker of this sort of poetry assumes a natural harmonious unity between subject and object, which is ordinarily in operation, but that occasionally a 'crisis of subjectivity' is experienced which causes the speaker to feel separated from his physical surroundings. Consequently, this produces a fear that the union between subject and object may be illusory. This anxiety is alleviated only when the speaker more fully experiences the natural phenomena surrounding him.

The Functioning of Empirical Identifiers

I will use Simon Armitage's poem 'Night Shift' to illustrate how Empirical Identifiers function. This poem appears in *The New Poetry* edited by Michael Hulse, David Kennedy and David Morley:

> Once again I have missed you by moments;
> steam hugs the rim of the just-boiled kettle,

water in the pipes finds its own level.
In another room there are other signs

of someone having left: dust, unsettled
by the sweep of the curtains; the clockwork

contractions of the paraffin heater.
For weeks now we have come and gone, woken

in acres of empty bedding, written
lipstick love-notes on the bathroom mirror

and in this space we have worked and paid for
we have found ourselves, but lost each other.

Upstairs, at least, there is understanding
in things more telling than lipstick kisses:

the air, still hung with spores of your hairspray;
body-heat stowed in the crumpled duvet.[8]

This poem contains all of the Empirical Identifiers: paraphrasable sentences, grammatical syntax, conventional punctuation, sense-data descriptions of events and objects, absence of ellipses, absence of metonymy and the use of metaphor.

It is similar to 'Adlestrop' in that the speaker is confronted with the sense of a separation between the unity of subject and object. He fears his self-identity diminishing without the physical presence of his partner. To remedy this he recreates her presence by alluding to her through sense-data descriptions of objects she has recently come into contact with: the steam on the rim of the recently switched-off kettle; the unsettled dust caused by the 'sweep of the curtains'; written lipstick notes on the bathroom mirror; the scent of her hairspray; the duvet retaining her body heat. These things are indexes of her actual presence elsewhere, and confirm the speaker's existence as a separate identity both from her and these objects. It is this comforting knowledge that enables the speaker to reconnect the subject with the object. Following is how the Empirical Identifiers each relate to this poem.

Empirical Identifier No. 1:
Paraphrasable Sentences

The poem consists entirely of paraphrasable sentences. Here is a paraphrase of it:

> You have just left the building. So recently, in fact, that the kettle still has steam on its rim after just being switched off. However, this is not the only sign that your departure has been recent: in the other room, the dust is still floating about from the action of the curtains you opened. Similarly, the heater you have just turned off makes a noise, as it cools, like the regular ticking of a clock.

> For weeks now we have not spent much time together because we work at different times. And because of this inconvenient arrangement we have to sleep and wake at different times, which

means that when I wake you are not in the bed with me.

The only way we can communicate is by leaving messages of our love for each other written using your lipstick (lipstick: because lipstick is a symbol of romance—isn't it?) on the bathroom mirror. Moreover, isn't it ironic that in this home of ours (one that we have worked and paid for) we have each gained self-knowledge but, sadly, lost a certain intimacy of each other?

Nevertheless, back to what I was saying before: about the objects I am looking at which represent your physical existence in this room and, by implication, your continuing existence elsewhere. For example, the scent of your hairspray still lingers, and the bed is still warm from the heat of your body. These things remind me of us making love and are, therefore, more sensuous indicators of our physical relationship than are the lipstick messages I have already mentioned.

Such an exercise in paraphrase would be difficult with non-empiricist poetry.

Empirical Identifier No. 2:
Grammatical Syntax

The grammar and sentence structure of the poem is conventional, and places the communication of content above any stylistic or formal considerations. If the grammar were not conventional, meaning would become plural as can be seen in the following lines from 'Into the Day' by J. H. Prynne:

> Who does we reign our royal house
> is roofed with fateful slates.[9]

These lines begin with the words 'who does' which immediately puts us into questioning mode, but the next word, 'we', draws our attention to the grammatical inappropriateness of the preceding word, 'does', in its location between 'who' and 'we'. We have been led to expect a question but the grammatically incorrect syntax has frustrated this expectation. We are left instead with a language which rather than denoting a position of enquiry relies, instead, on connotation for this effect. This sort of "question" belongs to neither an ontological nor an epistemological enquiry (both products of empirical reasoning) but to an enquiry that is syntactical rather than referential.

Similarly, 'our royal house is roofed with fateful slates' although syntactically correct contain the juxtaposition of 'fateful' with 'slates', two words not usually associated or combined with each other. This cannot be said of 'roofed' and 'slate' which often share the same collocation. If the word 'fateful' had not been included there would be little room for plurality of meaning. The word 'slates' would mean solely roofing materials. It is the juxtaposition of 'fateful' and 'slates' that produces the plurality. A few of the dictionary definitions of the word 'slate' are: 1) a fine-grained rock that can be easily split into thin layers and is used as a roofing material. 2) a roofing tile of slate. 3) a writing tablet of slate. 4) a dark grey colour. 5) a list of candidates in an election. 'Slate' is, thus, rich in connotation. The addition of 'fateful' enables two of these meanings to become appropriate. For example, it is quite possible to have a fateful dark grey colour—as in the sense of an omen. So, too, is it possible to have a fateful group of electoral candidates.

If we were to choose this latter image for one of the meanings of 'fateful slates' we could make it fit into

the rest of the sentence (if it can rightly be called one) by opening up the meanings of 'our royal house is roofed with'. This is simple, as the idea of electoral candidates enables 'royal house' to connote a political arena of some sort as suggested by the word 'house' (The Houses of Parliament or The White House, for instance). The word 'roofed' connotes a 'covering over'—a protection of some sort as in the image of a bird's wing covering and protecting its young. If we take this as our connotation, then one of the many meanings of 'our royal house is roofed with fateful slates' could be: 'Our political system is protected from tyranny by its processes of electing political candidates who are under oath (fated) to guarantee this freedom from tyranny'.

The same sort of exegesis can be performed even with lines that are grammatically sparser, such as the following:

> I a egg
> I a waffle
> I broken
> the better to live [10]

For example, if we look at the words 'egg', 'waffle', 'broken' and 'better to live' it is possible to free-associate from each one. From 'egg', we can get to "delicate", or "clever" (as in "egg-head") or "baby" (as in "chicklet"). 'Waffle' has another meaning apart from a food; it also means: "Pause or hold back in uncertainty or unwillingness". 'Broken' can mean, "broken physically" or "broken emotionally", the word can also mean: "interrupt". 'Better to live' can mean "able to live", "more fit to live" or "more worthy of life"

My interpretation of these lines is: "I am an unborn baby (egg). I sense my mother's uncertainty about having me (waffle). I hope she does not abort me (broken). I am worthy of life (better to live). Consequently, from a set of ungrammatical phrases it is possible to confer a depth of meaning. Such interpretations as given in the above two examples would be difficult with lines that were grammatically syntactical.

Empirical Identifier No. 3:
Conventional Punctuation

Every comma, semi-colon and full stop in Armitage's poem is in the "right" place. If the punctuation were not conventional, the poem would be more amenable to plural interpretation. I will use as an example lines nine and ten from Helen Kidd's 'The Paper City':

> Hills in the West fumbling the sky over
> a damp moulder of ground where marsh spooks stand.[11]

I will quote Kidd's own analysis of these lines in relation to their flexibility of meaning and punctuation:

> Similarly, punctuation can impose a straight-jacket on meaning, whereas removing it can allow a lexical item to spill over into an entirely different or ambiguous usage, thus deepening the poem's field of association. For example 'over' in line nine [...] can be read to refer back into its own line as meaning 'all over the sky' or it can connect with line ten as 'over a damp moulder of ground'. By placing it at the end of the line it effects a double movement,

backwards, as I have said, and also forward, operating as an open link with the following line.[12]

Empirical Identifier No. 4:
Sense-Data Descriptions of Events and Objects

The use of description in Armitage's poem is essential in the speaker's attempt to reconnect subject and object. Confirmation of phenomena independent of perception is required for full mental equilibrium. To this end, detail is important. It is not sufficient that there is steam on the kettle: the steam has to 'hug' the 'rim'. It is also essential to tell us that the kettle has just boiled. This attention to detail is designed to drive home the idea that precision in description is a means to a direct knowledge of phenomena. The speaker is almost obsessive in his need to confirm this: 'the clockwork / contractions of the paraffin heater', 'lipstick love-notes on the bathroom mirror', 'the air, still hung with spores of your hairspray'.

This concentration on precision echoes a stanza from Frank O'Hara's 'Cambridge':

> It is still raining and the yellow-green cotton fruit
> looks silly round a window giving out on winter trees
> with only three drab leaves left. The hot plate works,
> it is the sole heat on earth, and instant coffee. I
> put on my warm corduroy pants, a heavy maroon sweater,
> and wrap myself in my old maroon bathrobe.

O'Hara is considered by many to be an innovative poet, reacting against descriptive realism in poetic writing, however in this stanza, at least, this is not the case. What we see here is prosaic and descriptive prose that leaves little to the reader's imagination. In contrast to this, let us look at some song lyrics, one by Leonard Cohen and two by Bob Dylan. In Cohen's 'Night Comes On' from the album *Various Positions,* we have this verse:

> I said mother I'm frightened,
> the thunder and the lightening,
> I'll never get through this alone.
> She said I'll be with you,
> my shawl wrapped around you,
> my hand on your head when you go.
> And the night came on,
> it was very calm.
> I wanted the night to go on and on
> but she said go back,
> go back to the world.

Unlike O'Hara, Cohen is not averse to generalising. Consequently, this verse is pregnant with interpretative possibilities. From the beginning of this verse, ambiguity is allowed to operate in that we cannot be certain if the speaker is addressing his actual biological mother or whether "mother" is a metaphor for God or "Mother Nature". Similarly, we cannot be sure whether the thunder and lightening that frightens him is literal or metaphorical. The imprecision surrounding his fear serves to enrich listeners' experience of the song and allows them to decide for themselves the precise nature of this "fear". Moreover, this imprecision allows for numerous enquiries. The speaker's mother tells him that she will be with him when he goes.

Where is he going? Is he going into the fearful situation represented by the thunder and lightening? Is this situation an existential experience analogous to what Christian contemplatives have referred to as "the dark night of the soul"? Is the "night" in 'the night came on' also metaphorical? Perhaps, it stands for a feeling of comfort and reassurance brought about by the knowledge that his biological mother/God/Nature is with him in some sense. If so, does he want it to continue? He probably does but something tells him to 'go back to the world'. Who tells him this: the "mother" figure or the "night" (whatever the latter represents)? That this verse can invite such questions indicates its superiority to the O'Hara stanza quoted earlier.

Similar ambiguities, and the questions they prompt, can be found in the following verse from Dylan's 'Changing of the Guards' from the album *Street Legal*:

> Fortune calls.
> I stepped forth from the shadows, to the marketplace,
> Merchants and thieves, hungry for power, my last deal gone down.
> She's smelling sweet like the meadows where she was born,
> On midsummer's eve, near the tower.

Like Cohen, Dylan is not afraid to generalise. He is also unafraid to mix poetic registers, instances of which are his use of archaic-sounding phrases such as 'I stepped forth', 'smelling sweet like the meadows' and 'on midsummer's eve' alongside the more demotic 'last deal gone down'. This adds a linguistic variety whilst paying homage to his poetic inheritance. The verse states at its beginning that 'fortune calls', but we are not told for whom. Is it for the speaker? Is it for the listeners? Is it for humanity in general? Dylan leaves the choice up to us. The verse then introduces a persona with 'I stepped forth from the shadows' but this persona is not developed or elaborated upon, and we are left guessing as to its identity. Even the word 'shadows' (so vague that Pound surely would have frowned upon it) leaves open innumerable interpretive possibilities. Furthermore, phrases such as 'merchants and thieves', and 'hungry for power', not only function as specific symbols for corruption, decay and amorality, but as more general statements about the nature of the human condition. In addition, more questions are prompted by the figure of the woman. Who is the woman who is 'smelling sweet'? How is she like the meadows? Why is the word 'meadows' plural—how can she be born in more than one meadow? Is the meadow a meadow? If not what does it symbolise? What is the tower—is that symbolic also?

Similarly with Dylan's song 'The Wicked Messenger', more questions are raised than answered. The first verse is:

> There was a wicked messenger
> from Eli he did come,
> with a mind that multiplied
> the smallest matter.
> When questioned who had sent for him,
> he answered with his thumb,
> for his tongue it could not speak, but only flatter.

We note immediately the presense of ambiguity with the line: 'from Eli he did come'. We are not told if Eli is a place or a person. The name has biblical connotations and can easily be a person. In the Old Testament Eli is the judge and high priest of Israel and although loyal to God, his reluctance to remove his two corrupt sons from the priesthood resulted in disgrace. Dylan's lack of indication as to whom or what Eli is allows

14

us to perhaps see a biblical reference in the name. If we take the name as referring to the biblical Eli then we have to ask the question: If the messenger was sent by Eli (who was a faithful servant of God) why is he seen as wicked? Is it because his mind 'multiplied the smallest matter' (possibly meaning he was neurotic), or that his 'tongue it could not speak, but only flatter' (possibly meaning he was a liar)? Are these common human failings sufficient grounds for someone to be designated as wicked? Alternatively, perhaps the messenger is wicked because there is a crudity about him—he 'answered with his thumb' (he gave the finger, perhaps?). For want of detailed information, we simply do not know.

Still more mysterious is the line: 'When questioned who had sent for him'. This alludes to the possibility that perhaps Eli is not a person but a place since whoever sent for the messenger was requesting it from another geographical location than the one the messenger inhabited. If Eli is a person, then Eli would have been the one who sent him—there would be no need for a second person to request it.

With the second verse we have:

> He stayed behind the assembly hall,
> it was there he made his bed.
> Oftentimes he could be seen returning,
> until one day he just appeared
> with a note in his hand which read,
> 'The soles of my feet, I swear they're burning'.

From the first two lines of this verse, we obtain the impression that the people of the community he has entered have shunned him, which has forced him to live in less than hospitable surroundings. There is irony in this, in that his bed is behind the assembly hall—a place that one often associates with the (usually friendly) gathering of a community, yet he has been isolated. With the line: 'Oftentimes he could be seen returning', more questions are prompted. From where is he returning? Is it from Eli (be it a place or person)? What is the reason for the frequency of his trips to and from the community? Is he on some secret errand—if so, for whom? When he does return from one of his trips Dylan describes it as: 'until one day he just appeared'—no one has seen him returning on this occasion. The note he is carrying which reads: 'The soles of my feet, I swear they're burning', seems ominous. Does it indicate some sort of eternal judgment and damnation for him and/or the community? The final verse is:

> Oh, the leaves began to fallin'
> and the seas began to part,
> and the people that confronted him were many.
> And he was told but these few words
> which opened up his heart
> 'If you cannot bring good news, then don't bring any'.

The first two line of this verse have apocalyptic connotations. The falling leaves evocative of decay and death and the parting seas connoting massive geological and meteorological upheavals redolent of End Time prophesies. Such is the message that he delivers to the community that he is confronted by them with the words: 'If you cannot bring good news, then don't bring any'.

As I have attempted to demonstrate, the songs 'Night Comes On', 'The Changing of the Guards' and 'The Wicked Messenger' utilise vagueness and ambiguity to allow the listener to create highly individualised

interpretations. This is not possible with poetry that conforms to the traditions in contemporary poetry exemplified by, for instance, Seamus Heaney.

Empirical Identifier No. 5:
Absence of Ellipsis

The nearest thing to ellipsis in Armitage's poem is the omission of the word "and" after the word 'hairspray' in the following lines:

> The air, still hung with spores of your hairspray;
> body-heat stowed in the crumpled duvet.

However, it would be more accurate to describe these lines as asyndetic rather than elliptical. To give a demonstration of what the effect of these lines would be if ellipsis were present is difficult, principally because ellipsis is something that, ideally, has to be incorporated into the syntactical structure during composition, and not after. To simply delete words from these lines to illustrate my point would be to render them examples of asyndeton or paratactaxis.

Empirical Identifier No. 6:
Absence of Metonymy

There is no metonymy in the Armitage's poem.

Empirical Identifier No. 7:
Use of Simile and Metaphor

Armitage's poem makes use of metaphor as in 'steam hugs', in the line 'steam hugs the rim of the just-boiled kettle'. This use of metaphor links the signifier ('kettle') inextricably with the signified (kettle), thus, inhibiting connotation. 'Hugs' is also used to personify the steam and kettle and to draw attention to the speaker's "un-hugged" state.

Non-Empirical Identifiers

The constituents of non-empiricist poetry that distinguish it from empiricist poetry, I will refer to as Non-Empirical Identifiers. They are:

1. Multiple Registers (e.g. archaism, rhetoric, cliché).
2. Intertextuality.
3. Incoherent Syntax and Sentence Structures.
4. Novel Word Juxtapositions.
5. Abstraction.
6. No Distinct Ego or Poetic Persona.
7. No Philosophical Discursiveness.
8. Unconventional Punctuation.
9. Use of Ellipsis.
10. No Metaphors.

It is not necessary for every Non-Empirical Identifier to be present in a poem for the poem to be classified

16

as non-empirical. However, the more of these identifiers a poem has the more it can be classified in such a way.

The Functioning of Non-Empirical Identifiers

Non-Empirical Identifier No. 1:
Multiple Registers

An example of a poem that contains some of the Non-Empirical Identifiers is Veronica Forrest-Thomson's 'The Garden of Proserpine'. In this poem, we find examples of the use of multiple registers, particularly in close juxtaposition:

> And, O, many-toned, immortal Aphrodite,
> Lend me thy girdle.
> You can spare it for an hour or so
> Until Zeus has got back his erection.[13]

Here we see the use of the rhetorical device of apostrophe, which is now considered archaic but was frequently used in elegiac and epic poetry to invoke the presence of the dead or that of a muse. Here it serves a similar function, as the goddess of love, Aphrodite, is summoned to assist the speaker in matters of love. The syntax of the first two lines is noticeably archaic, containing words such as, 'many-toned', 'immortal', 'thy', 'girdle' and the single capitalised letter 'O'. This is in sharp contrast with the second two lines with their twentieth-century colloquial register and comic bathos.

The juxtaposition of these two discordant registers draws attention to the artifice involved in their construction, and connects the Elizabethan concept of courtly love to its modern equivalent of unrequited love, which is being alluded to by the use of the girdle, with its associations of sexuality, seduction and denial. The speaker (whom I will make into a female) is calling upon Aphrodite to rectify her loveless situation by conferring upon her the power of sexual attraction. Other juxtapositions of discordant registers in the poem are:

> I lie alone. I am aweary, aweary,
> I would that I were dead.
> Be my partner and you'll never regret it.[14]

In lines one and two we have the archaism, and in line three the colloquialism. Interestingly, the register of the first line is redolent of lines written by Elizabethan male poets. Such lines as 'Come, Sleep!, O Sleep!, the certain knot of peace', and 'Weep no more, nor sigh, nor groan' by Philip Sidney and John Fletcher, respectively, have the same jaded response to life that is discernable in 'I lie alone. I am aweary, aweary'. The colloquial third line with its modern contraction ('you'll') produces more bathos. As well as mixed registers there is a mixture of archaic and non-archaic vocabulary and phraseology. Among the archaic are: 'the moon is sinking', 'Pleiades', 'gods', 'Aphrodite is also Persephone', 'queen of love and death'. The non-archaic include: 'time runs on she said', 'stick together', they make a strong combination', 'so just make him love me again', 'you good old triple goddess of tight corners', 'and leave me to deal with gloomy Dis', 'we all know better', 'love kills people and the police can't do anything to stop it'.

It should be pointed out here that although Forrest-Thompson uses the above devices to some effect, her

actual poetic aesthetic is, surprisingly, empiricist. She still regards the text as the ultimate arbiter of meaning, hence her criticism of David Gascoyne's 'The Rites of Hysteria' as being meaningless because, 'the formal levels exercise no control, so that one cannot tell how the external world is filtered through the language of the poem'.[15] Moreover, whilst accepting the fact that readers will inevitably use their imaginations with regard to their appreciation of the text, in the following statement she qualifies the degree to which imagination is to be used:

> The reader must, of course, use his imagination; that is what poetry is for. But he must use it to free himself from the fixed forms of thought which ordinary language imposes on our minds, not to deny the strangeness of poetry by inserting it in some non-poetic area: his own mind, the poet's mind, or any non-fictional situations.[16]

By setting up a dubious opposition between 'poetry' and so-called 'non-poetic areas' she is redefining poetry as that which can only operate textually. In this sense her poetic has similarities to New Criticism.

Returning to the matter in hand, John Ashbery is also notable for his use of conflicting registers. In 'How Much Longer Will I Be Able to Inhabit the Divine Sepulcher...' the opening stanza repeats the neo-Romantic utterance of the poem's title while extending it into rhetorical query: 'How much longer will I be able to inhabit the divine sepulcher / Of life my great love?'. We then have a surreal-like semi-philosophical enquiry into whether,

> dolphins plunge bottomward
> To find the light? Or is it rock
> That is searched? Unrelentingly?[17]

To this is appended the hipster/cowboy demotic sullenness of 'Huh'.[18] The resultant effect of this mixture of discourses is to disorient the reader sufficiently to enable recognition of this disorientation tactic in process and, thereby, allow the reader to re-engage with the text on its own terms. Inevitably, this means that readers are forced to create meanings from the indeterminate and contextually dissonant linguistic signs presented to them.

Non-Empirical Identifier No. 2:
Intertextuality

Another Non-Empirical Identifier is the use of intertextuality. Among the most celebrated instances of this are T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*, and Ezra Pound's *Cantos*. Before them, Alfred Lord Tennyson and Mathew Arnold both referred to other texts. Tennyson's *Maud* draws heavily on *Hamlet*, while Arnold's *Empedocles* attempts to 'debunk the influence of Keats in contemporary philosophical poetry' by 'creating a failed "hero" as his protagonist, who is Keatsian in many of his concerns and in many aspects of his character'.[19] We can see intertextuality, also, in the fifth stanza of William Blake's 'The Tyger':

> When the stars threw down their spears
> And watered heaven with their tears:
> Did he smile his work to see?
> Did he who made the Lamb make thee?

Of these lines Michael Ferber says:

The 'When' clause tells of strange cosmic events but tells of them as if they must already be familiar to us; they are the setting or background to the main business of the stanza. But what are these events? They suggest a war in heaven, and the best-known story of a war in heaven is Milton's in *Paradise Lost*. Are the stars, then, the rebel angels, now defeated and weeping over their loss? Since that rebellion was the prime act of evil in the world, are we to take it as not only simultaneous with, but equivalent to, the creation of the Tyger? [20]

As Ferber suggests this stanza seems to be using *Paradise Lost* as its intertext. He later suggests, also, that Blake's 'The Sick Rose', similarly, alludes to *Paradise Lost*. With this poem Blake 'has reimagined the Fall, when a serpent entered the Garden to seduce Eve, and death entered the world'.[21] Ferber then quotes the speech from *Paradise Lost* (Book IX, lines 900-1) that Adam makes when he learns what has happened to Eve:

> How art thou lost, how on a sudden lost,
> Defac't, deflow'r'd, and now to Death devote? [22]

A moral parallel between Eve and Blake's Rose is then suggested: 'We no sooner think of Eve, however, when we wonder if the Rose herself is in any way at fault'.[23]

In the works of Eliot, Pound, Tennyson, Arnold and Blake, intertexts are used as exegetical reference points, recognition of which is required by the reader before there can be a forward movement in aesthetic appreciation. The intertext is made to function metaphorically as an extra-textual referent. However, apart from this usage, intertextuality can also function metonymically.

In the Forrest-Thomson poem cited already, 'The Garden of Proserpine', mythical and literary figures are mentioned. Aphrodite, Zeus, Pleiades, Dis, Sappho, Shakespeare, Swinburne, Tennyson, Eliot, Sophocles, Euripides and Aeschylus are all brought into play. However, it is unimportant whether the reader knows who they are. It is enough that they appear. They function as intertextual metonymic ciphers to be appropriated by the reader for his or her own personal exegesis. If the reader is aware that Aphrodite is the goddess given by Zeus in marriage to Hephaestus, or that Dis is the Roman name for Hades, the god of the underworld, all well and good. However, it is not essential information.

In another context, Roland Barthes says in 'The Death of the Author' that a text is,

> not a line of words releasing a single [...] meaning but a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash.[24]

'The reader', he says, 'is the space on which all the quotations that make up a writing are inscribed without any of them being lost; a text's unity lies not in its origin but in its destination'.[25] In light of this, the use of intertextuality can be seen as the systematic outworking of this more general observation about language and texts.

Non-Empirical Identifier No. 3:
Incoherent Syntax and Sentence Structures

In this section, I will use the word "incoherent" to characterize the mainstream evaluation of non-empirical poetry since most readers will understand it in this context.[26] Such poetry displays the presense of ego/s and

voice/s in a fragmented and discontinuous form. Incoherent syntax and sentence structure is evidenced in Clark Coolidge's 'On Induction of the Hand': 'There is a wrench that a certain staring at / while balancing humours we call words in state pours wings / of edgy fondness bound useless in calm of lucidity down the / chute of the sentence'. [27] It is also present in Tom Mandel's 'Say Ja': 'I wanted to increase / them singing aphasic their / song certain, the turnstiles / left open to leap over / which these gloomy pens / and stalls so full'. [28] Sentences such as these and the phrasal juxtapositions they consist of 'not only suggest unexpected relations', as Charles Bernstein says in his essay 'Semblance', 'but induce reading along ectoskeletal and citational lines'. [29] The result of which is that 'the operant mechanisms of meaning are multiplied and patterns of projection in reading are less restricted'. [30] This would not be so with more grammatical sentence patterns which, as Bernstein says,

> allow the accumulating references to enthral the reader by diminishing diversions from a constructed representation. In this way, each word's references work in harmony by reinforcing a spatiotemporal order conventionalized by the bulk of writing practice that creates the 'standard'. 'The lamp sits atop the table in the study'—each word narrowing down the possibilities of each other, limiting the interpretation of each word's meaning by creating an ever more specific context. [31]

Non-Empirical Identifier No. 4:
Novel Word Juxtapositions

Novel Word Juxtapositions can be found in Jack Kerouac's '211th Chorus': 'quivering meat / conception', [32] and in his 'The Thrashing Doves': 'all the balloon of the shroud on the floor'; [33] in Allen Ginsberg's *Howl*: 'hydrogen dukebox', 'starry / dynamo in the machinery of night' and 'supernatural darkness'; [34] in Tom Clarke's 'You (I)': 'siege / engines'; [35] and in John Ashbery's 'Leaving the Atocha Station': 'perfect tar grams nuclear world bank tulip'. [36] They can also be found in Blake's *Milton* ('freezing hunger', 'eternal tables'); [37] and his *The Book of Urizen* ('the caverns of his jointed spine'). [38] These word combinations result in elliptical breaks between juxtapositions of words not normally collocated and which allows for the possibility of meaning. It operates similarly to Eisenstein's theory of cinematic montage where,

> the emphasis is on a dynamic juxtaposition of individual shots that calls attention to itself and forces the viewer consciously to come to conclusions about the interplay of images while he or she is also emotionally and psychologically affected in a less conscious way. Instead of continuity, Eisenstein emphasized conflict and contrast, arguing for a kind of Hegelian dialectic, where each shot was a cell and where a thesis could be juxtaposed by an antithesis, both achieving a synthesis or significance which was not inherent in either shot. [39]

Similarly, William Empson's comment on the juxtaposition of two statements ('Swiftly the years, beyond recall. / Solemn the stillness of this spring morning'.) that are only loosely related. These two statements generate for Empson a discussion of the relationship and interpretation of the words 'swiftly' and 'stillness'. Commenting on their contradictory character, he says:

> Lacking rhyme, metre, and any overt device such as comparison, these […] two statements are made as if they were connected, and the reader is forced to consider their relations for himself. The reason why these facts should have been selected for a poem is left for him to invent; he will invent a variety of reasons and order them in his own mind. [40]

Later on he quotes a newspaper headline: 'Italian Assassin Bomb Plot Disaster' [41] and says that it is,

a very effective piece of writing, quite apart from the fact that it conveys its point in a form short enough for large type. It conveys it with a *compactness which gives the mind several notions at one glance of the eye* (Emphasis added).[42]

This ability of the compactness of Novel Word Juxtapositions to give 'the mind several notions at one glance of the eye' is the basic element that distinguishes poetry from prose.

Non-Empirical Identifier No. 5:
Abstraction

Another feature of non-empiricist writing is that of abstraction, by which I mean those phrases and image combinations that are too generalised and indeterminate to be strictly referential. These are not to be confused with Empson's "sleeping" or "subdued" metaphors but are similar to what he refers to as 'ambiguity by vagueness', citing an instance of it ('Brightness falls from the air') in Thomas Nashe's *Summer's Last Will and Testament*.[43] An example of abstraction can be seen in Blake. In 'To the Muses' the phrase 'chambers of the sun', in the first stanza, does not specifically refer to anything. The phrase 'chambers of the East' in the previous line, however, does. It refers to the cavernous areas located near the mythical Mount Ida (represented in line one as 'Ida's shady brow'), the place from which the gods watched the battles around Troy. It could also refer to the mountain in Crete where Zeus was said to have been born. The phrase 'chambers of the sun' does not allow for closure in this way. The word 'sun' (a source of light) has no connection semantically with the word 'chambers' (a source of darkness). Furthermore, the sun is noted for its lack of vacuity, unlike caverns.

Modern instances of this can be found in T. S. Eliot's 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock': 'I know the voices dying with a dying fall'; 'There will be a time to murder and create'; and 'Time to turn back and descend the stair'.[44] Also, in the following passage from *The Waste Land*:

> What are the roots that clutch, what branches grow
> Out of this stony rubbish? Son of man,
> You cannot say, or guess, for you know only
> A heap of broken images, where the sun beats,
> And the dead tree gives no shelter, the cricket no relief,
> And the dry stone no sound of water. Only
> There is shadow under this red rock
> (Come in under the shadow of this red rock),
> And I will show you something different from either
> Your shadow at morning striding behind you
> Or your shadow at evening rising to meet you;
> I will show you fear in a handful of dust.

> (19-30)

Whilst this passage does use concrete nouns (roots, branches, rubbish, rock, etc.) their resultant affect is connotative rather than sensory. Their inclusion within generalized statements allows the reader some leeway in interpretation—hence the many different readings of this poem by critics. Had Eliot intended the passage to be merely a visual and sensory description of objects; such varied readings would not be

possible. Indeed, Eliot ensured that readers understood the poem as being non-descriptive by including detailed footnotes explaining the allusions.[45] For example, as is well known, 'Out of this stony rubbish' is not a literal description of something he has seen. It is a reference to John Donne's *Devotions Upon Emergent Occasions*: '[...] and now the whole house is but a handful of sand, so much dust, and but a peck of rubbish, so much bone' (XVIII). Similarly, 'And the dead tree gives no shelter, the cricket no relief' is from the following verse from Ecclesiastes:

> Also when they shall be afraid of that which is high, and fears shall be in the way, and the almond tree shall flourish, and the grasshopper shall be a burden, and desire shall fail: because man goeth to his long home, and the mourners go about the streets. Or ever the silver cord be loosed, or the golden bowl be broken, or the pitcher be broken at the fountain, or the wheel broken at the cistern. Then shall the dust return to the earth as it was: and the spirit shall return unto God who gave it. (12:5-7)

What Eliot has achieved by mixing the concrete with the abstract is to enable the concrete to operate connotatively. Unlike Simon Armitage's 'Night Shift' referred to earlier, the passage is not meant to faithfully represent a world seen through the eyes of one person.

In Edward Dorn's 'An Idle Visitation': 'the footstep in the flat above'; 'the girl you left / in Juarez'; and 'The mission / bells are ringing in Kansas'.[46] This last quotation particularly illustrates the point: the speaker cannot, unless he has psychic abilities, know that the mission bells are ringing in Kansas, therefore, the verity of this statement cannot be derived from sensual experience. This leaves open two possibilities as to how he has acquired this information. The first is that he knows what time the mission bells ring each day (or week) and is therefore able, by looking at his watch, to deduce that they are ringing as he speaks. The second is that he is not referring to the actual mission bells ringing in actual Kansas but to the "idea" of 'mission bells ringing in Kansas'. In other words, he has conceptualised the mission, the bells and Kansas: extracted them from their actual geographical, temporal and referential contexts and emptied them of a referential signification. Similarly, in Ashbery's 'The Skaters' the personification of the weather ('The wind points to the advantages of decay' is used to conjoin an image ('the wind points') with abstraction ('the advantages of decay') in such a way that both the image and the abstraction cancel each other out as coherent statements, thus, inhibiting referential signification.[47]

Abstraction is also present in Emily Dickinson. In *Dickinson: The Modern Idiom*, David Porter says of her use of the abstract phrase 'Dome of Abyss' in poem 291:

> Abstract expressionist artists since Kandinsky have sought representations of this sort of experience that unknowably is. Materialization of incipient abstract forms occurs in Jackson Pollock's poured paintings, where he abandoned the brush [...], and in the motifless shapes of Robert Motherwell, Franz Kline, and Mark Rothco. [...] With Dickinson's 'Dome of Abyss' we stand at a comparable threshold of both verbal and figurative consciousness. The variant readings show us the poet attempting to haul instinctual feelings into language and thus into consciousness.[48]

The importance of abstraction for non-empirical writing has unfortunately been underemphasized both in mainstream and (even allowing for the poets mentioned) in certain avant-garde poetics: it being considered, perhaps, a sign of stylistic naiveté.

Non-Empirical Identifier No. 6:
No Distinct Ego or Poetic Persona

In relation to this point I can do no better than to quote Easthope's observation concerning the presence of an ego in the following excerpt from Eliot's *The Waste Land*:

> Unreal City,
> Under the brown fog of a winter dawn,
> A crowed flowed over London Bridge, so many,
> I had not thought death had undone so many.
> Sighs, short and infrequent, were exhaled,
> And each man fixed his eyes before his feet.
> Flowed up the hill and down King William Street,
> To where Saint Mary Woolnoth kept the hours
> With a dead sound on the final stroke of nine.
> There I saw one I knew, and stopped him crying: 'Stetson!
> 'You who where with me in the ships at Mylae!
> 'That corpse you planted last year in your garden,
> 'Has it begun to sprout? Will it bloom this year?
> 'Or has the sudden frost disturbed its bed?
> 'Oh keep the Dog far hence, that's friend to men,
> 'Or with his nails he'll dig it up again!
> 'You! hypocrite lecteur!—mon semblable,—mon frère!' [49]

(60-76)

Of this Easthope says:

> Although there is an 'I' that ego is a point in a process, not fixed in any definite relation to London, Dante, the Punic wars (during which the battle of Mylae was fought in 260 BC) and Webster's play, *The White Devil* (from which the warning about the dog is culled); the whole address to Stetson is unexplained and insufficiently motivated; meaning is dislocated across syntactical oppositions. Crucially, a reader is left undecided whether this is said or cited, whether a voice is represented speaking or there is rather a verbal collage from Dante, Vergil ('Mylae'), Jacobean drama and (in the last line here) Baudelaire. We are forced to become aware of the text as text, the materiality of the signifier based in phonemic difference, which is the necessary prior condition of all meaning.[50]

Eliot himself sought this effect when he said:

> The point of view which I am struggling to attack is perhaps related to the metaphysical theory of the substantial unity of the soul: for my meaning is, that the poet has, not a 'personality' to express, but a particular medium, which is only a medium and not a personality, in which impressions and experiences combine in peculiar and unexpected ways.[51]

This is almost echoed by Barthes when he says that it is language, 'which speaks, not the author; to write is, through a prerequisite impersonality [...] to reach that point where only language acts, "performs", and not

Non-Empirical Identifier No. 7:
No Philosophical Discursiveness

Discursiveness (specifically in relation to its poetic manifestation rather than within its philosophical framework) is a mimesis of thought processes and is, therefore, empiricist. Although it could be argued that in much of postmodern poetry these thought processes present themselves as plural and discontinuous, nevertheless, the lexical aspects (abstract nouns etc.) of discursiveness disallow connotation despite the discourse's fragmented appearance. What can be conveyed via discursiveness in all its forms (recollection, rumination, speculation and confessional) could be rendered more concisely with highly concentrated imagery and Novel Word Juxtapositions. In Eliot's view poetry is 'something over and above, and something quite different from, a collection of psychological data about the minds of poets, or about the history of an epoch'.[53]

Discursiveness in poetry arguably came to full fruition with Wordsworth, as can be seen in this extract from 'Tintern Abbey':

>   That time is past,
> And all its aching joys are now no more,
> And all its dizzy raptures. Not for this
> Faint I, nor mourn nor murmer; other gifts
> Have followed; for such loss, I would believe,
> Abundant recompense. For I have learned
> To look on nature, not as in the hour
> Of thoughtless youth; but hearing often-times
> The still, sad music of humanity [54]

(83-92)

Every phrase is intended to propel the reader's understanding forward to the next phrase so that enough semantic information can be gathered to enable hermeneutic closure. Meaning is produced retrospectively, i.e. after having read the passage. The "message" of the passage is more important than the individual semantic elements that comprise it and consequently the passage is captive to the logic of uninterrupted statement.

Examples of discursiveness can be seen even in more experimental modern works such as in Ashbery's *The Picture of Little J. A. in a Prospect of Flowers*:

> Yet I cannot escape the picture
> Of my small self in that bank of flowers:
> My head among the blazing phlox
> Seemed a pale and gigantic fungus.
> I had a hard stare, accepting
> Everything, taking nothing,
> As though the rolled-up future might stink
> As loud as stood the sick moment
> The shutter clicked. Though I was wrong,

<div align="center">Still, as the loveliest feelings [55]</div>

This is essentially a Wordsworthian transcription of a memory intermingled with philosophical rumination. Similarly, in Prynne's 'Frost and Snow, Falling' we find this:

> So that when the snow falls again the earth
> becomes lighter and lighter. The surface con-
> spires with us, we are its first born. Even
> in this modern age we leave tracks, as we
> go. And as we go, walk, stride or climb
> out of it, we leave that behind, our own
> level of contemplation of the world [56]

There is little in this that distinguishes it from the tradition of philosophically reflective poetry.

That discursiveness is so amply evident in experimental works could be regarded as nothing more than the use of it ironically: in the sense that these instances of it are used to defamiliarise the transparency of such discourse as it is presented in poetry that is more conventional. This may be so, but I am not sure whether irony (and, for that matter, defamilarization) is divorced from an empiricist aesthetic, in that its aims are dependent upon readers recognising its presence. That irony can be recognised indicates that ambiguity is absent (or severely limited), and that closure is intended: the poet intends the reader to recognise the irony, and the reader responds by obeying. How else could irony operate without this tacit agreement between poet and reader?

The last three Non-Empirical Identifiers (Unconventional Punctuation, Use of Ellipsis and No Metaphors) have already been touched upon in earlier sections.

Poetry as Mental Activity

In *The Reader, the Text, the Poem* Louise Rosenblatt says, 'The poem, then, must be thought of as an event in time. It is not an object or an ideal entity. It happens during a coming-together, a compentration, of a reader and a text'.[57] She later elaborates:

> The reading of a text is an event occurring at a particular time in a particular environment at a particular moment in the life history of the reader. The transaction will involve not only the past experience but also the present state and present interests or preoccupations of the reader. This suggests the possibility that printed marks on a page may even become different linguistic symbols by virtue of transactions with different readers. Just as knowing is the process linking a knower and a known, so a poem should not be thought of as an object, an entity, but rather as an active process lived through during the relationship between a reader and a text.[58]

For the poem to be experienced as an event in time, the importance of mental activity, or "internalisation", in the reader cannot be overestimated. By internalisation I mean that part of the reader's response that is able, through conscious decision, to minimise the relevance of the text in the hermeneutical process.[59] This can be readily achieved with poetry containing Non-Empirical Identifiers but is difficult to achieve with poetry in which the artifice (in the form of certain extra-lexical ingredients—such as the visual and acoustic) is foregrounded at the expense of semantic elements. Such poetry inhibits internalisation and is 'concerned only with representing its own mechanisms'.[60]

These elements of artifice are, however, non-empirical but they are so only in the same way as abstract painting and music. Like these, they are non-semantic and, as such, they preclude an exegetical response that is distinct from the hermeneutical procedures employed in the reception of non-representational visual art and music. In 'The Dollar Value of Poetry' Charles Bernstein advocates a poetics that is grounded in experiences that are released in the reading: a 'nongeneralzable residue that is specific to each particular experience'. In this sense, then, poetry is seen as being untranslatable and unparaphrasable for 'what is untranslatable is the sum of all the specific conditions of the experience (place, time, order, light, mood, position, to infinity) made available by reading'.[61] Bernstein sees this untranslatability as being misunderstood by advocates of 'certain "concretist" tendencies, who see in radical concrete procedures the manifestation of untranslatability at its fullest flowering'[62]. As Bernstein, stresses 'what is not translatable is the experience released in the reading'.[63] He goes on to say that 'in so far as some "visual poems" move toward making the understanding independent of the language it is written in, i.e., no longer requiring translation, they are, indeed, no longer so much writing as works of visual art.[64] In 'Words and Pictures', he emphasises the linguistic and semantic criteria necessary for any aesthetic of viewer/reception theory to be plausible: 'visual experience is only validated when accompanied by a logico-verbal explanation'.[65] For Bernstein, then, as he says in 'Thought's Measure', 'there is meaning only in terms of language'.[66]

Furthermore, he is well aware of the dangers of too much foregrounding of artifice when he writes in 'Artifice of Absorption':

> In my poems, I
> frequently use opaque & nonabsorbable
> elements, digressions &
> interruptions, as part of a technological
> arsenal to create a more powerful
> ("souped up")
> absorption than possible with traditional,
> & blander, absorptive techniques. This is a
> precarious road because insofar
> as the poem seems
> overtly self-conscious, as opposed to internally
> incantatory or psychically
> actual, it may produce
> self-consciousness in the reader in such a way as to
> destroy his or her absorption by theatricalizing
> or conceptualizing the text, removing
> it from the realm of an experience engendered
> to that of a technique
> exhibited.[67]

Bernstein welcomes internalisation. Without it, it is impossible for poetry to be experienced as an event in time. However, he does tend to view 'the semantic field as incorporating non-lexical features of a poem'.[68] While I agree with incorporation in principle, in practice it is psychologically problematical for most readers. This is perhaps why such poetry is deemed "difficult".

The formal qualities of a poem are, of course, important but only indirectly: in that they facilitate the inner ear's appreciation of the poem's sonorous qualities. They do not contribute overmuch semantically. The

only thing of importance is the mental activity experienced by the reader. The reader's attention should not be focused on the poem's structure or its rhetorical devices but, rather, should be concentrated on the resonance produced by the semantic qualities of the lexis. Only in this way, then, can the poem be fully experienced as mental activity. It must be remembered that a poem is "heard" primarily in the mind. All that we are able to glean from a poem is conveyed through the poems semantic operation. To argue that the formal qualities of the text facilitate a semantic response is to rely too heavily on an aesthetic theory that is more appropriate to the visual arts.

Conclusion

The classification and identification of Empirical and Non-Empirical Identifiers enables readers to become conscious of the procedures used to limit exegesis, and to inhibit reader participation in the interpretive process. Recognising this enables the reader to subvert these mechanisms, thereby, making conscious and controllable, reading strategies that would ordinarily function unconsciously. Such unconscious strategies are outlined as follows:

> The reader brings to the text his past experience and present personality. Under the magnetism of the ordered symbols of the text, he marshals his resources and crystallizes out from the stuff of memory, thought, and feeling a new order, a new experience, which he sees as the poem. This becomes part of the ongoing stream of his life experience, to be reflected on from any angle important to him as a human being.[69]

To use this process consciously enables the creation of individual meaning and significance for the reader. Robert Sheppard touches on this when he writes with regard to the poetry of Lee Harwood:

> A poem is not thus primarily self-expressive. It is objective, and only completed by the reader, though here Harwood does not have in mind the ideal reader of recent reader-response theorist, one "constituted" or "implied" by the text, but the multitude of readers who actually do engage with the poem-catalyst; it causes various changes within different readers without itself altering its objective form.[70]

The various reader-response theories that Sheppard alludes to are in actuality only stating more explicitly, and in a more specialist vernacular, what has always been the basic operating procedures of many poets, and even songwriters. With particular regard to the latter, the following statement by the songwriter Neil Young is illuminating:

> The way I do things is I give enough facts to make people get a feeling—and then they can associate their own lives with these images that make it seem to apply directly to them. Like the song was written for them. They can't believe it's so directly and obviously about their life. That's because it's not so specific that it eliminates them.[71]

There is a psychological basis for this reader-oriented approach. Rosenblatt makes this clear when she quotes the psycholinguist Eric Wanner as saying in his article 'Do We Understand Sentences from the Outside-In or from the Inside-Out?' that the 'listener makes an active contribution to what he hears and understands, and it is this contribution which makes the problem of comprehension both difficult and interesting'.[72]

The main thrust of this book has essentially been advocating a return to generalization and imprecision in

poetic practice. To obstruct the ambiguity inherent in language is to obviate the natural instincts of human beings to make sense of themselves and their experiences through reading poetry. If one looks at the poetry of children and the so-called "bad" poetry of adults, for instance, one finds it replete with imprecision. Contemporary mainstream poetry fails to sell in vast numbers because it leaves little to the imagination and disallows a personal interpretative interaction with the text. Its prose-like quality, which is excessively similar to prose fiction, leaves the reading public faced with a choice: to read poetry, or to read a novel. They generally opt for the latter because they perceive it as more value for money.

Ideally, each reader should be permitted the fundamental privilege of formulating a meaning which would (for that reader) be the quintessence of the poem's significance. The poem, in and of itself, is of little consequence other than as a cipher for this practice to occur. The words and images of a poem should be looked upon as devices that enable readers to recall their own experiences, reflect present circumstances and anticipate future desires. Each word should have the potential to enable the reader to derive personal significance from it. By doing this, the reader becomes, in effect, the composer of the poem, and the architect of its limits. It is of minor importance whether the commonly received meaning of the poem is discerned by the reader or not, as the ultimate aim of such a personal response is to enhance the enjoyment value of the work for that reader alone. What the poem is "meant" to mean from an authorial standpoint should not be of paramount concern for readers wishing to gain satisfaction and enjoyment from the work. Such an approach to reading poetry, if widely understood and accepted, could possibly restore poetry to its status as a significant art form.

[1] J. P. Ward, *Wordsworth's Language of Men* (Sussex: The Harvester Press, 1984), pp. 22-23.

[2] Robert C. Holub, *Reception Theory: A Critical Introduction* (London: Methuen, 1984), pp.24-25.

[3] Quoted in Edward Larrissy, *Reading Twentieth-Century Poetry: The Language of Gender and Objects* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990), p.2.

[4] Kate Rhodes, *Reversal* (London: Enitharmon Press, 2005), p.12.

[5] Anthony Easthope, 'How Good is Seamus Heaney?', *English*, 46. 184, (1997), 21-36 (p.24).

[6] Easthope, p.24.

[7] Easthope, p.25.

[8] Simon Armitage, 'Night Shift', in *The New Poetry*, ed. by M. Hulse, D. Kennedy and D. Morley (Newcastle: Bloodaxe, 1993), p.338.

[9] J. H. Prynne, 'Into the Day', in *A Various Art*, ed. by A. Crozier and T. Longville (Manchester: Carcanet, 1987), p.260.

[10] I made these lines up myself.

[11] Helen Kidd, 'Paper City', in *New British Poetries: The Scope of the Possible*, ed. by R. Hampson and P. Barry (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1993), p.156.

[12] Kidd, p.158.

[13] Veronica Forrest-Thompson, 'The Garden of Prosperine', in *New British Poetries*, p.118.

[14] Forrest-Thompson, in *New British Poetries*, p.119. The line, 'I lie alone. I am aweary, aweary' alludes to the lines in Tennyson's 'Mariana': 'She said, "I am aweary, aweary, / I would that I were dead!"'.

[15] Forrest-Thompson, *Poetic Artifice* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1978), p.41.

[16] Forrest-Thompson, *Poetic Artifice*, p.16.

[17] John Ashbery, 'How Much longer Will I Be Able to Inhabit the Divine Sepulcher?', in *Postmodern American Poetry*, ed. by P. Hoover (New York: Norton, 1994), p.168.

[18] Ashbery, p.168.

[19] A. H. Harrison, *Victorian Poets and Romantic Poems: Intertextuality and Ideology* (Virginia: Virginia University Press, 1990), pp.2-3. Wordsworth also evinces some intertextuality when he alludes to Milton.

[20] Michael Ferber, *The Poetry of William Blake* (London: Penguin, 1991), p.40.

[21] Ferber, p.45.

[22] Ferber, p.45.

[23] Ferber, p.45.

[24] Roland Barthes, 'The Death of the Author', in *Authorship: From Plato to the Postmodern*, ed. by S. Burke (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1995), pp.125-30 (p.128).

[25] Barthes, p.129.

[26] Charles Bernstein says that the absence of conventional syntax rather than producing incoherence produces new coherences. Email correspondence with the Charles Bernstein dated 26th June 2005.

[27] Carl Coolidge, 'On Induction of the Hand', *Postmodern American Poetry*, p.371.

[28] Tom Mandel, 'Say Ja', *Postmodern American Poetry*, p.417.

[29] Charles Bernstein, *Content's Dream: Essays 1975-1984* (Los Angeles: Sun and Moon, 1986), p. 37.

[30] Bernstein, p.37.

[31] Bernstein, p.36.

[32] Jack Kerouac, '211th Chorus', *Postmodern American Poetry*, p.78.

[33] Kerouac, 'The Thrashing Doves', *Postmodern American Poetry*, p.79.

[34] Allen Ginsberg, *Howl*, *Postmodern American Poetry*, p.131.

[35] Tom Clarke, 'You (I)', *Postmodern American Poetry*, p.394.

[36] John Ashbery, 'Leaving the Atocha Station', *Postmodern American Poetry*, p.170.

[37] W. H. Stevenson, *William Blake: Selected Poetry* (London: Penguin, 1988), pp.161 & 162.

[38] Stevenson, p.106.

[39] Ira Konigsberg, *The Complete Film Dictionary* (London: Bloomsbury, 1987), p.217.

[40] William Empson, *Seven Types of Ambiguity* (London: Hogarth, 1953), p.25.

[41] Empson, p.236.

[42] Empson, p.237.

[43] Empson, p.26.

[44] T. S. Eliot, "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock", *Selected Poems* (London: Faber, 1954), p.13.

[45] However, the use of footnotes in poetry operates to the detriment of ambiguity, and I only mention Eliot's use of them to demonstrate his attitude to the passage's concrete nouns.

[46] Ed Dorn, 'An Idle Visitation', *Postmodern American Poetry*, p.201.

[47] John Ashbery, 'The Skaters', *Postmodern American Poetry*, p.174.

[48] David Porter, *Dickinson: The Modern Idiom* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981), p. 32.

[49] T. S. Eliot, *Selected Poems*, p.53.

[50] Easthope, p.26.

[51] T. S. Eliot, *The Sacred Wood*, 7th edn (London: Methuen, 1920), p.56.

[52] Barthes, 'The Death of the Author', Burke, p.126.

[53] Eliot, *The Sacred Wood*, p.ix.

[54] *The Poetical Works of William Wordsworth*, ed. by T. Hutchinson and E. de Selincourt (London: Oxford University Press, 1936), Wordsworth Editions 1994, p. 206.

[55] John Ashbery, 'The Picture of Little J. A. in a Prospect of Flowers', in *Contemporary American Poetry*, ed. by Donald Hall, 2nd edn (London: Penguin, 1972), p.189.

[56] J. H. Prynne, 'Frost and Snow Falling', *A Various Art*, p.242.

[57] L. M. Rosenblatt, *The Reader, the Text, the Poem: The Transactional Theory of the Literary Work* (Illinois: Southern Illinois University Press, 1978), p.12.

[58] Rosenblatt, pp. 20-21.

[59] Rosenblatt's attitude to the relevance of the text can be seen in the following quotation where she comments on the titles of literary works: 'But when we try to think of what a title—Hamlet, say, or Moby Dick—might refer to apart from a reader, whether the author himself or another, "the work" disappears. The title then refers simply to a set of black marks on ordered pages or to a set of sounds vibrating in the air, waiting for some reader or listener to interpret them as verbal symbols and, under their guidance, to make a work of art, the poem or novel or play'. See *The Reader, the Text, the Poem,* pp.12-13.

[60] Charles Bernstein, *A Poetics* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992), p.10.

[61] Bernstein, *Content's Dream*, p.58.

[62] Bernstein, *Content's Dream*, p.58.

[63] Bernstein, *Content's Dream*, p.58.

[64] Bernstein, *Content's Dream*, p.58. It could be argued that visual poetry is, indeed, semantic. I agree to a point. For instance, Ernst Gomringer's 'WIND' (which plays with associations such as the words "in" and "win" contained within the word "WIND") and Augusto de Campos's 'CODIGO' (which contains the word "God" as an anagram and alludes to "cogito ergo sum") do, indeed, operate semantically. Nevertheless, their semantic operations are extremely meagre. With 'WIND' the associations come to only two words: "win" and "in" (perhaps also the word "wind", as in to wind a clock). The same limitations can be seen in de Campos's 'CODIGO'. Apart from a reader's fleeting appreciation of the novel aspects of these poems their affects are exhausted as soon as they are recognised.

[65] Bernstein, *Content's Dream*, p.125.

[66] Bernstein, *Content's Dream*, p.62.

[67] Bernstein, *A Poetics*, pp.52-53.

[68] Email correspondence with the Charles Bernstein dated 26th June 2005.

[69] Rosenblatt, p. 12.

[70] Robert Sheppard, 'Lee Harwood and the Poetics of the Open Work', in *New British Poetries*, pp.216-33 (p.220).

[71] Quoted in J. McDonough, *Shakey: Neil Young's Biography* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2002), p.11.

[72] Quoted in Rosenblatt, p.41.