A Parsing-Proof Whole: Susan Howe's Experimental Syntax and Its Processing Implications

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In this paper I investigate the role of experimental syntax on literary comprehension, taking an untitled poem from Susan Howe's collection *Bed Hangings* (2001) as my case study. Before delving into the details of the linguistic analysis, it is useful to review existing studies on the connection between syntax and difficulty, defined here as impeded or faulty comprehension already at paraphrase level.

One crucial phenomenon in this respect is syntactic ambiguity, whereby the same syntactic structure encodes two distinct semantic representations. Mallarmé's expression 'le seule continue', for instance, is parsed by Derrida (1992: 114) as both an intransitive clause ('the only one should continue') and a noun phrase ('the only unremitting one'). This is possible because the French word 'continue' functions as either a verb or an adjective. The line 'and that one talent which is death to hide' from Milton's *Sonnet XX*, is another glaring example of syntactic ambiguity. Stockwell paraphrases it according to various possibilities (2002: 77), which necessarily leads to interpretive uncertainty. Austin (1985) tackles syntactic ambiguity from a generativist perspective, examining cases like Shelley's 'the grey ruin shook' where *ruin* can be either subject or object and *shook* can be either transitive or intransitive (1985: 23).

Syntactic ambiguity is worthy of the interest of psycholinguists too, since it yields insights into our processing operations. From within text comprehension studies, Frazier points out how 'syntactic ambiguity poses a difficult problem for the processor' (1988: 199) and further makes a useful distinction between *temporary ambiguity* (which can be disambiguated later on) and *full ambiguity* (which cannot be disambiguated).

Interestingly, and perhaps contrary to expectations, Frazier also underlines that later disambiguation does not reduce the processing effort (1988: 199).

Other syntactic behaviours are so radical that they do away with well-formedness altogether. Focusing on the syntax of Beckett's prose in *How It Is* and *Worstward Ho*, Thoms (2008) notices opposite yet convergent strategies, such as over- and under-punctuation. He argues that, while 'the precise effects of over and under-punctuation may be markedly different', they 'both destabilise the grammatical interpretation of the text in a similar manner' (2008: 65). One of his most substantial claims is that syntactic deviation in literary texts can be interpreted 'by pragmatic inferences with respect to context' (129), as the perceived spokenness of Beckett's texts does presuppose a communicative context as its ideal background. Fowler (1971) focuses instead on lines such as 'he danced his did' and 'with up so floating many bells down', both by E. E. Cummings. He interprets them as ungrammatical strings while attempting to trace them back to well-formed counterparts through a chain of transformational rules. From a processing viewpoint, what is impeded in the latter example is a structural parsing of the lines, resulting in a defective construal of its ideational meaning. This line is thus close to what Levin (1977: 14) describes as syntactic deviance in nature, impeding all kinds of semantic construal. By contrast, the former example is unproblematic to parse, as *did* unequivocally functions as noun even though it is, lexically, a verb. It is therefore plausible to posit different processing modes for the two strings. In a similar vein, Quartermain calls 'asyntactic' (1992: 183) some lines by Howe in his close reading, and Perloff (1991: 41) ascribes syntactic indeterminacy to the Language poets, an American avant-garde movement. In these latter cases, however, there is little attempt at syntactic analysis. It is the business of stylistics to remedy this lacuna; yet, with the exception of Cummings's poetry, there is a lack of stylistic analysis on asyntactic or syntactically ill-formed poetic language. This is the gap the current paper aims to fill.

The poetry of Susan Howe is ideal to fulfil this aim. Analysing one of her poems, Middleton draws attention to the poet's 'incomplete statements' (2010: 637), although he too refrains from showing how the incompleteness is linguistically realised. After a careful

reading of Howe's collections, I have been impressed by this short untitled poem from *Bed Hangings* (2001):

      A small swatch bluish-green
      Woollen slight grain in the
3   Weft watered and figured
      Right fustian should hold
      Altogether warp and woof
6   Is the cloven rock misled
      Does morning lie what prize
      What pine tree wildeyed boy

The poem opens with a string of nouns and adjectives that refuses to be parsed in a unique or even preferential way. The first line consists of a noun phrase where adjectives both premodify (via *small*) and postmodify (via *bluish-green*) the Head noun *swatch* – a parsing enabled by old poetic diction where adjectives can postmodify nouns[1]. In the second line, there is a new noun phrase (*woollen slight grain*) that may also include *bluish-green* in l. 1, since in English a noun can be preceded by two adjectives. The fact that *bluish-green* can apply to two Head nouns creates a garden path effect. The two juxtaposed noun phrases are in turn followed by a prepositional phrase (*in the / weft*) without any verb in between. A new structural ambiguity is introduced in l. 3 by *watered* and *figured*, which function either as past participle of *weft* or as premodifying adjectives of *fustian*, the Head noun of a third potential noun phrase. Given that an important function of punctuation is that of clarifying syntactic relations (Tartakovsky 2009: 215), the lack of punctuation invites us to read each line holistically, merging all these potential phrases into an undifferentiated, parsing-proof whole.

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[1] Conjecturing an influence or even a conscious revival of old poetic diction is plausible here, since in *Bed Hangings* Howe also cites 'specific sermons' and 'Pragmatist documents or New England spells and charms rendered in *Old Spelling*' (Perloff 2003: 341; emphasis added).

Although the stylistic role of noun phrases in twentieth century poetry has been extensively commented (e.g. Adamson 1999, Testa 1999), to my knowledge the present analysis is the only one showing how even such a minimal syntactic unit is undermined by stylistic choices turning structural ambiguities into a compositional principle. The difficulty is structural and syntagmatic rather than semantic, as the 'fabric' domain is activated by *woollen*, *weft*, and *fustian*. The lexical choice of *fustian*, in particular, may have been motivated by a metalinguistic sense of the word harking back to the end of the sixteenth century – more or less the time of the sermons quoted in the book by Perloff's account. A scholar with strong historical interests, Howe is probably aware of such a sense, which Adamson discusses as follows:

> Though terminological distinctions are never consistently applied, *bombast* refers to the excessive or unwarranted use of Latinisms, *fustian* to their playful or anarchic use. Both words gained their metalinguistic senses in the last decades of the sixteenth century, developing, in line with the STYLE = CLOTHING metaphor of the time, from terms for material: bombast, the cotton wool padding used for false enlargement (*OED* 2), fustian, the cotton velvet which imitates the finery of the real thing (*OED* 1a/c). (Adamson 1998: 576)

Although obviously not engaging with the issue of Latinate vs. native styles, the presence of textile materials in the poem reflects the poet's attempt to imitate 'the finery of the real thing' through an appropriately convoluted handling of the syntax-line interface. Just like it is impossible to tease out the threads in a piece of fabric, it is also impossible to find a unique path in the dense texture of the poem.

An additional semantic domain (i.e. 'irrigation' or 'agriculture') connects *grain*, *watered* and *swatch* – in fact, the last word has the obsolete sense of 'row (of cut or grass) cut' (*OED*). Nouns are made salient in isolation, yet the presence of adjectives and of a preposition hints at the possibility that syntactic relations may be restored. The linguistic

notion of constituency, a 'form of order' inherent in language (Halliday 2004: 5) is therefore challenged, as are default, linear modes of reading. The sort of self-questioning reading encouraged by these lines can be in turn understood as an instantiation of deconstructionist practices:

> Deconstruction may be nothing more or less than the response necessitated by the text; it may be nothing, more or less, than *taking responsibility for the act of reading*, rather than seeking to avoid that responsibility in the name of some institutionally approved method of interpretation. (Wolfreys 1998: 15; emphasis added)

The various reading paths allowed by lines 1-4 imply that it is the reader who must take responsibility for her parsing and subsequent understanding of the poem. The only syntactic certainty at this point is that this string of potential phrases is indisputably the subject of the main verb (*should hold*), delayed until line 4. Stylisticians have pointed out the climax of expectation this structure builds in the reader (Jeffries 1993), as well as the processing effort it requires (San 2005). This tension between effort and expectation is perhaps exemplary of the cost-benefit dialectic (to adapt a key notion from Sperber and Wilson's Relevance Theory) involved in reading difficult poetry: the effort is a sort of precondition for the effect to be achieved.

The question here is whether this remark applies to the poem under scrutiny as well, and if so with what nuances. Having analysed the string preceding the main verb, I argue that verb delay does not enhance expectation as it would do in more traditional poems. This is because the most pressing hurdle for readers is to make sense of (or to surrender to) the string of words preceding the main verb. Such is the parsing overload that the sudden appearance of a verb should come to readers as an unexpected relief rather than as an anticipated fact. What is more, by locating *hold* in end-line position, Howe conflates its transitive and intransitive uses (both salient for this verb), pushing the reader towards two opposite directions: backward, if the verb is read intransitively; forward, if the verb is

read as a transitive one. In the former case, lines 1-4 constitute a complete (S+V) if awkward clause and line 5 would be syntactically parsed together with line 6 as an identifying clause with the interpersonal value of a statement (*Altogether warp and woof / Is the cloven rock misled*). In the latter case, which seems more natural, *warp and woof* becomes the object of *hold* and line 6 (*Is the cloven rock misled*) is parsed as a question not graphically marked by a question mark. The unmistakably interrogative structure of line 7 (*Does morning lie what prize*) should retroactively make this parsing route more salient than the former. The poem thus becomes a game of possible reading paths, maximising the potential for structural ambiguities and refusing to guide the reader in a unique, predetermined direction.

In terms of processing, the blurring of constituency boundaries in the poem is likely to pose exceptional parsing challenges. At the same time, lexical cohesion (the presence of a 'fabric' lexical set of ll. 1-5 and the 'nature' one of ll. 6-8) allows for a post-reading attribution of aboutness, although at the cost of performing a delinearised reading whereby content words are isolated from the tenuous syntactic grid hosting them. In short, all attempts at linear, stepwise readings are defied in favour of a synthetic, 'sensorial' approach. This, in turn, is encouraged by the foregrounding of objects and their synesthetic qualities, not least brought out by the alliterations on /w/ and /s/. A parallel can further be traced with Faulkner's prose as described by Dillon: 'when both rhetorical and syntactic structures break down, passages dissolve into "things" and "events" loosely associated but indeterminately related' (1978: 132).

This unconventional reading mode is empirically reflected in the results of a test that I have conducted. The test, designed with the psychological software e-Prime, measured reading times for the poem by Howe and compared it with those of poems by Ezra Pound, Wallace Stevens, Geoffrey Hill, Jeremy Prynne and Mark Strand. The results, given in the table below and averaged across a group of twelve readers, show that Howe's poem has been read by and large the slowest, at 90.41 millisecond per character. The poem's ill-formed syntax and the garden path problems identified are the main factors accounting for such a slow reading. Indeed, readers may have been repeatedly forced back to previous

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lines once misled by the garden paths, needing more extra reading time than for less syntactically ambiguous poems.

Table 1 Average speed and standard deviation (SD) across lines per text

Text by	Average speed	SD across lines
Pound	62.76 ms/char	11.79 ms/char
Strand	63.51 ms/char	8.38 ms/char
Hill	72.45 ms/char	10.90 ms/char
Stevens	73.39 ms/char	10.47 ms/char
Prynne	79.34 ms/char	12.48 ms/char
Howe	90.41 ms/char	13.05 ms/char

The inclusion of empirical data, which I have kept as brief as possible for want of space and not to overshadow the emphasis given to the syntactic analysis, is meant as a step towards a more integrational, robust and scientific approach to the study of literature. Overall, throughout this presentation, I have shown how a stylistic approach to the study of syntax in poetry is able to match the rigour typical of linguistic approaches while also answering literary questions on reading approaches and poetic effects.

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