

The channel of (mis)communication: Semantic and pragmatic deviances in two poems by Geoffrey Hill and Susan Howe

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Stylisticians have pointed out that there exists a correlation between deviant use of language and interpretive/processing effort when reading works of literature (e.g. Riffaterre 1971: 71; Miall & Kuiken 1994; Stockwell 2002: 36; Leech 2010: 61). A case in point is late modernist and postmodernist poetry such as Geoffrey Hill's and Susan Howe's. In the present paper I will focus on two of their poems featuring a variety of deviances on both semantic and pragmatic levels. I argue that such deviances can be regarded as interferences, or 'correlates of difficulty': these run counter to default processing and convincingly account for empirical evidence of faulty comprehension obtained through an independent comprehension task.

1. Introduction

The hypothesis according to which linguistic deviance slows reading speed down, thwarts comprehension and enhances laborious interpretations (Riffaterre 1971: 71; Stockwell 2002: 36; Leech 2010: 61) is perhaps so reasonable and matter-of-fact a claim that a proper investigation of this complex phenomenon has hardly started in stylistics. One noteworthy exception is a study by Miall & Kuiken (1994) in which correlations between stylistic foregrounding and reading times have been calculated. Psycholinguistic research provides more data than stylistics on the relationship between discrete linguistic units and processing. However, the severe limitations imposed by scientific stringency mean that utterly simple textual instances equal to or below clause level are used rather than natural texts, let alone literary ones (but Conklin & Mahlberg, forthcoming, indicates a promising way out of this situation).

When it comes to linguistic deviance, contemporary poetry is by and large the most suited field of investigation, as formal experimentation and the drive for novelty in this literary genre throughout the 20th century have been radical (see Perloff 1991 on various American avant-garde movements) and increasingly so, as shown by Martindale (1990) through quantitative methods. However, to my knowledge there has been no unified attempt yet to provide a theoretically-grounded account of the types, distributions and effects of such

deviances in poetry. The closest a study could get to this ideal was probably Levin's (1977), analysing the link between semantic deviance and metaphor from a theoretical linguistic perspective. However, for all its rigour, Levin's study suffers from some major shortcomings (see Cureton 1983) essentially stemming from an approach sympathetic with generativist theories and hence uninterested in natural data from poetry. Compared to narrative, 20th century poetry has (apparently) rejected all foundational norms, and this has turned this genre into a Cinderella in stylistics as far as attempts at unifying theories are concerned (Riffaterre 1978, Martindale 1991, Fabb & Halle 2008, and Tsur 2008, 2012 being outstanding exceptions yet not focussed on the issue at stake here).

Now there only remains one fundamental notion to be introduced: that of 'difficulty'. Previously, difficulty has been discussed from a variety of theoretical standpoints. For instance, Riffaterre (1978: 151) describes it in terms of a clash of codes, specifically the semantic and the semiotic, while Steiner (1978) outlines four typologies (contingent, tactical, modal and ontological) ordered according to an increasing conceptual distance from the text. From the viewpoint of more traditional literary criticism, Bowie (1978) discusses different facets of the phenomenon with reference to the work of Mallarmé. Purves 1991 (ed.) is a collection of essays attempting to come to terms with the notion itself by generally adopting a conventionalist position over an essentialist one, hence emphasizing social factors and historical shifts over intrinsic textual features. By contrast, Toolan (1993) shows how a dense poem by Hill can be accessed through lexical relations across the text. From a historical and receptionist viewpoint, Diepeveen (2003) focuses on reactions to modernist works in the past and shows how difficulty was an abused label serving the modernists' purposes to consolidate their Canon. Adopting an empirical approach, Yaron (2002, 2003) compares readers' responses to two poems (one by Cummings and one by Strand), finding that Cumming's poem elicits more lacunary and fragmented think-aloud protocols than Strand's, an index of the former's higher difficulty; finally, Yaron (2008) provides a checklist of features deemed typical of difficult poems, summed up in the following definition:

A poem is considered difficult if the representation constructed by the reader is defective. Such defective representation is produced when some or all of the potential obstacles in the text, intentional or unintentional, become effective obstacles in the domains of language and/or coherence and/or the world referred to. This means that they disrupt construction of the representation. (2008: 146)

Despite all their differences, in these studies difficulty is usually treated as an a priori category based on personal judgment and open to ad hoc post-rationalisations, rather than seen as the complex resultant of many interacting and observable variables. In other words, it is dealt with as a starting point rather than a point of arrival. Even Yaron's definition – the closest one to the common, shared sense of the notion among non-specialists – is still little informative because it treats difficulty as an all-or-none phenomenon: it thus lacks explanatory power to account for the intuitive and shared feeling that poems can be difficult in a variety of ways (e.g. Bowie 1978: ix, Lamarque 2009: 413).

Taking Yaron's definition as a point of departure, Castiglione (2013) is a descriptive and exploratory study of precisely 'the potential obstacles in the text' listed by Yaron. In this study I have shown how the potential textual correlates of difficulty and the range of their effects are far more complex than those anticipated by Yaron. What was still missing was, among other things, (a) a more thorough and narrowed-down focus on semantic and pragmatic deviances (as these turned out to have the highest frequencies in the samples analysed) and (b) some preliminary empirical evidence turning such deviances from possible into plausible correlates of difficulty (ad hoc tests would be needed to turn the correlates into determinants of difficulty). These are the gaps this paper seeks to remedy.

2. Deviances in two poems

Two poems will be analysed, with a special emphasis on the semantic and pragmatic deviances they feature. By DEVIANCE is meant here *any textual instantiation, of variable length, which (1) linguistically, deviates from the primary norm of language as described in standard grammars as well as from language as used in non-poetic and in (conventionalised) poetic discourse, and (2) psychologically, is likely to disrupt processing and/or comprehension to some degree.*

The reason why I accept the semantic/pragmatic distinction is that some deviances run counter to basic conceptual principles irrespective of context (semantic deviances) whilst other do not infringe any such principle but are dependent on contextual information (pragmatic deviances). In the following subsections (2.1 and 2.2), tables are devised in which such deviances are reported in their textual instantiations within the poems and consistently described from a linguistic viewpoint.

The poems analysed are reported in the end of this section. Their authors are the English late modernist Geoffrey Hill (born 1932) and the American postmodernist Susan Howe (born 1937). These poets have been chosen because they are both critically well-established (several monographs have been written on both) and considered as ‘difficult’: the authoritative *Norton Anthology of English Literature* uses the word ‘difficult’ to characterize the work of Geoffrey Hill (1999: 2717), while the work of Susan Howe is the subject of an interpretive essay by Quartermain where the challenge posed by the poem confronted is evident and readily admitted by the critic himself (1992: 182-194).

The poems are both excerpted from longer sequences but display marked stylistic differences: Hill’s poem foregrounds fragmentation alongside hierarchical organization, after Pound’s and Eliot’s high modernist techniques; Howe’s poem also foregrounds fragmentation but it runs counter to a discourse-based writing practice, abolishing punctuation and problematizing syntax through chains of juxtaposed nouns and modifiers between which undetermined relations obtain. The empirical data derived from a comprehension task featuring both poems (Section 3) support their effective difficulty, accountable for by the types and degrees of the deviances.

YES, I know: fantasies see us out
 Like a general amnesty, with son
 Et lumière and civic freedoms.
 Something must give, make common cause,
 In frank exchange with defamation.
 So talk telegraphese, say: FORTITUDE
 NEVER MY FORTE. BLOOD-IN-
 URINESAMPLES
 RUIN EURO-CULTURE. Try not to each
 Succession of expenses; nominal
 Acceptance, each makeshift honour botched
 As though by royal appointment. And PASS to all
 Duties, rights, privileges, of despair.

(Geoffrey Hill, from *Speech! Speech!* 2000)

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

(Susan Howe, from *The Midnight*, 2003)

2.1 Semantic deviances

The semantic deviances found in the two poems are reported in Table 1 below. Each deviance is identified by a number for ease of reference; odd numbers are given to Hill’s poem, even

numbers to Howe's, and the same coding system is applied for the pragmatic deviances in the next sub-section (2.2, Table 2).

Id.	Hill	Id.	Howe
(1)	<i>fantasies see us out</i>	(2)	<i>A small [...] fustian</i>
(3)	<i>like a general amnesty</i>	(4)	<i>hold</i>
(5)	<i>son / Et lumière and civic freedoms</i>	(6)	<i>warp and woof</i>
(7)	<i>Say</i>	(8)	<i>[warp and woof] is the cloven rock...</i>
(9)	<i>And PASS to all</i>	(10)	<i>cloven rock misled</i>
(11)	<i>each succession [...] each honour</i>	(12)	<i>lie</i>

Table 1 – Semantic deviances in the poems

As shown in the table, all semantic deviances are local, stretching from single ambiguous lexical items ((4), (7) and (12)) up to nominal ((2), (5), (10), (11)) and prepositional ((3)) phrases, and clauses ((1), (8), (9)). Throughout this section I will describe them in linguistic terms, explain their relevance as foregrounded items in the poems they come from, and focus on the problems they are likely to pose on processing and comprehension.

Half of the deviances imply a double construal, resulting in what psycholinguists have termed ‘garden-path effects’ (i.e. Harley 2008). This is the case with (4), (7), (8), (9), (12) and *see out* within (1). Some of these samples rely on ambiguities pre-existent in the language system and (plausibly) in the long-term mental lexicon (i.e. *lie* in its two distinct senses; *pass* as verb or noun, with the latter sense now grown totally independent from the former; *see out* in its idiomatic and literal sense). In these cases the poets simply build around a co-text able to accommodate both senses. In other cases, however, the ambiguity is constructed ex novo. For instance, in (4) Howe arranges *hold* in end-line position, thus conflating its transitive and intransitive uses (both highly salient for this verb) and developing a structural ambiguity opening various parsing possibilities: *warp and woof* can be either object of *hold* in the transitive option, or subject of *is* in the intransitive one. If the latter option is followed, the outcome is (8), a counterfactual statement with the relational identifying verb ‘to be’ (i.e. ‘warp and woof *is* the cloven rock’). However, if the former option is followed, the bracketed stretch is to be deleted from (8), which would be read as a question, implying a shift of mood

and thus a potential pragmatic deviance (see 2.2). In (9) the ambiguity of *pass* fits the context because of a sort of structural priming built up in the preceding stretches: the processing of *pass* is primed, or biased, toward the noun option because it follows nominal phrases (*succession of expenses, nominal acceptance*) with which it entertains an addition relation (A, B and C). However, the presence of many commands in clause-initial position throughout the poem should prime *pass* towards the verb option equally intensively (the same priming towards a command is undergone by *say* (9), which is either a verb in the imperative mood or a conversational marker). Both readings of *pass* are then possible, standing in a mutually exclusive relation (in (4), by contrast, the two readings are in a mutually inclusive relation). What is more, the ambiguity of *pass* is functional to the likely theme of the Hill poem, regarding the status of writing and speaking in society: in the verb parsing option it relates with the mode of speech presentation (a dramatic monologue) in which several topic shifts occur (i.e. ‘let’s pass to something else’); in the noun parsing option, *pass* relates to the *amnesty-civic-cause-duties-rights-privileges* ‘political’ lexical chain, alluding to a relaxation from moral values.

Due to their systemic presence (five instances across two short poems), these puns are likely to be prominent STYLISTIC MARKERS (see Adamson 1999: 594) of 20th and 21st century difficult poems (see also Castiglione 2013 for further examples from Mallarmé, Eliot, Oppen and Prynne). The distinct senses implied in such puns are unlikely to be active (that is to say, to result in double construals) on a first reading, as usually one decoding or parsing option is markedly more salient than the other. On re-reading, however, awareness of these ambiguities should impose a greater conceptual load and lead to a richer mental representation in the reader.

The spectrum of semantic deviance is, however, wider than that. (2) presents the most obvious case: a fifteen-word long nominal phrase extremely resistant to an experiential construal, (2) features four nouns (*swatch, grain, weft, fustian*) none of which alone serves as the logical subject of *should hold*. This is possible because Howe eschews any codified logico-semantic relation (either linking by hypotaxis or parataxis) relying instead on apposition. Therefore, *grain* could elaborate on *swatch* either reinstating it in other words (positing a metaphorical equivalence, i.e. ‘a swatch is a kind of grain’) or extending it (positing a simple additive relation, i.e. ‘a swatch plus a grain’). The additional fact that all these nouns (plus *woof*, in complement position) are hyponyms of ‘fabric’ should encourage the reader to mentally equate or relate them. What is more, most adjectives (*bluish-green, woollen, slight, watered, figured, right*) can either post-modify the previous noun (post-

modifying participials function as adjectives) or pre-modify the next one. In summary, (a) grammatical relations of dependency are made undecipherable and (b) the assignment of properties is made impossible to establish: in a twofold move, (2) incorporates in its own texture insights from post-structuralist theory questioning the reliance on classification in Western philosophyⁱ.

Differently from (2), *the cloven rock misled* (10) requires a univocal parsing which is, however, highly disruptive of experiential meaning: whilst *cloven rock* literally means *split rock* (the phrase has a real referent, as a quick search on Google Images confirms), *cloven* is likely to prime its nearly unique collocate *hoof* (as attested by the COCA corpus). This discrepancy between long-term default reading and unexpected textual instantiation could account for *cloven rock* having been perceived as deviant in protocols from a comprehension task (see Section 3). The processing load is further enhanced with the odd post-modifier *misled*, which typically collocates with human agents. A similar mis-assignment of human agency to inanimate entities is found in *fantasies see us out* (1) if ‘see out’ is interpreted compositionally (i.e. ‘to see out of sth.’) rather than idiomatically (i.e. ‘to give relief to sb.’). However, because ‘fantasies’ are attributable to human beings in a way ‘rocks’ are not, *fantasies* is a more likely candidate for human agency than is *rock*, resulting in a milder deviance. On an intertextual note, the presence of (1) is also vouched by a Provençal trope promoting the thoughts of the poetic persona to the status of logical and psychological subjects, as in the work of Cavalcanti, an Italian poet contemporary with Dante. This clause is post-modified by the Adjunct *like a general amnesty* (3) which rhetorically takes the form and function of a simile. The post-modification fits both senses of *see out* in (1): two possible conceptual construals are hence (a) ‘fantasies give us relief the way a general amnesty would’ and (b) ‘fantasies see us outside as it happens during a general amnesty’. Protocols obtained during the comprehension task mentioned above show the unique activation of the former construal; however, the latter (more deviant) option should be salient as well for more consciously literary readers. In both cases, a link is made between two normally unrelated entities: a private, psychological one (*fantasies*) and a plural, social one (*amnesty*). This is likely to pose a conceptual load on literary processing.

Building a co-text accommodating both idiomatic and literal meaning is true not only of *see out* in (1), but also of *warp and woof* (6) which has an idiomatic meaning (‘basis, foundation, underlying structure’). However, preceding (6) *altogether* – being homophonous with ‘all together’ – should prime a compositional parsing of the separate itemsⁱⁱ. As a

consequence, if the latter analytic route is taken, (6) will be de-automatized and perceived as an anomalous binomial, since as separate items *warp* and *woof* are semantically unrelated.

Like the latter, compositional construal of (6), (5) (*son / Et lumière and civic freedoms*) features weakly implicated nouns in an addition relation (X + Y); however, differently from (6), (5) is vouched by a specific intertext, namely, the motto of the French revolution ‘Liberté, égalité, fraternité’ (Liberty, equality, brotherhood’): *son* alludes to ‘brotherhood’, *civic freedoms* to ‘liberty’ and *lumière* to the Enlightenment which was a cultural pre-condition for the revolution to start. The presence of a cultural intertext and the English-French linguistic clash (a functional one in Hill, motivated by allusions to the national history of Britain) is likely to enhance the difficulty of (5) both from the viewpoint of conceptual construal and lexical access. The ironically reductionist quality of *freedoms* (if compared to the ‘liberté’ intertext) stems from demoting the abstract (hence non-countable) noun ‘freedom’ to a countable one by putting it in the plural form.

A similarly latent reductionist effect is in the last pair of semantic deviances (11) I have isolated. Here, both *each succession* and *each honour* are nominal phrases infringing a basic semantic principle, namely, that determiners such as *each* should be combined only with countable nouns, which *succession* and *honour* are not. This infringement is subtle and functional as all the others in the Hill poem (the instances in the Howe poem are more overtly deviant): subtle because it would probably be regarded as acceptable by most native speakers; functional because – from an aesthetic and hermeneutic perspective – it literally points to a paradoxical commodification of abstract entities like values.

2.2 Pragmatic deviances

In the previous subsection I analysed textual instantiations of semantic deviances, likely correlates of difficulty in the two poems (see Section 3). Here I focus on pragmatic deviances, that is to say, samples in which the deviance is to be measured against contextual norms rather than ones used by default in language.

Id.	Hill	Id.	Howe
(13)	<i>YES, I know</i>	(14)	<i>is the cloven rock misled</i>
(15)	<i><u>So</u> talk telegraphese</i>		
(17)	<i>FORTITUDE [...] CULTURE</i>		

Table 2 – Pragmatic deviances in the poems

The imbalance of pragmatic deviances in the two poems (three in Hill but just one in Howe) stems from the fact that the Hill poem lends itself more naturally than the Howe poem to a literary pragmatic analysis, as it posits a speaker reporting and commenting words from others. A further, more theoretical reason for this imbalance is possibly that semantic (relative) well-formedness is likely to be a prerequisite for pragmatic deviances to be identified: if basic semantic principles are questioned (as in Howe), then the poem does not present itself as an instance of communication – in such case pragmatics can do no more than notice this infringement without being able of isolating textual instantiations of it.

The deviance of (13) is clearly not a semantic one: *YES, I know* is a stock expression mainly confined to spoken and fictional language and typically occurring at the beginning of a turn-taking, as a search on the COCA corpus revealed. Therefore, (13) is likely to be stored as a unit in long-term memory and quickly processed during reading. However, it is pragmatically anomalous, because it opens a text whilst it is normally expected to occur as a REJOINER (Halliday & Hasan 1976: 206), that is to say, in response to another person's turn. *YES, I know* presupposes preceding text transparent to both speaker and addressee and so it can be conceived of as a pragmatic deviance running counter to expectations of novelty in poetic discourse (but see Jeffries 1993 and Adamson 1999 for the influence of spoken language on 20th century poetry). As a result, a paradigmatic tension is set up between two discourses – the everyday and the poetic. The same holds true for *warp and woof* (6), analysed in the previous section as a semantic deviance but in fact illustrating also an instance of pragmatic deviance in which poetic verbal art incorporates formulaic language, relying on the co-text to de-automatize its processing.

Thematic unity is disrupted in both poems: Howe's (14) entails a shift of scenario (from fabrics to nature) as well as of mood (from declarative to interrogative in the parsing option treating *hold* as transitive) while in Hill's the capitalized lines in (17) ('*FORTITUDE / NEVER MY FORTE. BLOOD-IN-URINE SAMPLES / RUIN EURO-CULTURE*') are

semantically unintegrated to the co-text. From the viewpoint of text production, such shifts may well have been inspired by analogous habits in casual conversation (see Adamson 1999: 597); however, from the viewpoint of text reception, readers are not likely to accept unrelatedness and will instead pay extra-attention to these shifts as gateways to higher levels of conceptual relations between the parts of a poem (see Section 3). Hill's capitalized lines, typographically and structurally mimicking newspaper titles (see Semino 2002 for the discussion of the same phenomenon in a poem by Carol Ann Duffy), contain the statement *BLOOD-IN-URINE SAMPLES / RUIN EURO-CULTURE* which posits a causal correlation for which no evidence is available. The absence of an appropriate context turns this statement into a non-sequitur, a logical fallacy: this is what customarily happens with inadvertently chosen newspaper titles. A similar phenomenon is found in (15), where *so* explicitly signals a causal enhancement which is, however, unwarranted by the co-text, as only weak implications obtain between the preceding text (*'make common cause, / in frank exchange with defamation'*) and the need for 'telegraphese'.

Although they depend on the surrounding co-text, these instances are all local, and as such they receive the textual instantiations reported in Table 2. However, there is also a global pragmatic interference in both poems, one which is not possible to isolate in single textual instantiationsⁱⁱⁱ: this is to do with the unclear ontological status of both poetic persona and implied addressee. In Hill's poem this indeterminacy results in a mixed mode, oscillating between a dialogue and a monologue, with important consequences for interpretation. The poetic persona here is explicitly signalled by an *I* in nearly initial-position. First persons in poetry typically correspond to the poet's persona (as in lyrics: see Austin 1994) or to a specific character, usually introducing himself (as in popular ballads). However, the status of the *I* in Hill's poem stands in between that of the lyric 'I' (an alter-ego of the poet) and of an unnamed character who takes the floor and voices out his or her opinions. The former reading is couched in the high subjectivity expressed by the speaker, whose inferred stance on social and civil matter tallies quite well with the common critical perception of the biographical author. The latter is vouched by the title of the collection where the poem comes from: *Speech! Speech!* – implying that someone is bound to give a speech.

The status of the addressee is indeterminate as well: if the speaker is interpreted as the poetic persona, also the addressee could be the poetic persona, as the second person used in self-address is a convention of much 20th century poetry (Testa 1999). On the other hand, the addressee could be either EXOPHORIC (= the reader in the reading situation) or ENDOPHORIC (= an imagined audience in the fictional world build by the poem). It is likely that non-literary

readers would preferably interpret the speaker as the poetic persona and the addressee as themselves (exophoric reading), as this would allow themselves to feel more personally involved, searching for what Zwaan (1993: 163) calls F-emotions (related to the fictional world). More consciously literary readers, however, should be likely to access this poem as a dramatic monologue (endophoric reading), as this posits a more mediated reading experience allowing for A-emotions (related to the aesthetics of the text: Zwaan 1993: 163). Even more likely, both options will be activated, leading to a richly conflicting mental representation.

As for Howe's poem, the ontological status of the poetic persona is not simply ambiguous as in Hill's poem, but rather is undecidable, since (a) their grammatical markers (e.g. pronouns, possessive adjectives) are absent and (b) the content of the poem is not of an experiential kind, so that to interpret the poem as a report of direct experience (i.e. a dream, a consideration...) would be inappropriate. The same holds true for the addressee: whilst in Hill's poem this is signalled by the imperative mood and auxiliaries of deontic modality (i.e. *must*), in Howe's poem the only possible endophoric addressee candidate is *wildeyed boy*, since this is embedded in a vocative construction primed by the presence of two previous interrogatives. However, because the relation between the addressee and the content of the interrogative is far from clear, the salience of *wildeyed boy* as an endophoric addressee is low since it only has the form, but not the function, of an addressee. Finally, and in a way different from Hill's poem, there is no appeal to exophoric audiences (that is to say, real readers), so that no purpose seems to stand at the foundation of the poem: the perceived lack of purpose – a philosophically motivated one in postmodernist writing – de-automatizes engrained literary readerly stances, and is thus a substantial (literary) pragmatic violation.

3. Empirical evidence of the correlates and discussion

Prior to performing the above analysis, response data regarding the two poems have been obtained through a comprehension task handed out to ten English undergraduates and featuring simple open-ended questions (e.g. 'What's the poem about?', 'Did you enjoy the poem?'), assessment of self-comprehension on a five-point rating scale and the request to underline the stretches perceived as reading obstacles. The experiment design and the findings are discussed in detail in another paper (Castiglione 2013b, submitted) showing how style and text-structure strongly affect reader response. Here I report and discuss only the evidence more pertinent to the kind of interferences examined in the previous section.

The underlining task is obviously tightly related to the question of correlates of difficulty addressed in this paper. Table 3 below reports the stretches more frequently underlined.

Highlighted core stretches	Poem by	Deviance type	No. of times
warp and woof	Howe	Pragmatic deviance (rare lexis)	5
Weft	Howe	- (rare lexis)	4
cloven rock	Howe	Semantic/pragmatic deviance	4
BLOOD-IN-URINE SAMPLES / RUIN EURO-CULTURE	Hill	Pragmatic deviance	3
Woollen slight grain in the fustian	Howe	Semantic deviance	3
lie	Howe	- (rare lexis)	3
So talk telegraphese	Hill	Semantic deviance	3
et lumière	Hill	Pragmatic deviance (rare lexis)	3
	Hill	- (rare lexis)	3

Table 3 – Core stretches consciously recognized as reading obstacles

As can be seen, there is a good overlap between the instances analysed in Section 2 and those independently reported by readers, suggesting that there is indeed a correlation between linguistic deviance and perception of difficulty. Both pragmatic and semantic deviances seem to contribute equally to such perception, but the picture is in fact less clear than it appears on Table 3. As a matter of fact, the experiment design did not always allow appreciating exactly *what* in the stretches underlined caused the difficulty: for instance, *warp and woof* may have been highlighted as simply an unknown expression (tagged with ‘rare lexis’ in Table 3), or as a semantic deviance ((6) and/or (8)).

All the remaining cases in Table 3 do not pose any problems in terms of processing (i.e. construing referents in the semantic deviances and integrating information in the pragmatic deviances) but instead thwart activation, since they feature lexical items unknown to the participants. While the contribution to difficulty of such instances (impaired access to lexical meaning) is undeniable, I find them quite uninteresting from a stylistic perspective. As a consequence, they are not the object of the present paper (but see Castiglione 2013 for some examples). Conversely, many of the interferences in Tables 1 and 2 have not been spotted by respondents. Here one plausible explanation is that, in order to be verbalized, some of them (i.e. the garden path constructions, Hill’s connotational clashes and determiner-mass noun mis-assignment, the ontological status of poetic persona and addressee) require a literary

sensitivity not fully developed yet in the respondents. My anti-positivist contention here is that the interferences analysed throughout this paper exert an influence on processing and comprehension all the same.

Data on reading times per line would offer here strict empirical validation; however, these are still waiting to be collected from a new experiment at the time in which this article is being written. Even so, the interferences can be shown to have explanatory power in accounting for other, more indirect, empirical evidence, such as the assessment of self-comprehension. In the comprehension task, this measure has shown that both poems are to be considered difficult: Hill's poem scored an average 3.10 and Howe's poem 4.10, whilst the easiest poem (by Strand: the same tested by Yaron 2002) tested scored only 1.20 (max. value = 5, min. value = 1). Other indicators (ranging from intersubjectivity of topic identification to the elaborateness of the open responses) confirmed the ratings as well as the greater difficulty of Howe's poem. I believe that my linguistic analysis in Section 2 can account well for the 1 point standard deviation between the difficulty rating means of the two poems. I summarize it here: as far as the semantic deviances are concerned, the 'either *a* or *b*' type of puns in Hill ((1), (7), (9)) point to a resolution, whilst the 'both *a* and *b*' ones in Howe ((4), (8), (12)) do not; in addition to this, puns in Howe are embedded in parsing indeterminacy, whilst in Hill each ambiguous unit, conceptually complex as it may be, is univocally marked by punctuation and syntactic well-formedness. The free modifying Adjunct (3) in Hill post-modifies two construals of *fantasies see us out*, and yet one of the options is of overarching salience on a first reading; by contrast, the opening nominal phrase in Howe (2) goes so far as to question from the outset basic conceptual realities such as logical subject identification and property assignment. The addition relations to be found in Hill (5) and Howe (6) (if read compositionally) reflect again a higher level of cohesion in the former. Finally, the assignment of human features to inanimate entities is more plausible in Hill (1) than in Howe (10). In other words, the semantic deviances in Hill are both integrated in the co-text and arranged 'vertically', likely to be perceived chiefly on re-reading due to their low salience; by contrast, the semantic interferences in Howe are both out of context and arranged 'horizontally', likely to be perceived immediately due to their high salience and not allowing for a preferred reading mode, much in keeping with deconstructionist theories emphasizing endless possibilities of reading paths (e.g. Derrida 1992).

Because Howe's poem has been deemed more difficult than Hill's, and yet the pragmatic deviances are more numerous in Hill's poem, it may be assumed that semantic deviances weight more than pragmatic ones in the perception of difficulty. However, this is

too simplistic and misleading an explanation, since it overlooks the *degree* of the deviances: Howe's shift topic (14), for instance, is more radical than its counterparts in Hill ((15) and (17)), and the ontological status of poetic persona and addressee is only ambiguous in Hill but undecidable in Howe. Again, *ad hoc* tests are needed to assess the exact influence and weight of both semantic and pragmatic deviances. While this issue could be profitably investigated in the future, here I wish to linger on the degree of topic and/or frame shifts in the two poems. Hill's (17) transition (*telegraphese* → *FORTITUDE* [...]) is clearly signalled as a projected locution realized in a capitalized sequence functional to the co-text (between *telegraphese* and the sequence obtains an elaboration relation: the latter is a straightforward exemplification of the former). Howe's (14) topic shift (*woof* → *cloven rock*), on the other hand, is not similarly warranted.

In summary, whenever Hill's poem foregrounds incongruences (i.e. the unwarranted causal enhancement in (15) and the logical fallacy *BLOOD-IN-URINE SAMPLES RUIN EURO-CULTURE* within (17)) it does so to point towards a solution via the co-text; conversely, in Howe's poem the incongruences are not foregrounded because they are the internal norm of the poem: they ask to be accepted rather than solved. The stylistic analysis finally leads to a hermeneutic insight: Hill's poem embodies a late modernist attitude insofar as it features fragmentation while longing for a resolution into a higher symbolic level; Howe's poem embodies a postmodernist Derridean attitude eager to abolish hierarchy and welcoming fragmentation into the 'tissue' of the text as a condition rich with possibilities.

4. Conclusion and suggestions for further research

Throughout this paper, I have revised the critical literature on difficulty in poetry, pointing out that what was still missing was a linguistically-based, fine-tuned account of the interrelation between local phenomena and reader response in accounting for the perception of difficulty. I have then focused on potential reading obstacles which I have divided into two categories: semantic and pragmatic deviances. After a close examination of such phenomena, I have provided some preliminary empirical evidence and shown how this may be suitably explained with reference to such deviances, which may then be regarded as correlates of difficulty. I consider this as an advance compared to previous accounts, often ill-suited from a linguistic viewpoint and treating difficulty as an a priori category. However, this study is still at an initial stage: additional empirical measures are needed, together with an analysis of a wider range of poems aimed at expanding the taxonomy of the interferences. Finally, such

taxonomy should also be mapped onto a conceptual table of discourse processing developed from models proposed in cognitive psychology (i.e. Kintsch 1998, Zwaan 2004, Harley 2008) and adapted to literary scopes, in order to attain a clearer overview of the interrelation of linguistic and cognitive levels during poetic reading.

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank Violeta Sotirova and Alexander Neal for their helpful comments on earlier drafts of this paper, and Counterpoint Press for the permission of reporting the poem by Geoffrey Hill.

Endnotes

ⁱ Derrida (1992: 110-126) identifies Mallarmé as the first poet questioning previous critical classifications, but the same argument underpins much of Perloff's criticism on experimental writing (see Perloff 1991).

ⁱⁱ This hypothesis is supported by the fact that some models of reading in psycholinguistics posit a 'phonological mediation' (Harley 2008: 212) between word recognition and word activation even in silent reading.

ⁱⁱⁱ Hence, in the light of my definition of 'deviance', this should not be regarded as a deviance but rather a violation of extra-textual norms.

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