# Form, Uncertainty, and the Reduction of the Arbitrary in Postmodern Poetry

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## ABSTRACT

This article examines how uncertainty and the reduction of arbitrariness simultaneously create the tension necessary for the formal existence of the modern and postmodern poem in English. Building on sociologist Niklas Luhmann's extensive investigations of art as one of many modern autopoietic social systems, the author examines how the system of poetry seeks to reduce the arbitrariness of utterances while simultaneously maintaining the semantic and syntactical uncertainty necessary for a poem's formal existence as an aesthetic (quasi)object. The author examines poetry's necessary resistance to code-formulations, concluding that the "noise" in poetic utterance is necessary to maintain the system of poetry given the social pressures of rampant legalism, fundamentalism, and hyper-commodification in which experience itself is being reduced to manipulable quanta.

Consider the use of digital recording and playback technologies, in which sonic information is lost when music performance is digitally quantized at any of several stages of the recording/playback process. In the translation of an analog electrical signal into binary code, performance is robbed of a part of its being, since digital sampling of a signal can only occur at a rate less than infinite, and its informational arbitrariness is over-reduced to exactly *what it is.* Audiophile listeners have long maintained that *what it is* does not allow, paradoxically, for the fullest reproduction of an originary event, or, if one abandons this fiction, the fullest production of a richly meaningful aesthetic quasi-object.[2] The listener must rely too heavily on perceptual tricks to fill in the informational gaps in the

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[2] See Bruno Latour (1993) for his formulation of the term quasi-object, by which he means a hybrid of the natural and the manmade (We have never been modern. Trans. Catherine Porter. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press). See also Paul Mann's (1991) discussion of "synthetic objects" and "discourse objects" (Theory-death of the avant-garde. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press). Here I mean, roughly, an object the existence of which is predicated on the operation of the system in which it is situated. Or: the quasi-object becomes constituted, hence observable, because of the discourse that accumulates around a social nexus (e.g., an emergent technology, a new practice, etc.).

digital signal. This is one of the reasons audiophiles are often also vinyl record enthusiasts; as a medium of analog duplication, vinyl records reproduce signals as continuous frequency curves. Furthermore, analog recording methods, duplication media, and playback technologies introduce widely variable signal distortions. When a digital signal crosses a certain amplitude threshold, there is a single response: *noise.* Analog distortion, on the other hand, is unpredictable along an upward curve. Its limit is also noise, but there is no definite threshold beyond which the signal disintegrates. As listeners, we perceive mild signal distortion as "warmth," personality, character—we are allowed imaginal entry into the performance—perhaps because signal distortion represents the distortion inherent in perception, the ambiguity of *being* itself. It is hardly surprising that artists and audio engineers, in attempting to capture as much performance information as possible, prefer recording with analog transducers and tape, thereby introducing a field of unpredictable potential states into the process.

I suggest that something similar occurs in our contemporary experience of poetry, in which a particular kind of ambiguity, such that meaning is unpredictable along an upward curve, is essential for the poem's formal existence. Furthermore, I suggest that this ambiguity results, paradoxically, from a strong reduction in the arbitrariness of the poem's formal possibilities. At first blush, this type of ambiguity does not differ much from, say, Empson's seven types, Chomsky's transformational model, or other lexical and structural manifestations. A quick sampling of Empson's (1966) conception of ambiguity: "simultaneous unconnected meanings"; "a contradictory or irrelevant statement, forcing the reader to invent interpretation"; "when a detail is effective several ways at once"; "two opposite meanings defined by the context, so that the total effect is to show a fundamental division in the writer's mind." However, as useful as these definitions of literary ambiguity are, I would like to add an element of probability and infinite variability within identifiable constraints to the concept, so that we can think of the communication that occurs in the medium of meaning as not only oscillating between two boundaries but as having a greater or lesser probability of specific interpretation depending on a number of variables, all of which function in the creation of an aesthetic quasi-object. This particular ambiguity is, I believe, a particular hallmark of late-modern poetry.[3]

That we lack interpretative confidence in the object that is the poem is a happy state of affairs and signals that we are indeed engaged with poetry—literature, art—and not something more closely resembling code, such as an instruction manual or a television guide. This is not to argue that aesthetic value is immanent or that an aesthetic object is autotelic. Rather, the degree of our interpretative confidence contributes to the creation of the aesthetic quasi-object that is the poem. That about which we have complete confidence is constituted as a non-aesthetic (quasi-)object.[4] N. Katherine Hayles (1999) sums up this matter: "Although information is often defined as *reducing* uncertainty, it also *depends* on uncertainty" (p. 32). When we feel that the probability of a certain aesthetic formation is exactly 1—that is, absolutely expected as what it is—no information will be communicated. This suggests that a reader's—and an author's—willingness to surrender a large degree of interpretative confidence is essential for literary communication.

Surrender to the work of art, however, does not come without risk. Adorno (1974) observes of music-listening that it "takes the place of the utopia it promises"; poetry threatens to do this as well. Adorno addresses the doubleness of contemporary aesthetic experience: the observer must acknowledge his conscious role in the process of artistic creation while at the same time resisting the tendency for the individual psyche to be overwhelmed by the larger social system or even by the coerciveness of individual artworks. Fortunately, the observer is rescued from Adorno's aesthetic envelopment by a willingness to embrace the ambiguous.

What is at stake in balancing a necessary ambiguity and an equally necessary reduction in arbitrariness is the constitution, maintenance, understanding, and control of imaginal space. One way of understanding how ambiguity and arbitrariness figure in the constitution of modern art, particularly poetry, is suggested by Niklas Luhmann (1990; 2000a; 2000b), who articulates a social theory of continuous, non-stable systems within changing environments, pointing first to the movement from

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[3] We might consider the work of, among others, John Ashbery, Jorie Graham, Charles Bernstein, Carl Phillips, Lyn Hejinian, Anne Carson, Brenda Hillman, and Ben Doyle, as exempla of this claim.

[4] To the degree that quasi-objects are constituted by interpretative acts, they do not attain being as a result of any specific "individual" interpretation. Interpretative authority—indeed all authority—resides in the cumulative operations of the system of communication to which the quasi-object belongs.

stratification to functional differentiation within society over the past three-hundred years.[5] The more complex the social environment has become, the more autonomous various social systems, including art, have become in order to cope with the multitudinous, often contradictory, demands that challenge the field, so that social communication fragments into a series of self-referentially closed domains— politics, economics, religion, science, sports, and so on. The emergent social system closes itself from any threat to its own authority, yet each of these autonomous discourses contributes, in specific ways, to the overall process of societal self-maintenance and remains responsive to the influence of the environment. However, this overall process lacks external authorization. As Kuhn (1962) has said about the system of science, "There is no standard higher than the assent of the relevant community," and so the problem of establishing clear hierarchies or priorities in a complex and dynamic society is to find a means of sufficiently reducing complexity (p. 94).[6] This is accomplished by each functional system's becoming self-governing. Over the last several centuries, the differentiated fields have established their independence with respect to their underlying values, performance criteria, priorities, and imperatives. Thus, scientific truth is constructed and validated within the domain of scientific communication; economic rationality is internal to economic discourse; and, of course, since around 1700, when admiration was replaced by *knowledgeable* admiration, art has become almost wholly liberated and has evolved into a self-referential autonomy: art declares its own status.[7] For Luhmann (2000a), art's autonomy is first and last an instance of the overall societal process of differentiation (pp. 133-184).

As a subsystem of art, poetry defines its own purposes recursively and self-referentially, both with respect to the identification of the most urgent poetic problems and with respect to the appropriate selection of formal textual, contextual, paratextual, and metatextual means to deal with such problems. However, poetry, like other (sub) systems, does so under stressful conditions of mutual interdependence,[8] since the failure to self-organize responses to the irritations of the environment leads to either irrelevance or subordination. Once art—poetry—has differentiated itself, it must always present something new; otherwise its communication breaks down into meaninglessness or turns into general social communication about other matters.[9] An operatively closed system, in other words, requires the novel presentation of information in order to continue. (Of course, structural couplings between art and environment must be presumed or agents identified by and within the system could not innovate; after all, art does have material being.)

In the sense that art is whatever can be talked about as art, there is a systemic closure that makes it difficult for the system to call its own operations into question, let alone erase them. This

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[5] See especially Essays on self-reference (1990). New York, NY: Columbia University Press.

[6] Jürgen Habermas (McCarthy, 1978, pp. 213-232) has vigorously objected to these claims, pointing out that the problem with functionalism as proposed by Luhmann, Parsons, and others is that the theory creates the problem of world-complexity it seeks to resolve, presupposing "the fulfillment of certain conditions." In presuming to condense Habermas's critique of functionalism to footnote length, I identify, following McCarthy, four central objections: 1) functionalist explanations fail to specify the boundaries and goal-states of social systems; 2) the concepts of systems theory derived from cybernetics and the life-sciences lose their precision when overextended to social study; 3) systems theory suggests that political legitimacy can be reduced to mere legality and is, therefore, potentially anti-democratic; 4) functionalism, in conceiving theory as practice, reduces truth to a way of stabilizing certainty and consensus. Whether these objections prove out is immaterial for our discussion here; excepting the notion that the theory creates the world-complexity problem, the conception of art that I am outlining could, I believe, be validated by Habermas's action theory, in that access to the text occurs by communicative action that is motivated by the text.

[7] Plumpe and Werber (Schmidt and Jahraus, 1999, p. 3) locate the differentiation of literature from the broader social system around 1770, with the emergence of strictly literary communication loosed from restrictions on what is utterable or excessively coded. See also Eagleton, T (1992) "The ideology of the aesthetic." The politics of pleasure, Ed. Stephen Regan. Buckingham: Open University Press. Eagleton traces the relationship between aesthetics and politics since the Enlightenment. While Eagleton argues that the two systems are inseparably entangled, I suggest that aesthetics is not so much a function of bourgeois politics arising from individualism and property rights as it is a system structurally coupled to such a politics, so that the modern bourgeois political system and the art system are in a state of constant mutual irritation.

[8] Interdependence—not integration, which would occur under regimes of domination. Structural coupling between systems allows a multiplicity of states, as systems respond to one another's pressures (irritations) in a continual—and continually self-protective—self-reorganization. Although the simultaneous operation of structurally coupled systems constrains each system's freedom, this state of affairs does not suggest that one system must dominate another.

[9] Innovation here relies on "playing by the rules of the game" as determined by the autopoietic system of art. The avant-garde does not reject the art system per se; on the contrary, practitioners of experimental art want what they do to count as art. Otherwise, they would become tree surgeons or scuba-divers (although Duchamp, longing to create works that are not "art," might claim aesthetic motives for such activities).

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state of affairs does not lead to stasis, however, for the system of art is both structurally coupled to other systems and irritated by the demands of the environment—demands to which art must respond, usually by innovating, or face annihilation. Here we experience the paradox of open closure, in which art must continuously "make it new" in order to remain itself, differentiated from everything that it is not. Once recognized as art, the difference cannot disappear again. Either an artistic move is productive within the art system or else it fails; it contributes to the self-maintenance of art or it is relegated to other forms of discourse.

Although art's authority lies in art itself rather than in the perceptions of a single doer or observer, we must not be too quick to dismiss the role of the individual in the process. Like any social system, the self-referential, self-sustaining system of art cannot operate without convention and consensus.[10] An artist makes a work; a critic has her say; the literary historian eventually re-evaluates the accepted wisdom; and so on. These matters are accepted or rejected by the system depending on current conditions of validity. The discourse conventions of knowledgeable individuals and the tentative consensus of separate observers are necessary for the system's self-perpetuation, yet, tautologically, the system is what determines individual membership in the discourse community in the first place. In any event, the system of art is independent of any specific doer or observer. The question of which persons or what statements qualify as part of the discourse of art is not very interesting, since the system does the qualifying for us time after time.

Luhmann (2000a) identifies the function of art as the mediation between perception and communication, a subject I will return to later. More specific to this discussion, Plumpe and Werber define literature in terms of communicative operations, such that the ontological status of artworks as symbolically generated communications is constituted strictly as the difference between medium and form (Schmidt and Jahraus, 1999, p. 3). Without this distinction there is only unmarked space. Making this distinction requires no justification and generates all subsequent operations, each of which creates further difference. A sequence is set in motion, one that elaborates into, in my examination here, art or individual aesthetic (quasi-)objects. Any arbitrary event will initiate the move from an unmarked to a marked state, so that although its history haunts it, the motive for the work of art, indeed its entire history, is of little relevance. Paradoxically, both the object and the creative process emerge from the imperative of drawing of distinctions. Understanding the difference between marked and unmarked space is a distinction that is its own unity. The "other side" of a distinction, a form, remains indicated as present, whereas logically it is indicated as absent.[11] One unfolding of the paradox of this unity of distinction, which arises neither from logic nor from rhetoric but from action, is art. The continuous and productive resolution of this paradox is the oscillation from marked to unmarked states and the reentry into form, an activity that produces a world and its myriad manifestations.

Art, poetry, can be thought of as a means by which the mind,[12] conscious and unconscious, observes itself, making symbolically available what would otherwise remain hidden.

Now we can specify the unfolding of the unity of distinction we call art: the difference between the mind, in its broadest configuration, including the "imagination," and communication. Communication captivates perception and thereby directs awareness. We pay attention. The private is made public but still retains the character of privacy. Precisely because the psychic system remains operatively closed and inaccessible to itself, it "initiates communication in such a way that communication in turn makes consciousness continue. And communication irritates consciousness in such a way that consciousness in turn initiates communication" (Schmidt and Jahraus, 1999, p. 249). Through the mediation of the aesthetic object we share a particular awareness of perception, of the experience of conscious and unconscious operations, in all its temporal specificity, which cannot be

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[10] See Peirce's "consensus theory:" "the opinion which is fated to be agreed upon by all who investigate what we mean by the truth" (McCarthy, 1978, p. 299).

[11] N. Katherine Hayles (1999, pp. 32-36) argues, quite persuasively, that in contemporary experience presence is overwhelmed by pattern, the other side of which is randomness. This squares with the idea that the other side of a marked form is also a presence, if we take randomness to mean the possibility that "any symbol can appear in any position" (p. 32) in unmarked space.

[12] I am using Timothy D. Wilson's (2002) definition of the unconscious as the "mental processes that are inaccessible to consciousness but influence judgments, feelings, or behavior" (p. 23).

made available by other means.[13]  "By defining [art] in terms of communicative operations, the concept of "work" is given a different ontological status:  The work is seen as a symbolically generated medium of communication" (Schmidt and Jahraus, 1999, p. 242), which fascinates the mind.

So how do communicative operations figure into form? Form presents self-difference and self-identity simultaneously, as an unstated self-reference, a unity. Form does not emphasize the ordering of content, as we generally think of it, but considers the difference "content" makes. Any difference that marks a unity can be conceptualized as form, and this presence places on the other side of itself the realm of what we often think of as chance or randomness.  In this sense, form is the externalization of inner content.  It is *being* structured by *meaning*.[14]

When distinctions are marked as forms, they can be distinguished and reproduced.  However, forms are articulated asymmetrically, since only their internal side needs further elaborations, complications, innovations, etc.  Forms are generated by a rupture in a symmetry that must be posited: we must presuppose an unmarked state, so that a new series of operations, beginning from a self-created difference, begins with a blind spot.  We step into a marked state to draw a boundary, thereby transgressing another sort of boundary, and all subsequent operations take place in this first-distinguished marked space.  Freed of both ontology and semiotics, form becomes pure self-reference. It is itself a boundary and thus opens up the possibility of transgression, which is crucial for art's continued existence, for boundaries must, apparently, be transgressed for innovation to be recognized.

The forms that we identify in art tend toward a kind of open closure.[15]  As I have suggested, although the work of art must respond to the myriad demands of the world-environment, it must distinguish itself externally from this unmarked space, or it will be subsumed.  Internally, a work of art must close itself by limiting, with each of its formal decisions, further possibilities. In the case of traditional prosodies, many of the formal decisions are given:  adhering to Shakespearean sonnet form means vastly reducing the arbitrariness of diction and syntax:  line fourteen must necessarily be end-stopped, rhyme with line thirteen, consist of ten syllables, and so forth.  Whether closure is internal or external, it is supported by the frame, the context, that is produced along with the work and its boundaries cannot at that point be transgressed except as the notion of transgression is accepted as one more formal device.

One must observe form as if the other side, the adjacent space, were undetermined—which it is! Form points us to the unmarked space (everything that is not form) as an indeterminate space of pure suggestion.  A form, which is a determination, suggests this unmarked, probabilistic space but without defining what it is.  It would be wrong to suppose that in the contemplation of aesthetic quasi-objects the infinite possibility of unmarked space beyond form can be apprehended by an observer. Although original symmetry must be ruptured to result in operations, original symmetry remains unobservable; only the form can be observed.  What can be observed in art is thus the unfolding of a paradox that as a paradox escapes observation, and this observability of the unfolding validates the arbitrariness of the initial rupture.

"A system exists as long as it is able to replicate its own elements. It succeeds when each operation successfully joins another operation of the same system and proper connectivity is secured. In the case of sign operations, each sign must contain information for subsequent signs yet remain arbitrary," writes Elena Esposito (1999), elaborating on Luhmann's inquiry into semeiosis. She goes on to say that every sign is necessarily redundant, containing information on subsequent signs which then

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[13] Aesthetic discussion does not generally allow the distinction between perception and communication to be seen, perhaps because these two systems are treated as a unity of difference, which is structurally coupled so that communication relies on the perception of signs and perception exposes itself to the influence of utterance.

[14] It might be objected that this understanding is nothing more than the old "the-medium-is-the-message" formulation. However, "meaning" as a medium can never be a "message" (whatever that term points to), unless it is itself constituted as second-order-observable object. There is nothing necessarily misguided about making this move—in fact, it is exactly what I have done here—but where McLuhan fails is in not recognizing a new, higher-level medium in which the medium-of-meaning executes its operations.  I'm not sure what to term this medium—perhaps the domain of second-order probability.

[15]  This is a good point at which to mention that the term "operative closure" is not synonymous with a monadology. Art may be operatively closed but this neither means that it fails to maintain contact with its environment nor that it fails to communicate with other operatively closed systems.

limit the range of possible connections, so that references are never merely between pure signifiers (a state of affairs that would presumably prevent communication in meaning from occurring).

In supporting this contention, Esposito comments in passing that the sound of a word does not give information about the sounds of subsequent words. This latter point seems untrue and goes to the heart of my discussion. In Anglo-Saxon poetry, for example, the sound of a word certainly does give information about subsequent words" sounds, since the Anglo-Saxon line requires a pattern of alliteration; or, to take another example, in traditional rhymed poetry, any teleuton predicts its eventual rhyme.  Knowing that sound predicts sound reduces the element of surprise, as well as the range of ambiguity, suggesting, at least in this case, that to reduce the arbitrary is also to reduce the ambiguous. If a signifier were not arbitrary, the sign could not be ambiguous, or so it would seem. I am not convinced, however, that this is the case.

Let's look at the opening sentence of John Ashbery's (1984) "Worsening Situation':

Like a rainstorm, he said, the braided colors
Wash over me and are no help. . . . (p. 165)

Looked at in one way, the whole sentence is a sign, that is, a signifier operating in the medium of meaning, but, at least partly because it is presented as poetry, it is an oscillating sign, refusing clear interpretation.  On the other hand, the sentence is comprised of over a dozen otherwise autonomous (because arbitrary) signs whose meanings also oscillate wildly depending on the conditions of their use. Nonetheless, the possible meanings of the individual signs in the sentence-as-sign are constrained by grammar, punctuation, and syntax, all of which direct the reader's thinking. The word "like" could initially be taken as the imperative—"he" is commanding one to enjoy a rainstorm. This possibility is eliminated and the grammatical function of "like" reduced to that of a preposition by the syntax of what follows.  Yet the other possibility remains. The part of speech *could have been otherwise* at one point in the reading, and this alternative haunts the sentence, even, perhaps especially, upon re-reading. In this case, reducing the arbitrariness of the word "like" by continuing the sentence in a particular way so that "like" is resolved as a preposition actually introduces ambiguity—an ambiguity quite different from the kind we experience in the combination of words "the braided colors wash." Here we have multiple meanings of the word "wash" (to cleanse, to sweep over, etc.) all of which remain even when the sentence seems to point us to a single interpretation. More interesting, we assume that the "braided colors" refers to a material state, since *braiding* points to material existence. Or do we?  Colors, after all, have no material existence. So how can the immaterial be operated on materially? What can we do with the uncertainty of our response to these two words?  Again, arbitrariness is reduced in the sense that once the word "braided" is accepted as an adjective, the word "colors" must be accepted as a noun (rather than a present-tense verb); but the alternatives linger at the edges of understanding. "The braided" could be a substantive performing the action of coloring; this possibility is open until we have read the entire sentence, and even then alternative possibilities remain, despite our desire to understand.

This kind of ambiguity in poetry is not a device, but a condition, though perhaps not one that results from binarism or the two-sidedness of the sort Esposito or Empson explicates. Two-sidedness, or double-meaning, results in irony, over-interpretation, or both. One of the guides in deciding that Ashbery's words are art instead of something else is the scope of ambiguity, the deferral of interpretative certainty, which any sentence, poetic or otherwise, compels to some degree. The ambiguity in the Ashbery lines is an oscillation of interpretation sweeping through all potential states between two states of absolute signification (code). But in the case of "like" in Ashbery's poem are there not only two potential states:  imperative or preposition?  Perhaps.  But taken with the whole sign that is the sentence, each part of which—moneme, phoneme, punctuation—in its own arbitrariness introduces some degree of ambiguity while seeming to reduce it, the word "like" can be seen as sweeping through all potential states of meaning.

We find a different kind of oscillation in Harryette Mullen's "Kirstenography" (2002), in which the text is haunted by the translation of an "original" text, so that both natural language and code appear together—or rather, multiple codes appear together.  Here is the opening verse paragraph:

K was burn at the bend of the ear in the mouth of Remember.
She was the fecund chill burn in her famish.  She came into

the word with a putty smoother, a handsewn farther, and a
yodeler cistern.  They were all to gather in a rosy horse on a
piety sweet in Alligator Panorama. (p. 46)

There is a subversive ghost language at work here that goes beyond the double-sidedness of irony. Although in the earlier example Ashbery's words occupy multiple states of signification dependent on syntax, in "Kirstenography" the focus shifts to diction, partly because the poem lacks enjambment as a device for delaying interpretation. Mullen's mumbling misspeaking challenges the reader to interpret the language first by substituting words for the ones given.  Hence, "K was burn at the bend of the ear in the mouth of Remember" becomes, "in translation," "K was born at the end of the year in the month of December."  When the reader makes this move, he or she appears to reduce the ambiguity of the original text to such a degree that it is no longer of much interest; but instead the reader observes the poem as existing in at least two possible states simultaneously, the original and the translation (which actually looks more like an "original" text). Now, layered with the same unfolding syntax-dependent ambiguity we find in the Ashbery example, Mullen's sentence becomes a richly textured work that defies interpretative certainty even as the reader mistakenly believes that it has been "translated" into a simpler form.  Again, the reduction of arbitrariness to a state approaching but not reaching code actually introduces an ambiguity that is variable to the degree to which the reader is aware of Mullen's maneuvering.

What is the probability of settling on one sign—and thus, one interpretation—over another? This question pertains to both the practice of writing poetry and the practice of reading it.  I could write a sentence such as "Following the yellow-brick road leads them to Oz." As in the Ashbery poem, the first word ('following') has multiple significations awaiting resolution, depending, among other things, on whether we take it as a participle or a gerund. And so on and so forth.  But the sentence as a sign is given a high degree of interpretative certainty if it is generated within the discourse of primary education and intended to summarize for a ten-year-old child the Frank L. Baum story of Dorothy and Toto. Uncertainty is reduced to zero if the sentence is generated within the discourse of, say, economics; in this case, it fails to operate in the medium of meaning; it is not an object in the system of economics and so either is unavailable to interpretation or is metaphorical in construction and thus subject to an extremely limited interpretation. (That is, the speaker/writer and hearer/reader, conditioned by and subject to the discourse of economics would, in order to make sense of the metaphor, have to restrict their interpretations.) In other words, for my sentence to operate the way Ashbery's sentence does, it would have to be generated by and accepted by the autonomous system of literature as outlined above.  To state the obvious, the contingency of this sentence as a literary event is limited by its participation in a particular discourse, that of literature, with all its requisite practices and expectations.  So we are really only concerned with probability in terms of the context of the literary event.

Esposito (1999) develops the idea, quoting Lyons, that "it no longer makes sense to speak of arbitrariness per se but only of arbitrariness with respect to the observer.  If 'arbitrary' is taken to mean that 'given the form, it is impossible to predict the meaning and, given the meaning, it is impossible to predict the form,' then it follows for the theory of observation that the relationship between form and meaning cannot simply be obtained from the objects" (p. 88). The observer comes to art prepared for art—and prepared *by* art—thereby hugely reducing arbitrariness even before the encounter with the art object.  It is not just physical context that matters but prior expectation and chronically accessible categories of judgment (Wilson, 2002, p. 76).  In the case of poetry, the reader's expectations about the nature of poetic utterance reduces the arbitrariness of signification and also contributes to poetic ambiguity, in that the poem might fulfill certain expectations (e.g., that one experiences words differently in the poetic context; that poetry is all signifier and no signified; etc.) and simultaneously introduce ambiguity because it *does* fulfill these expectations. As initiated readers, we have come to consider the alternative states of a poem, whether semantic, syntagmatic, or paradigmatic. Such reading conditions, temporally situated, lead to communications that can be independent of authorial intention or understanding to such a degree that we might question my earlier assertion that the work of art reproduces in one psychic system the operations of another.  To which I can only say that what is

reproduced by the art object, particularly in the absence of received forms, is a range of possible operations, the more probable of which are accepted as the (form of the) experience.

There is another matter of probability to consider, that is, probability as presence. Thus, as the mind, conscious and unconscious, naively or in re-reading, encounters the lines "Like a rainstorm, he said, the braided colors / Wash over me and are no help," it engages with the field of probable interpretations at various levels. Few would deny that the mind as a matter of course seeks and clings to interpretative certainty; if it did not, our psychic operations would pass into a realm of infinite chaos, of incorrigible noise. However, the work of art exposes the ways in which the human mind both is and is not busy seeking and clinging to certainty, a different realm of experience—a realm that is a field of possibility in which the objects are positions of probability. It is not that meanings are indeterminate, but that they are only *probably* determinate. Nor is it the continuous deferral of meaning that matters for contemporary poetry—indeed, art is drenched in meaning—but the infinite deferral of interpretative certainty.

As something which oscillates not only between poles of actuality but also between a state of potentiality and actuality, the contemporary poem can scarcely be considered an object in any traditional sense. Whether or not giving up the notion of the classical object means giving up the notion of the classical subject in favor of the autonomous-system-as-observer, we are required to reconstruct the object which has lost its opposite. As I have mentioned above, objects can be thought of not as having a specific opposite (e.g., a subject/observer) but as demarcated against the everything else that is unmarked space, as forms whose other side remains undetermined. They individualize themselves by excluding the sum total of everything else, not because they are construed as given but because their significance as objects implies another realm which haunts them.

When a traditional prosody is given, the reduction of arbitrariness is necessarily conditioned, as are the types of ambiguity available to the poetic project; but with the erosion of the availability of received prosody, tropes, and subject matter, the marked space of poetic creation has been significantly reduced and the unmarked space of possibility has been vastly expanded, so that the challenge for a poet writing in the wake of three centuries of modernist revolution is to continually find new ways to condense out of the language-cloud an aesthetic object that can communicate in the medium of meaning. Avant-gardists have responded with their own formal shortcuts (e.g., Oulipo methods) to accomplish what traditional forms once accomplished, but neither these nor "freer" verse prosodies are inevitabilities in the continual quest for new methods of composition and presentation in the effort to protect poetry from dissolution or crystallization into code-objects. This formal project can be more clearly defined if we recognize form as a structure that takes its shape from conscious and unconscious cognitive material rather than as a strategy for production or a prerequisite for recognition. Since the material is generated by the conscious and unconscious operations of the author, we might conceive of form as that which takes the shape of the author's perception—that the poet's mind and the form of the poem are identical. This implies that the poem, as a mediator, reproduces its form in the consciousness of the observer, and in this way the operations of one psychic system are executed to a greater or lesser degree within another. In a very real sense, the creator is the form of the work, and the observer is the form of the work.

As readers and interpreters, then, we might well focus our critical attention and aesthetic appreciation of contemporary poetry on the understanding of consciousness, as we have previously focused on understanding form, broadly or narrowly conceived. We already do this to a large degree when we read naively. Indeed, the idea of "voice" in poetry derives from identifying form as more or less identical to authorial consciousness. Most traditional readings attempt to separate form and creative consciousness, treating the poem as a classical object. When one treats a poem in this way, one's relation to it is precariously close to that of translating code, of seeing it for *what it is*, a state which excludes the broadly imaginal and totalizes the aesthetic experience by reducing its arbitrariness, or at least its probability of *being otherwise,* to near zero. A central preoccupation of the postmodern aesthetic is to resist this temptation by refusing closure and expanding the interpretative field. Whether this preoccupation develops from interesting and innovative artworks or whether contemporary art makes a project of incorporating theory as a practical device into its products and methods of production, the result is what I have been calling the aesthetic quasi-object, a multiple

hybrid or constellation comprised not only of the material work but also the media in which it communicates, the rhetoric surrounding it, its history, the reader-observer's awareness of her own perception as well as the perception of other observers, the presentation of the original material by third parties,[16] and so forth, as part of a process of being-generation and structuration of a wholly new experience both distinct from the authorial language event (in the case of poetry) and separated from "ordinary" existence. Contemporary art makes this an explicit project, pointing the observer to this end (partly through the use of theory as an artistic device). This process in itself might strike one as manipulative, even tyrannical, in the way it implicates the observer in the generation of its being. But rather than the totalitarian inevitability Adorno (1974) implies (see above), in which aesthetic experience fails to recognize its own generativity, the initiated reader, by introducing the ambiguity of individual perception, mitigates against the tendency for aesthetic experience to crystallize into mere objects of contemplation.

Great certainty results in a paucity of information, bringing communication to a halt; great uncertainty results in a wealth of information, sparking the continuation of communication as both sender and receiver contemplate the multiplicity of an utterance's probable message states.[17] Rasch (2000) argues that "communication requires the differentiation of code and noise" (p. 62), meaning, as I see it, *things exactly as they are and things in massively multiple potential states.* Here I take *noise* to refer to both the inherent and injected ambiguity in a natural-language utterance. If this is the case, then the poem—or the work of art in general—can maintain existence only by deflecting the interpretative certainty which would bring an abrupt halt to communication and dissolve the work into the environment from which it is differentiated. On the other hand, too much noise, whether introduced intentionally by the author (say, in the form of extremely ungrammatical utterances) or non-consciously by the reader (say, by idiosyncratic construals of experience separate from the realm of the artwork) prevents understanding. Perhaps the ideal situation would be a kind of "constrained misunderstanding" in which both artist and observer participate. Ultimately, the virtue of uncertainty in maintaining the system of art under the social pressures of rampant legalism, fundamentalism, and hyper-commodification in which experience itself is being reduced to manipulable quanta is that it necessitates choice. The making of interpretative choices which are recognized as always provisional and perhaps illusory is in the end the only means of maintaining the imaginal space necessary for dealing with emergency.

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[16] For example, when the layout and production people at Farrar, Straus and Giroux decide to print C.K. Williams's poems in a standard-size volume, they must decide where to break his long lines to fit within the margins, thereby introducing a semantic or syntagmatic ambiguity by creating a secondary enjambment of the lines.

[17] One reader of an earlier draft raises the question of whether a computer-generated linguistic event (a "poem") can be called a work of art, since the so-called aesthetic object lacks the executions of the operations of perception on the part of the computer and is identified, if at all, as a poem post hoc. My initial belief is, yes, such a linguistic event counts as art. First, when and how the work is identified as a poem does not matter except that it is identified as such. Second, the operations of computers as currently configured result, ultimately, from human action (dare we say intention?). The initial rupture of unmarked space is initiated by an algorithm composed by humans. Computers do, of course, alter their own constitutions in increasingly complex ways, but I don't see that this vitiates the initial state of affairs. Looking to the near future, computers may achieve an embodied consciousness (defined by a Turing test or some other measurement), at which point they may generate poems that mediate the computers" own perceptions. I look forward to that exciting event. The production of music as an aesthetic quasi-object is another interesting and complex issue beyond the scope of this essay. Even leaving aside the multiple mediations of the recording and playback process, and limiting the discussion to the live performance of classical music, we encounter problems involving architecture, acoustics, changing standards of musical-instrument production and tuning, the personalities and physical abilities of conductors and performers, and the vast epistemological gulf between the era when a piece was written and our own, not to mention the question of the degree to which a musical score is treated as code.

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