

# شعرية التعددية Poetics of Multiplicity

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## المخلص

تحاول هذه الدراسة إعادة تعريف الحالة الشعرية لأحد أكثر الشعراء التجريبيين تأثيراً في السياق الثقافي المعاصر، جاكسون ماك لو. تناقش هذه الدراسة أيضاً جماليات هذه الحالة مثلاً للمساعي التجريبية الشعرية المعاصرة المتعددة الأوجه والمتجاوزة لحدود النوع. تدعي هذه الدراسة أن مفهوم "التعددية اللاسلطوية" له أهمية رئيسية لفهم شامل للحالة الشعرية في أعمال جاكسون ماك لو. كما صاغه الفلاسفة الفرنسيون فيليكس غواتاري وجيل دولوز في عملهم المشترك (١٩٧٢) *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*، يستكشف هذا المفهوم كيف يمكن فهم التأليف القائم على الصدفة في عمل ماك لو على أفضل وجه كوسيلة يحاول من خلالها تحقيق أكبر قدر ممكن من الديمقراطية في العلاقة المعقدة بين الشاعر والقارئ، مع أقل قدر من المركزية لذات الشاعر. ببساطة، تحاول شعرية ماك لو "تنقية" التعبير الفني من عمل الذاتية أو القصد التأليفي.

## Abstract

This study attempts to redefine the poetics of one of the most influential experimental poets in contemporary cultural scene, Jackson Mac Low. It discusses his aesthetics as generally representative of the experimental endeavors of contemporary poetics in all its characteristic multi-disciplinary and cross-generic registers. This study argues that the concept of "anarchic multiplicity" is of key significance for a compound understanding of the poetics of Jackson Mac Low. As articulated by French philosophers Félix Guattari's and Gilles Deleuze's, in their collaborative work *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (1972), this concept explores how chance-based composition in the work of Mac Low is best understood as a means with which he attempts to achieve the greatest possible degree of democracy in the complex relationship between the poet and the reader, with the least amount of centrality for the poet's ego. Simply put, Mac Low's poetics attempts to "purify" the artistic expression from the workings of subjectivity or authorial intent.



## Research Questions

1. How could Deleuze's and Guattari's concept of "anarchic multiplicity" offer a critical frame to understanding the poetics of both Mac Low, in terms of ideals and practices?
2. What are the specific details and significance of Mac Low's poetics?
3. What is the position of the poetics of Mac Low in the context of experimental poetics?

## Research Scope

This study explores the poetics of Mac Low and how his poetic innovation promotes multiplicity, eccentricity, and freedom. It attempts to provide a critical approach as comprehensive as possible since there is a lack of studies dedicated to the poetry of Jackson Mac Low

## Research Statement and Significance

This study argues that the poetics of Mac Low rejects conventional linearity and hegemonic centrality of the 'self' regarding the process of writing or composition. It offers an unparalleled level of cultural and aesthetic democracy and co-participation in the creation and consumption of works of art and/or literature.

## Literature Review

Jackson Mac low is an American Poet and artist who was born in 1922, in Chicago, USA. From 1966 to 1937, Mac Low taught at NYU; and he also taught at SUNY-Albany in 1984, SUNY-Binghamton in late 1980s. Throughout his prolific career as poet, playwright, composer, painter and performance artist, Mac Low received some significant fellowships from CAPS in 1977, the NEA in 1974, the Guggenheim Foundation in 1985, the Fulbright Foundation in 1986, the Queen Elizabeth Arts Council in 1986, the New York Foundation in 1988, and The Fund for Poetry in 1988 and 1992. Some of his publications include *Bloomsday* and *French Sonnets* in 1984, *The Virginia Woolf Poems* in 1985, and *Words and Ends from Ez* in 1989. In the 1990s, his published books included: *Twenties in 1991*, *Pieces o' Six: Thirty-three Poems in Prose* in 1992 and *42 Merzgedichte in Memoriam Kurt Schwitters* in 1994.

Jackson Mac low became a key figure in the "Fluxus" Movement, attended Cage's *Experimental Composition* classes at the New School for Social Research in the late 1950s. Throughout his prolific career as poet, playwright, composer, painter and performance artist, Mac Low received



some of the most prestigious and creative fellowships offered in the United States. These included the Creative Artists Public Service Program for Multimedia Art (١٩٧٣-٧٤) and for Poetry (1976-77), a Creative Writing Fellowship by the National Endowments for the Arts (1976), and the Guggenheim Foundation Fellowship for poetry (1985). In New Zealand, he got the Fulbright Fellowship (1986), the Queen Elizabeth II Arts Council (1986).

Later on, he was also awarded the New York Foundation for the Arts (1988), The Fund for Poetry (1988-89, 1990-91 and 1998), and, finally, the Dorothea Tanning Prize (1999). Mac Low's marital life seems to have influenced and inspired his poetic endeavors. His first marriage was in 1962 to painter and performance artist Iris Lezak. They had two children, Mordecai-Mark in 1963 and Clarinda in 1966. Lezak occupied a good deal of Mac Low's poetic inspiration. For example, his book entitled, *Stanzas for Iris Lezak* (1971), is obviously named after her name; it contains many poems with encoded love messages to Iris by repeating her name acrostically through the lines:

If, return into sage

in religion it saying

is robber, ignorant spiritual (SIL 274, *my emphasis*)

Mac Low's employment of intermedial, [non]intentional, [non]egoistic, indeterminate and chance-based operations seem to have done away with what seems to have been established as canonized generic boundaries of conventional literary/artistic mediums. His work seems to call for, a "classless" society. Therefore, Mac Low is loosely affiliated with the art movement known as Fluxus. By virtue of its historical context, Fluxus emerged in "the decades in which the sciences of transdisciplinary complexity came into their own" (Friedman, 1998, p. 237). The Fluxus movement seems to have eliminated not only conventional boundaries between traditional artistic media and genres, but also between conceptions of art and life.

Mac Low identifies himself as an anarchist and pacifist. In an interview with composer Peter Dickinson (July 1987), published in *Cage Talk: Dialogues with and about John Cage* (2006), Mac Low argues, "I am an anarchist who votes! In the intervening years I adopted anarchism as my predominant political belief—maybe pacifism is a floor under all of them" (p. 100). Indeed, this may help explain why Mac Low, unlike typical avant-gardists, insists on his opposition to the art institution, but never the elimination of art nor institution.



Mac Low's poetic stance draws deeply from early 20th century artistic movements, such as Futurism and Dada, especially in terms of chance operations, anarchism, discontinuity, collage aesthetic, and "simultaneous poem" (Caws, 2001, p. 288). One of the most significant indications of multiplicity in Mac Low's poetry seems to be the states in which a poem is composed and received. In other words, his compositional and experimental techniques result in a matrix that suggests an infinite number of realizations and actualizations upon performance. That is, the non-stability of "form" in Mac Low's poetics defies fixity in the sense that it is always in a state of flux, questioning the notion of the final artistic product that is traditionally finished and complete.

In this sense, the inconsistency and indeterminacy of the "form" tend to deprive the conventional passive reader, as Lyotard (1979, p. 81) puts it, "matter for solace and pleasure". Mac Low's poetics subverts form, as stable and fixed, and disrupts language, as meaningful. In so doing, he incorporates silence, and (nonsensical) noise, as an element of composition. Mac Low's "Tree Movie" (1961) might give a glance at this stance:

### Tree Movie

Select a tree.\* Set up and focus a movie camera so that the tree fills most of the picture. Turn on the camera and leave it on without moving it for any number of hours. If the camera is about to run out of film, substitute a camera with fresh film. The two cameras may be alternated in this way any number of times. Sound recording equipment may be turned on simultaneously with the movie cameras. Beginning at any point in the film, any length of it may be projected at a showing.

\*For the word 'tree', one may substitute 'mountain', 'sea', 'flower', 'lake', etc.

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Read as a poem, Mac Low's "Tree Movie" is open to infinite realizations upon performance.

As is obvious, Mac Low's performance piece consists of one or two actions that tend to frame a portion of the real world as such. Significantly, the performer can choose another natural object rather than the tree. The notion of framing is directed toward nature itself as an already-made aesthetic object of art. In this sense, the text on the page is not itself the



work of art. Rather, it is a set of instructions suggestive of an indeterminate “poem” or “concept” or a “movie.” Reminiscent of Cage’s infamous piece entitled, 4’33 (1952), Mac Low’s performance piece includes whatever happens during filming.

Additionally, silence becomes as poetic as conventional poetic language. In terms of both culture and aesthetics, silence and noise seem to question the imposition of meaning-based values and revered taste taken by conventional poetics. They seem to imply the absence of predetermined social constructs, represented by conventionally coherent language, linear thought and formal syntax, as manifestations of hegemony, logocentrism, egocentrism, power and hierarchy, which Mac Low’s aesthetics tends to investigate and interrogate. In addition, silence prolongations, represented by in-text blank spaces, are left to the performer to determine their duration. Therefore, the poem is never actualized without a performer and each performance is only one actualization among many others.

In his essay, “Some Ways Philosophy Has Helped to Shape My Work” (1983), Mac Low explains the influence of poets and critics, such as Paul Goodman, Richard McKeon, Ronald S. Crane and Elder Olson, all members at the University of Chicago in the late 1930s and early 1940s, on his experimental endeavors in the 1940s and 1950s. Mac Low argues :

I have long ascribed my continuing openness to what is usually called “experimentation” in the arts, and eventually my adoption of aleatoric and systematic procedures and of indeterminacy in composition of texts and performance works, to my interpretation of Aristotle as viewed by (McKeon, et al., 1982, p. 121)

This might explain Mac Low’s experimentation with language as material for construction, rather than traditional communication.

### **Jackson Mac Low’s Poetic Multiplicity**

Mac Low’s poetics of multiplicity is mostly apparent in his poems known under the title *Asymmetries*. These poems constitute a flexible system resulting in infinite realizations of the same piece. Mac Low devised some performing methods, which suggest ways of realizing these poems as musical notations to regulate rhythm, tone, pitch, prolongations and silences. These methods can be summarized as thus:

#### **1 .The Basic Method**

In this method, “blank spaces before, after and between words or parts of words ,between lines of words, and before whole poems are rendered as silences equal in duration to the time it wd [sic] take to read aloud the words printed anywhere above or below them” (ACO,p. 69). Words are either initially capitalized and read loudly or shouted; or



enclosed by punctuation marks and whispered or read softly. Punctuation marks regulate the pitch.

## **2 .Words only :**

The performer throws a die. If the performer/composer gets 2 or 4, words are read as in the basic method. Breath and length are regulated by line endings .

## **3 .Silence only :**

The performer throws a die. If the performer/composer gets 6, the whole poem is read silently. The duration the poem takes is the same as if the poem is read aloud by the basic method.

## **4 .Silence, words and tones :**

The performer throws a die. If the performer/composer gets 7, play a tone is played with a musical instrument. The tone is iterated, and the pitch is determined according to the instructions provided.

## **5 .Tone only :**

The performer throws a die. If the performer/composer gets 8, one tone is played and iterated as long as it would take if the poem is really aloud by the basic method

## **6. Tones and silences.**

The performer throws a die. If the performer/composer gets 9 or 11, the poem is read silently. Tones are played according to the instructions provided .

## **7 .Words and tones :**

The performer throws a die. If the performer/composer gets 10 or 12, words are read by the basic method. Pitch and tones played are regulated according to the instructions provided.

## **8 .The 8th method :**

In this method, “the silences of the basic method are replaced by whispers of any words printed above or below spaces” (ACO, p. 70). Whispering is regulated according to the instructions provided.

Mac Low’s Asymmetries are aesthetically cross-generic works that fuse the conventional distinctions between poetry, music and performance, on the one hand, and the composer and performer, on the other hand. The structure of Mac Low’s Asymmetries also incarnates Buddhist influence on his poetics. For example, the following poem, “Drawing-Asymmetry #41” (1961) illustrates the various aspects of the poem in terms of shape and sound:



Drawing-Asymmetry #41

This influence extends to affect the form and structure of another type of performance texts developed in 1961 known as *Gathas*. The word “gatha” is a Sanskrit word, which means “verse” or “hymn” (TB, p. 192). In these poems, “the letters of their words are placed in the squares of quadrille (graph) paper, and they are realized through spontaneous, but rule-guided performers’ choices, usually, but not always, made during performances” (TB 192). According to Mac Low, *Gathas* are performance texts derived from Buddhist mantras—repetitive, poetic verbal formulas based on Sanskrit phonemes (1992, p.23) — by chance operations as an attempt to evade what Mac Low calls the “ego-tripping” (TB, 194).

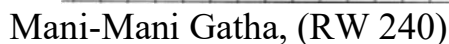
For author and curator Jonathan Stalling in his essay: “Listen and Relate” Buddhism, Daoism, and Chance in the *Poetry and Poetics of Jackson Mac Low*, the *Gathas* represent a culmination of Mac Low’s philosophical and political proclivities. That is, the interrelated relationship among performers is analogous reflects a conception of a communal society whose workings are derived from anarchist and Buddhist stances. As Stalling argues,

Mac Low’s insistence that performers not only to “listen” (the directive of “bare attention”), but also to “relate” to the



phenomena encountered by adjusting to rather than interfering with “otherness” recalls his Anarcho-Daoist ethics of wuwei. So, although the gathas are certainly “Buddhist” poems, they nevertheless reveal a unique combination of chance, Buddhist metaphysics, and Daoist ethics. (p. 100)

The performers have the freedom to enact the sounds and silences in different ways: as speakers, vocalists, or instrumentalists. Performers also have the freedom to determine their own tempo, the direction of moving across the quadrille—horizontally, vertically, or diagonally, as well as the durations or prolongations of silences. Mac Low’s *Gathas* poems substantiate his collaborative and communal aesthetics, which necessitate the participation of the performer in the actualization of the poem, which is itself a mere possibility among many ,depending on the dynamics of Mac Low’s potential form. *Gathas* tend to defy fixations, the poem as a final and complete artistic product, and singularity, the centrality of the poet’s ego. Each performance results in a distinct realization ,and therefore, an actualization of the poem as the dynamicity of the poem and the merge between textual, phonetic and visual elements perpetuate its ever-evolving nature:



On the other hand, in his *Twenties: 100 Poems* (1991), Mac Low generated these poems “by gathering words, phrases, and other linguistic material from his inner and outer environments (p. xxi). As the title indicates, each poem is composed of twenty lines divided into five quatrains “made up of single words, names ,and short phrases, which are not arranged through normative syntax, and (rarely) short sentences, none embedded in narrative, logical, or other structures of discourse (TB, p. 327):



Filijal swifty      collapse exact pandandy

rat pageant ocean notion corm      grail

east of      restitution ton glover

gambol swan bronze tetter      (Twenties; 29)

As obvious in the quatrain quoted above, white spaces are indicative of silence determined by the performer. As in *Twenties: 100 Poems*, Mac Low used what he calls “fuzzy verse-form” in his 20 Forties (1999), published by Zasterle Press (TB, p. xiii). The complete series, *154 Forties*, is edited by Anne Tardos and published posthumously in 2012 by Counterpath. In *20 Forties*, each poem consists of eight stanzas, each comprises five lines of different length, hence the title Forties. Tardos “The Forties were written freely and without the use of any system or method other than a predetermined verse format. They reveal the inner workings of Jackson’s mind and his encyclopedic knowledge as no other works do” (TB xxv). In his essay, “Poetry and Pleasure” (2008), Mac Low points out that these poems reflect his interest in the English Victorian poet Gerard Manley Hopkins (1844-1889) and his prosodic metrical system known as “sprung rhythm” (Mac Low xii):

Unannounced inténctions      creepy aríthmetic  
 totalized sóarers      zóris      actívity-boosters  
 nettles originally págeant      gentian Schwártzkopf  
 denotation-withered-on-the-vine      the sacrosanct  
 contínuance      vóucher-tool  
 déal      sláp      plácket      áttitude-tubes      (Forties 2)

As obvious in the poem quoted above, The Forties incorporate silence prolongations regulated according to the following prosodic system devised by Mac Low:

Caesural spaces = durations of silence and/or  
 prolongations of final phonemes or syllables:

4 letter spaces [ ] = 1 unstressed syllable;

8 letter spaces [ ] = 1 stressed syllable or 1  
 beat;

32 letter spaces [ ] = 1 stressed and 1 unstressed  
 syllable or 2/3 3beats;

36 letter spaces [ ] = 2 beats.

None occurs between typographical lines. Breath  
 pauses at verse-line endings ad lib. (Forties, p. XIV).



Mac Low (1954) started to compose what he identifies as “eventative verse”: simultaneous poems entitled, *5 biblical poems*, in which “the lines include specific numbers of “events”— rather than feet, syllables or stresses—in that case, of single words and/or silences” (Zurbrugg, 1983, p. 255). For example, in the following poem entitled, “5. 2. 3. 6. 5. , The 3<sup>rd</sup> biblical poem” (1955), Mac Low employs chance operations to determine the number of “events,” indicated by /—/, per line. Thus, the numbers in the title, therefore, indicates the number of “events” in each stanza. This indeterminacy resulting from chance operations extends to performance perpetuating the poem as forever unfinished and indeterminate. In other words, the duration of silence is governed by any word of the performer’s own choice. Upon performance, the poem seems to be a sequence of “events” in the form of both words and silences:

sustenance /\_\_\_\_/ and /\_\_\_\_/ /\_\_\_\_/

/\_\_\_\_/ /\_\_\_\_/

/\_\_\_\_/ /\_\_\_\_/ bullock,

of twenty /\_\_\_\_/ /\_\_\_\_/ /\_\_\_\_/ children

hands, /\_\_\_\_/ came and /\_\_\_\_/

/\_\_\_\_/ weight threescore /\_\_\_\_/ the

upon /\_\_\_\_/

Shechem /\_\_\_\_/ /\_\_\_\_/

/\_\_\_\_/ /\_\_\_\_/ he /\_\_\_\_/ his against

/\_\_\_\_/ /\_\_\_\_/ Jephthah, cities /\_\_\_\_/

/\_\_\_\_/ /\_\_\_\_/ /\_\_\_\_/ not children

/\_\_\_\_/ thee?

ten the /\_\_\_\_/

/\_\_\_\_/ said for eater But /\_\_\_\_/

/\_\_\_\_/ /\_\_\_\_/ done to and

From *An Anthology of Concrete Poetry* (1967); p.204

Mac Low’s aesthetics displays a dynamic poetic form that challenges formal closure. That is to say, the poem is always in a state of flux since the text on page serves only as a notation for performance, which



itself is apt to the performers' own interpretation and improvisations, and thus, open to infinite realizations and actualizations. The following poem "A Vocabulary for Sharon Belle Mattlin" (1973) by Jackson Mac Low is a case in point:



A Vocabulary for Sharon Belle Mattlin 1973 (DA 88)

As is obvious, the poem does not abide by any established poetic conventions. Formally speaking, it is not conventionally structured into stanzas; it does not even pertain to any poetic lines. In this sense, it challenges conventional semantic and syntactic structures since words are juxtaposed as separate entities or "events" whose relational logic, if there is any, is put forward in aesthetic perception. That is to say, these words or collages maintain their meanings as such; but also, it is the performers' responsibility to make sense of these disjointed signifiers.



## Conclusion

The significance of Mac Low's poetic multiplicity resides precisely in its capacity for rebelliousness even within such a formally rigid context. If readers look closely at the content of his formally conventional poetry, with regard to his other poetic identities, they might identify aspects of intellectually anarchistic content capable of undermining any singular impression regarding his poetics "abundance" by any single pattern in the aesthetics of his writings. The traditionality of his writing seems to serve more as a means of exploration rather than a definite belief in linearity or classicism. Mac Low's anarcho-pacifist character remains operative in his experimental poetry after 1954, however, taking a different aesthetic shape. In other words, his early concentration on overtly political rejection of the status quo has been tempered by a more profound concern with the philosophical and cultural aspects of poetic form where conditions of composing and receiving the work of art seem much more significant than anti-capitalist slogans for freedom and peace. However, other philosophies, such as Buddhism and Daoism are also revolutionary forces operative behind the emergence of Mac Low's experimental poetics of chance, ex-centricity, and non-intentionality.



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