



Jackson Mac Low: The Limits of Formalism

Author(s): Ellen Zweig

Source: *Poetics Today*, Vol. 3, No. 3, Poetics of the Avant-Garde, (Summer, 1982), pp. 79-86

Published by: Duke University Press

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1772391>

Accessed: 27/06/2008 15:20

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>. JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use provides, in part, that unless you have obtained prior permission, you may not download an entire issue of a journal or multiple copies of articles, and you may use content in the JSTOR archive only for your personal, non-commercial use.

Please contact the publisher regarding any further use of this work. Publisher contact information may be obtained at <http://www.jstor.org/action/showPublisher?publisherCode=duke>.

Each copy of any part of a JSTOR transmission must contain the same copyright notice that appears on the screen or printed page of such transmission.

JSTOR is a not-for-profit organization founded in 1995 to build trusted digital archives for scholarship. We work with the scholarly community to preserve their work and the materials they rely upon, and to build a common research platform that promotes the discovery and use of these resources. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Jackson Mac Low
The Limits of Formalism

ELLEN ZWEIG
Center for Experimental and Interdisciplinary Arts,
San Francisco State

The use of chance operation in the poetry of Jackson Mac Low brings into question formalist critical techniques. In *Stanzas for Iris Lezak* (1971), each poem was made through the use of a set of chance operations. Mac Low would select a book, one that he had been reading on the subway perhaps, and using the title as an organizing device, he would turn to the first page of the book looking for the first word that had the first letter of the title, each word of the title generating a line, and the whole title a stanza. In "The Story of Mosses, Ferns, and Mushrooms," Mac Low used the title in this acrostic manner to yield:

The has earth.
Seemed the older roots you
Older fourth
More older seemed seemed earth. Seemed,
Fourth earth. Roots "new". Seemed
And "new". Different
More up seemed has roots older older more seemed

(1971:158)

There were other variations of this basic idea. Sometimes Mac Low used a newspaper headline to get a poem from the newspaper article; sometimes he used a sentence of his own making like "I love Iris" and a book we cannot discern from the title. He designed several rules for his procedure. In the early poems, like "The Story of Mosses, Ferns, and Mushrooms," every time a letter appeared he used the same word; later, he ruled out any repetitions and had to turn the pages of his book until he found the next word with that letter. Punctuation occurred also by chance; it appears only if it happened to appear with a particular word in the book. The number of stanzas was usually arbitrary; sometimes Mac Low would

* This article is an excerpt from Zweig, Ellen, *Performance Poetry* (Ross-Erikson: Santa Barbara, forthcoming).

simply forget about a certain poem and went on to another; sometimes he would finish reading the book and start another poem with another book (1971:399-424).

The critic might look at a Mac Low poem on three levels. First, there is the particularity of the poem, the poem as it ends up, an artifact. In the first stanza of "The Story of Mosses, Ferns, and Mushrooms," he may notice several structural devices. Mac Low uses repetition: "earth" is repeated three times, "fourth" twice, "more" three times, "new" twice. (I have paid attention only to major category words here, nouns, verbs, adjectives, and adverbs, but it would be possible to count all instances of repetition as meaningful: "the" twice, "has" twice; "you," "and," and "up" are not repeated.) In this sort of analysis the word "seemed," repeated seven times, more than any other word, could be noted as the vehicle for the central concept of this stanza. When it is repeated twice in a row in line four, it suggests a double (punning) meaning. The second "seemed" might have been spelled "seamed"; the word switches meaning and spelling in all of its places in the poem once we have seen the possibility of this spelling. It becomes ambiguous, a kind of tremor in the seam of the poem. Other repetitions have different effects; the repetition of "older" in conjunction with "more" serves as an intensifier: roots are "older," the earth is "more older" (or so it seemed) and the "more older" something is the "more seemed" (seamed) it is.

The critic might notice more about this stanza by counting the phonemes. There are 17 /r/ sounds, and eight of these occur as "r", five as "or" ("different" is a simple "r" sound, not an "or.") Most sounds are not repeated within a single line; lines 4, 6 and 7 have repetitions of /m,/ /d,/ /s,/ /i,/ /n/ more than twice but these are obviously due to the repetitions of certain words: "more," "older," "seemed." The only exception is line 6 where the repetition of /n/ is not due to the repetition of any words; this line, as it declares, is "new" and "different."

The critic using these and other formalist techniques will come to an interesting and provocative analysis of this poem. An observant critic might even wonder about the title and find the acrostic hidden in the lines. However, without Mac Low's explanation of his methodology, the critic (who might be inclined to say that he does not need to know who wrote the poem or how it was written) will not fully understand what is going on in the poem. Mac Low is usually careful to describe his procedures when he publishes his chance operation poems; it is also well known among those who are acquainted with Mac Low or his work that he writes poems through chance-operations. When we know that Mac Low never intended the pun "seemed/seamed" or to draw attention to the line "And 'new'. Different" by repeating the "n" sound, and that these poetic devices occurred by accident, we realize that we may be missing something important in the poem by ignoring Mac Low and his methods.

Jakobson was aware of this problem in his study of folksongs. In the article, "Subliminal Verbal Patterning in Poetry," he insists that the patterns discovered through formalist methods need not be intended by the poet:

Such structures, particularly powerful on the subliminal level, can function

without the assistance of logical reflection and patent apprehension both in the poet's creative work and in its perception by the sensitive reader [. . .] (1970:308).

In the poetry Jakobson discussed in this article he found that "the striking particularities in the poetic selection, accumulation, juxtaposition, and distribution of diverse phonological and grammatical classes cannot be viewed as negligible accidents governed by the rule of chance" (1970:302). This somewhat applies to Mac Low, especially to the poem in question here. Mac Low rarely eliminates all choice from his work. Here he has chosen a particular book, has chosen to allow the repetitions of words, has chosen the rules that will govern the structure of the poem. However, we know, if we know Mac Low's methods, that many of the particularities of the poems are strictly chance-determined, and this also by choice.

Mac Low's poem is an example of what Dick Higgins calls "matrix" art or "blank forms" (1978:8,31). In this sort of art the specifics are unimportant compared to the structure or set of rules designed to produce these specifics. This brings us from the level of particularities to a second possible level of analysis. Here we ask what sort of structures the poet makes; Higgins might ask if these structures are elegant in themselves, or he might ask what they imply. "The meaning of an art work is its implications. Lacking those it lacks its essence, and cannot achieve its social, emotional or intellectual impact. The good critic points to the implications and does not play doctor with the artist" (1978: 61). A discussion of the elegance of the structures leaves us in the formalist realm; a discussion of the implications of these structures leads us to a discussion of aesthetics.

"Matrix" or "blank form" art implies that the particulars are not only unimportant but are interchangeable with other particulars. Higgins suggests that Gertrude Stein's "a rose is a rose is a rose is a rose" could have been "a star is a star is a star is a star"; her point is in the structure of her repetitions, and in the equation she has set up. She is saying that an object is (only) itself and a word (only) that word; the fact that she used a rose adds very little to this concept (1978:79).¹

When we look at Mac Low's structures we see that they are simple and logical, elegant in the mathematical sense. Mac Low took the minor tradition of acrostic poetry and, combining it with chance, created a new form. A poem like "The Story of Mosses, Ferns, and Mushrooms" works well within Mac Low's rules. The title generates and fits the vocabulary. Although the poems in *Stanzas for Iris Lezak* tend to have associative rather than syntactic meaning, meaning resides more in the structure than in the particulars.

The structures in *Stanzas* change as Mac Low refined and played with his method. In the first poems like "The Blue and Brown Books" and "Mark Twain Life on the Mississippi Illustrated Harpers" he took the first letter,

1. The rose is not as arbitrary as Higgins suggests. The rhyme is determined by the context: "suppose we suppose that a rose is a rose is a rose," Rose is a female name, and the rose may refer to Shakespeare's "a rose by any other name."

"m," for example, from the "Mark Twain" poem, and found the first word in the text beginning with the letter "m." Then, for the "a," he took the first "a" word going backwards in the text if there was an "a" word before the "m" word. He later changed this method.

I found this going forwards and backwards in a source text too cumbersome, so that after generating a few poems that way, I generated the rest of the poems by going straight thru each source; that is, each time after I had taken a word into a poem, I went forward to the next word in the source text that began with the required letter (1971:402).

This change was very satisfactory because it allowed Mac Low to read his books while he was generating poems; the process of reading actually led him forward to new words. This method seemed more organic than the going back and forth method he had originally used.

Other changes in the rules included the elimination of repetitions and the elimination of certain function words (especially articles and prepositions). These changes have their effect on the type of poem the matrix can produce; the lack of repetitions made the poems more complex and the lack of function words made them less syntactic. A more syntactic version was achieved when Mac Low began to use units larger than single words. These were usually word strings beginning with the required letter and ending with a punctuation mark. Besides adding more usual syntactic units to the poems, these phrases tended to add more punctuation.

If the reader is a purist about chance-operations, demanding that procedures follow as random a method as possible, he may be troubled by Mac Low's work. Mac Low tends to use both strict chance methods and looser flexible rules subject to his whim. For example, the number of stanzas per poem was often predetermined by consulting a table of random digits or through other chance means. However, Mac Low admits that he often ended a poem after he finished reading the source text or after "one or two sittings." "The Story of Mosses, Ferns, and Mushrooms" has 13 stanzas; however, only the first twelve spell out the title. The 13th stanza is incomplete, probably because Mac Low finished reading the book and according to his rules could not go back to find the rest of the required words. This combination of strict rules of chance and looser practice represents an aesthetic and philosophical stance that solves a difficult problem in the case of "The Story of Mosses, Ferns, and Mushrooms." Mac Low had two conflicting rules to choose from. He had decided to make stanzas that spelled out the title of the book he was reading; he had also decided not to go backwards in finding words. Although the unfinished stanza may seem unsatisfactory in the particular poem, it does satisfy the constraint that the poem end when the reading of the book ends. Again, this is an organic use of the chance method; Mac Low always keeps his poems as part of his daily living.

The critic who explores Mac Low's structures and is willing to add to their elegance and their organic nature the implications of these structures will find the *Stanzas* deepening. One of the most interesting implications of the *Stanzas* is that they are intensely personal. This is surprising because at first glance they seem rather abstract and cold, obscure and difficult. But the *Stanzas* are a personal record of Mac Low's reading and of his

relationship with Iris Lezak; it is a book of love poems. Reading the titles of the poems, "Who Am I? of Bhagavan Sri Ramana Maharish Sri Ramanasram Eighth Edition," "There are many ways to use Strayer's Vegetable Soybeans," and "Twenty-Five Stories Spencer Holst One Dollar," is like walking into the man's house and looking at his bookshelf. When we enter the *Stanzas* we enter a life, not just a book of poems. We meet a man who loved a woman, Iris Lezak, and dedicated poem after poem to her name, with phrases like "Plant poem for Iris Lezak whom I love," "I love Iris," "Iris is Lovely," and with the sentences that generated one of the most striking of love poems: "My girl's the greatest fuck in town. I love to fuck my girl." It is these sentences that generated "6 Gitanjali for Iris" by using the *Gitanjali* of Rabindranath Tagore as a source text (1971:400).

Further implications of the structures of *Stanzas* will lead the critic to consider a third level of analysis, a theoretical level that describes and questions the philosophical basis of the work. This is where structure leads to vision, to the purpose of a method like chance operations.

Mac Low describes the philosophical basis of his method in two ways (1978). First, he was influenced by Buddhism and Taoism, and by the *I Ching*. His emphasis on chance instead of choice was made in order to attempt to get rid of the ego. Chance operations, he believed, would help him to get rid of the habitual associations which arise from personal history. Poetry made from choice is made from these associations, sometimes consciously and sometimes unconsciously. One of the advantages of chance method is that it can avoid the choices of the unconscious, the choices we make without ever being aware that they are choices. Thus, chance methods can rid us of our personality which has been created by our culture and our personal history. The goals of the method are similar to the goals of Zen Buddhism, where enlightenment is associated with freedom from the habits of culture and personal history.

One of the consequences of this freedom from habit is that there are more surprises in the work. If we invoke information theory here, we can note that there is more information in unexpected data. If everything in a poem is determined randomly, then everything has a high amount of information, a high surprise value. However, we must know that the poems are made by chance method, before we can understand them as maximum information structures. If we read a poem from word to word, we find that some words seem to follow logically from the former word. This is usually due to the expectation of syntax.

In "The Story of Mosses, Ferns, and Mushrooms" we read "The" and expect either a noun or an adjective. Instead we read "has," a word from an unexpected grammatical category. At this point we cannot parse the sentence and read on to "earth," which fits the expectations of "has." "Has" could be followed by a noun, verb, adjective, adverb, article, or pronoun. A word with this many grammatical expectations yields an unexpected answer because we do not know exactly which possibility will appear. Thus, the "earth" that follows "has" is a surprise even though it fits one possible expectation. If we read through the poem we find several phrases that clearly follow our expectations of English syntax; "the older roots," "fourth earth," "Has roots" are the clearest examples.

If we know that the poem has been made by random means, we read it with almost no expectations. In the case of Mac Low's acrostic poems we read with the expectation that the words of each line will spell out a word and the stanza will spell out the title of a book. Since this expectation is always fulfilled in this particular form there is no information in the first letters of each word. The information is actually contained in the words themselves.

This analysis points out two dangers involved in information theory analysis. First, the quantity of information is dependent on what the reader/listener knows already about the poem. This prior knowledge should be carefully indicated in any analysis in order to set the limits of the analysis. For example, each time we attend a poetry reading we get somewhat less information from the poet's presence. His presence simply does not change all that much. On the other hand, we may get a different type of information from his presence; he may look tired at this reading, or this may be the most moving reading he has ever given. Setting the limits of our prior knowledge helps us to pay attention to details we might have missed while we were gathering that prior knowledge.

Another danger in our information analysis is that it can lead us astray. If the most information can be gained from looking at the particular word, from word to word, in a Mac Low poem, we cannot conclude that these words are the most important part of the poem. In fact, the implication that chance methods yield more information from word to word is one thing we learn from the poems. However, the important point of the poems is that they are made by chance methods. We seem to be going in a circle with this methodology, proving what we already know to be true.

We have said that one of the consequences of the freedom from habitual associations brought about by chance methods is surprise; another consequence is that we move from a world governed by causality to a world governed by synchronicity. According to George Brecht in his article "Chance-Imagery," chance methods lead to a world in which cause is either unknown or "unlooked for" (1966:117). Mac Low suggests that the new world can be described best by Jung's concept of "Synchronicity," which first appeared in Jung's "Foreword" to the Wilhelm translation of the *I Ching*. According to Jung,

synchronicity takes the coincidence of events in space and time as meaning something more than mere chance, namely a peculiar interdependence of objective events among themselves as well as with the subjective (psychic) states of the observer or observers (1967:xxiv).

Thus, instead of a "sequence of events" described by causality, the world consists of a "coincidence of events" described by synchronicity. Mac Low retains a more Western attitude towards coincidence:

I myself think that if there is a connection and it does something, it's *some* kind of cause but it's different from the time-linear cause going from past of future. It's *across* any present, between any two things coexisting (1978:176).

The implication of Mac Low's description of the situation is that everything happens in the present; by working with chance methods he can stop time and hold the present moment, and live fully in the present moment.

George Brecht describes several more consequences of the Buddhist/Taoist attitude of chance methodology. For Brecht, escaping the bias of personal history and culture is "a means of attaining greater generality" (1966:126). Nathaniel Tarn suggests that this sort of "greater generality," which he calls "totalization," is a goal of the ethnopoetic researches of some poets. He describes poets who seek knowledge in other cultures in order to free themselves from the narrowness of their own culture. Chance methods are another way away from one culture to a more universal culture, although chance methods applied to English will yield a different sort of poem than chance methods applied to Chinese. Nevertheless, the basic method will take us away from our Western preoccupation with causality and time sequence.

According to Brecht, we will also be more like nature if we employ chance methods for making art. This is because, like the Chinese, we see nature as partly dependent on chance. Although we set up the rules of the method, therefore controlling the game, we are subject to the whims of chance once the game begins. We will learn an attitude of Buddhist indifference to the details of our art, perhaps even to art and/or life itself. If we no longer generate the words of poems from our personal histories, we will feel less attached to the artifact which is the final poem. Mac Low admits that he can still think of himself as "Jackson Mac Low, the great poet who makes up chance systems" (1978:175). Nevertheless, he has learned something in the process that does take him farther from ego and farther along the path to enlightenment.

Mac Low's chance method, based in part on Oriental philosophies, is also part of his political philosophy which he describes as "pacifist-anarchist" or as a kind of push toward an "enlightened and anarchistic society" (1978:180). This political aspect of Mac Low's work is seen more in his compositions for performance than in collections of poems such as *Stanzas for Iris Lezak*. Mac Low describes his and other composers' performance pieces:

Composers have been writing pieces that involve a large amount of performer choice, all the way from completely free improvisation to improvisation using given materials following certain procedures, but having many performers (1978:173)

For example, in his "Vocabulary" pieces Mac Low provides a number of performers with large pieces of paper covered with words. The words may be drawn in many directions, in many different kinds of ink and different size letters. These Vocabularies are usually made from all the possible words that can be made from the letters of a word or a name. In "Vocabulary for Peter Inisfree Moore" Mac Low used all of the words that it was possible to make from the name of his friend the photographer Peter Moore. In this particular Vocabulary Mac Low made a list of the possible words. Next, he divided a piece of paper into ten sectors. Then using the RAND Corporation table, *A Million Random Digits with 100,000 Normal Deviates*, he found words from the list, determined in which sector of ten he should draw the word, and determined which of ten different directions the letters of the word should run. He left the size of the letters and the size of the pen nib to his own "spontaneous choice."

In performance, Mac Low simply hands out copies of the Vocabulary with a few instructions. The performers are to read the words in any way they want; they can choose any words. Sometimes musicians will join the group using a code devised by Mac Low which assigns each letter a pitch or note in the musical scale. The musicians can then play the words on the Vocabulary. The only other instructions that Mac Low gives are that

great care, tact, courtesy, attention & concentration, must be given to making every detail of one's performance contribute (as far as one can tell) toward a total sound sequence (including ambient, audience sounds, & outer-environmental sounds [as well as what the other performers are doing]) which the performer wd *choose* to *hear* (1978:180).

Mac Low's performances are models for a society in which aware citizens would work through free choice toward the goals of the whole. There are very few rules except for the rules of consideration and attention.

Composers and poets working with chance methods soon became aware of the fact that it was virtually impossible to get rid of bias. Brecht believes:

It is increasingly evident that sampling left to the discretion of a human individual is not random, although he may be completely unconscious of the existence of bias, or indeed actively endeavoring to avoid it (1966:124).

The bias moves from the details of the system, even to mechanical systems. Of all the artists who have explored chance methodology, Mac Low's work is most able to cope with this disappointing bias. Mac Low has never been obsessed with chance; he allows some choice, the human element, to enter into all of his work. There is a satisfying openness both for the surprises of chance and for the whims of personal choice. If Mac Low has failed to escape his ego, to get rid of all bias that comes from his culture and his personal history, he has done so with full attentiveness to the consequences of this failure. His work is softer, more loving, more human, than the unbiased samplings of the most reliable machine. In this way he has made a successful human poetry, a poetry of attempt, a poetry with a vision of a better world.

REFERENCES

- Brecht, George, 1978 (1966). "Chance Imagery," in: Richard Kostelanetz, ed. *Esthetics Contemporary* (Buffalo, New York: Prometheus).
- Higgins, Dick, 1978. *A Dialectic of Centuries* (New York: Printed Editions).
- Jakobson, Roman, 1970. "Subliminal Verbal Patterning in Poetry," in: Roman Jakobson and S. Kawamoto, eds. *Studies in General and Oriental Linguistics presented to Shiro Hattori* (Tokyo:TEC).
- Mac Low, Jackson, 1971. *Stanzas for Iris Lezak* (Barton, Vermont: Something Else Press).
- 1978 "The Poetics of Chance and the Politics of Spontaneity, or the Sacred Heart of Jesus," in: Anne Waldman and Marilyn Webb, eds. *Talking Poetics from Naropa Institute* (Boulder, Colorado: Shambala), Vol. 1.