Beyond lines, beyond stanzas:
Studying unconventional text structure
in American poetry

ADRIAN TROJAK

Abstract

The article explores how text functions as a poetic medium. It argues that unconventional text structure possesses significant potential to inform meaning, evoke emotions, and affect the aesthetic experience of reading poetry. By analyzing works by E. E. Cummings, William Carlos Williams, Mary Ellen Solt, and Anthony Cody, the article puts forward the following hypotheses about typographical arrangement in experimental poetry: typography allows the poet to translate the speaker's experience; typography influences the reading process to reflect the emotional character of the poem; text structure multiplies the modes of communication used in the poem to convey meaning; text structure is used to present complex issues with an economical use of language and draw the reader's attention.

Key words

poetry, text, structure, typography, literature

Poza wersami, poza zwrotkami:
Badanie niekonwencjonalnej struktury tekstu
w poezji amerykańskiej

Abstrakt

Artykuł ma na celu zbadanie problematyki tekstu jako narzędzia poetyckiego. Postawiona jest w nim teza, że niekonwencjonalna struktura tekstu posiada znaczny potencjał jako środek przekazywania znaczenia, wywoływania emocji oraz wzbogacania doświadczenia estetycznego czytania poezji. Analiza prac E. E. Cummingsa, Williama Carlosa Williamsa, Mary Ellen Solt i Anthony'ego Cody'ego prowadzi do szeregu wniosków dotyczących roli spełnianej przez zabiegi typograficzne w poezji eksperymentalnej. Niekonwencjonalna struktura tekstu umożliwia poecie dokładniejsze przedstawienie doświadczeń podmiotu lirycznego oraz wywarcie wpływu na proces czytania w celu dopasowania go do emocjonalnego charakteru wiersza. Pozwala również na pomnożenie środków komunikacji przekazujących znaczenie w wierszu oraz prezentację złożonych problemów w sposób zwięzły i przyciągający uwagę czytelnika.

Słowa kluczowe

poezja, tekst, struktura, typografia, literatura

1. Introduction

Howard Nemerov defines poetry as "literature that evokes a concentrated imaginative awareness of experience or a specific emotional response through language chosen and arranged for its meaning, sound, and rhythm" (2024). It is therefore an art form which aims at evoking an aesthetic experience through a specific arrangement of language. In crafting this arrangement, the poet uses specialized tools such as carefully chosen vocabulary, grammatical structures, rhyme, and meter. All of these contribute to the meaning of the poem and its effect on the person reading it. However, the most immediate impression

that the poem makes on the reader is made through its positioning on the page. This is especially true for experimental compositions, in which the poet chooses not to follow the traditional practice of positioning the text in the conventional poem structure of orderly lines and stanzas.

This article argues that the typographical structure of the text is used to craft an aesthetic experience for the reader, as well as to inform the meaning of the poem, evoke emotions and affect the general reading experience. It begins by outlining historical instances of unconventional text structure in poetic literary works before moving on to the analysis of selected poems by American writers. The analyses will aim at showcasing the usefulness of typographical arrangement as a poetic technique. The focus on American writers is dictated by the wide choice of authors employing unconventional text structure as a crucial element of their poetry in the canon of US literature, as well as the contemporary literary scene in America. Having studied the selected poems, which include "i" by E. E. Cummings, an excerpt from *Paterson* by William Carlos Williams, "Forsythia" by Mary Ellen Solt, and "In line I am a lot of things and since I am a lot of things I am everything he cannot imagine" by Anthony Cody, the article will present the conclusions made from the conducted analyses.

It is important to acknowledge that the significance of the text's materiality has been recognized by multiple scholars in contemporary literary scholarship. In her article on media-specific analysis and electronic hypertext, Katherine N. Hayles argues for the adoption of "a mode of critical attention which recognizes that all texts are instantiated and that the nature of the medium in which they are instantiated matters" (2004: 67). Hayles emphasizes the importance of media-specific analysis, which "insists that 'texts' must always be embodied to exist in the world" and conceptualizes literature as the effect of dynamic interactions between "the materiality of these embodiments" and "linguistic, rhetorical, and literary practices" (2004: 69-70). Through such conceptualization of literature, the materiality of

the text is given its proper attention as a constitutive element of the literary work. Another scholar who appreciates the value of the textual aspect of literary works is Johanna Drucker, who argues that "the specific properties and obvious graphical elements, though frequently unnoticed, are an important part of semantic meaning production" (2006: 271). In her article, "Visual Readings and the Visual Aesthetics of Textuality," Drucker demonstrates the possibility of shifting attention "from the 'produced' nature of signified meaning to the 'productive' character of signifying field" (2006: 275). In the case of printed poetry, this signifying field is the page on which the text of the poem is arranged. Critical approaches to analyzing poetry which devote a significant amount of attention to the text itself by analyzing its arrangement and typography can provide literary research with significant findings and valuable insight pertaining both to the craft of writing poetry and the experience of reading poetry. It is therefore a matter of utmost importance to continue the inquiry into the textual and typographical aspect of poems.

Examples of poetic works written in unconventional forms can be found throughout the history of world literature. The phenomenon can be observed even before the Common Era, when a Greek poet, Simmias of Rhodes, created poems which Smith describes as belonging to "that fantastic species called *griphi* or *carmina figurata*, that is, pieces in which the lines are so arranged as to make the whole poem resemble the form of some object" (1867: 828). Indeed, this is true for his poem "Wings", whose lines are positioned in a way that the textual structure of the text is made to resemble the titular object (Simias 2015: 564). Of course, similar experiments have been attempted in English poetry as well. George Herbert, who must have been aware of Simmias' shaped poetry, has chosen to use a similar device in his well-known poem "Easter Wings" (Brown 1972: 132). The poem consists of two stanzas, each constituted by ten lines. The length of lines decreases as the text progresses towards the middle part of the stanza, before starting to increase again. This provides each stanza with a shape resembling a pair

of angel wings. For example, the final stanza of the poem is structured thusly:

> My tender age in sorrow did beginne
>   And still with sicknesses and shame.
>   Thou didst so punish sinne,
>   That I became
>   Most thinne.
>   With thee
>   Let me combine,
>   And feel thy victorie:
>   For, if I imp my wing on thine,
> Affliction shall advance the flight in me.
> (Herbert)

The shape of the poem is crucial to understanding the meaning of "Easter Wings." The speaker expresses an acknowledgement of a repenting sinner that only through God they can rise above the disastrous consequences of a sinful life, which made them "most thinne," and take "flight," signifying heavenly salvation. This message is to be found both in the linguistic content and the arrangement of lines. As Whitlock correctly observes, "the wings represent the wasting away by sin of God's original creation, and then regrowth in power through Christ's victory" (1986: 38). Brown comes to a similar conclusion, stating that "the shortening of the lines toward the center of each stanza" signifies "fall and decay" while "the corresponding lengthening of the lines figures redemptive arising, spiritual growth" (1972: 134). In other words, the length of lines represents the state of a sinner's soul. They shorten when it is weakened through sin, and lengthen when it is strengthened by reuniting with God. Thus, the arrangement of lines represents the process of fall and redemption. It enhances the meaning of the poem, by visually representing the spiritual journey of the speaker. By applying unconventional text structure into his poetry, Herbert could provide insight into the spiritual life of a Christian both through language and the text itself.

However, perhaps some of the boldest experiments with the textual structure of the poem have been attempted in the twentieth century. With the advent of modernism, which Barry accurately describes as "that earthquake in the arts which brought down much of the structure of pre-twentieth-century practice in music, painting, literature, and architecture," experimental forms in poetry seemed to thrive as never before (2017: 82). Many of those experiments were applied to typography. As Barry claims, the shifts in the practice of writing brought forth by modernism had the result of producing "a literature which seems dedicated to experimentation and innovation" (2017: 84). Indeed, the innovative character of the novel techniques implemented by modernist writers is hard to underestimate. This is especially true for the implementation of unconventional text structure into poetry, which demanded from the readers that they look for meaning not only in the semantic properties of the speaker's words, but in the arrangement of these words on the page as well.

Modernist experiments with the poetic form reflected the social, political and economic circumstances of their time. For example, in his article on William Carlos Williams, Barnstone claims that the poet perceived "the world-wide convulsion of the Second World War" as "an opportunity to break up old oppressive orders and create a new order." The emergent new literary order would replace "traditional metrics with avant-garde forms of ordering the poem" (2014: 34). This observation seems to indicate a connection between the upheaval caused by the global conflicts of the early twentieth century and the radical formal experiments in the works of modernist poets. The disruption of the textual dimension of poetry reflected the disrupted state of world affairs. From this point of view, typographically experimental modernist writing can be understood as a subversive activity which, taking advantage of the historical moment, aimed at effecting a radical change in the art form.

2. Translating experience into verse – E. E. Cummings

In the canon of American modernist poetry, E. E. Cummings emerges as perhaps one of the boldest experimentalists of his time when it comes to the typography of the poem. Cummings' close attention to his poems' textual arrangement came from what Kidder aptly called "his insistence that poetry is not only words and punctuation but also – and most emphatically – the matrix of empty spaces in which they hang" (1979: 257). In other words, the poet was keenly aware that the positioning of the poem on the page could be successfully utilized to enhance its aesthetic value beyond what was afforded by purely linguistic devices. Cummings' poem, "i", is an excellent example of his use of unconventional typographical arrangement to convey meaning and enhance the aesthetic experience of the reader. It is an impressionist study of a fighter's perspective during a boxing match. In order to faithfully translate the impressions of the boxer into verse, the poet chose not only to describe them to the reader, but also to influence the reading process itself. This influence is effected by a deliberate manipulation of the typographical arrangement of words, lines and stanzas. For example, the beginning of the poem reads:

    i
    (meet)t(touch)
    ems crouch(
    lunge
)ing bruised
    Suddenly by thousand

    starings rinsed with
    thoroughly million yells they
    f-oo-l(whom,blinds;blood)pa-nt
    stab are
    (Cummings 1968: 388)

The words in the poem are often compressed together or frag-
mented and the syntactical flow is frequently interrupted by line
breaks, punctuation signs, and ellipses. All of these cause con-
fusion in the reader. They can register certain perceptions, feel-
ings, and thoughts, but they are broken, erratic, and disor-
ganized. The confusion is supposed to parallel the experience of
the boxer: it illustrates what their thinking process must be like
due to the immense exhaustion and the experience of being sav-
agely beaten, all the while having to focus on fighting back. The
process of registering experience is radically changed from its
usual orderly functioning, sometimes being reduced to simple
recognition of oncoming punches and the sounds of the crowd.

There is a visible progression in the incomprehensibility of
the text from the beginning to the end of the poem. Initially, the
words are fairly recognizable: "i/ (meet)t(touch)/ ems crouch(/
lunge/)ing bruiseD/ Suddenly by thousand/ starings rinsed
with/ thoroughly million yells they/ f-oo-l(whom,blinds,blood)
pa-nt" (Cummings 1968: 388). Of course, the syntactic coher-
ence is interrupted by enjambments and ellipses containing
recognitions of actions such as meeting, touching, lunging, be-
ing blinded by blood, but relatively to the latter part of the poem
the meaning remains quite clear. The elliptical signs, by their
bulgy shape, mimic the fists being thrown by boxers. The same
effect is achieved by the capital D in "bruiseD," which makes the
entire fifth line look like an arm extended to deliver a punch.
The dashes in the words "f-oo-l" and "pa-nt" already signify the
beginning difficulty in expressing the fighter's thoughts, as the
lyrical speaker has to catch their breath in-between punches.
This difficulty grows as the poem progresses and so the text be-
comes visibly less coherent. A key stylistic device that produces
the confusion in the reader is the technique of fragmentation
and fusion. "In poetry," explains Kidder, "fragmentation and fu-
sion consists in the breaking up of the conventional arrange-
ments of stanzas, lines, or words into smaller units and in com-
bining of them into larger ones" (1979: 281–282). The use of this
technique is visible in the lines "wo-l oop-l/eftsthrowr ightsm

issingupperc/uts-lurc hhurt-re/ coil charge &) swooN/Crowd-loomroar:ingdiskface,es" (Cummings 1968: 388). The sequence of punches and movements, that is "lefts" and "rights" being thrown, "missing uppercuts," the "lurch" and the "recoil" have been fused together by the omission of spaces between them, and then the resulting fusion has been re-fragmented with spaces, punctuation signs and line breaks inserted in various places. The same is true for the "crowd" of spectators described by the speaker as "diskfaces," who "loom" and "roar." After Cummings applies fusion and fragmentation to its representation, it takes the form of the quizzical line, "Crowdloom-roar:ingdiskface,es." The resulting new arrangement does not follow syntactical and lexical rules of the English language, therefore becoming hard for the reader to follow and make sense of. The words are compressed together or rent apart by typo-graphically unusual spacing, punctuation signs and line breaks, forcing the reader to put more effort into decoding the words from the seemingly nonsensical sequences of letters. By progressively making the text harder to read, Cummings en-deavored to translate the experience of the boxer into poetry. The increasing effort of reading the poem parallels the increas-ing difficulty experienced by the boxer in the ring, who finds it harder and harder to think clearly in the face of exhaustion and the damage taken from their opponent.

There is also significance to be found in the structure of the very last five stanzas of the poem, which seem by far the least coherent. The stanzas form a long thin column, with each line possessing either one, two or three signs. The letters do not seem to form any recognizable word. This is probably due to the intense exhaustion of the lyrical speaker at the end of the boxing match, as they are too tired to form any coherent thoughts. Con-sequently, the outcome of the match, or even the very fact of the fight's conclusion, cannot be inferred from the linguistic content of the poem. However, the lonely column in the context of the scene brings forth an image which unmistakenly coincides with an end of a fistfight, that is the last person standing – a single

vertical figure in the ring. This figure can be identified by the fact that its vertical shape mirrors the very last line of the poem, which contains the only recognizable word of the last stanza, that is "I" (Cummings 1968: 388) – the self-reference of the triumphant lyrical speaker who successfully knocked out their opponent. Cummings chose to provide closure to the reader not through language, but through a visual typographical arrangement. Language does not inform us of any resolution of the match, yet the structure of the text does so independently of it.

Thus, it is through unconventional text structure that the poem succeeds in its goal to provide the reader with an impressionist poetic rendering of a boxing match and a unique aesthetic experience of studying the fighter's perspective. This would not be possible if the poem's structure allowed for an easy reading experience. Orderly arrangement of the poem would not be able to mimic the discordant thoughts of a fighter in the same way as Cummings' composition. As Peterson keenly observed, Cummings' typography "forces" the reader to understand the boxer's disorientating situation "just as the boxer struggles to understand it himself," and so "the reader's frustration is the boxer's frustration, an identification that cannot be accomplished by simply telling readers that the boxer is confused or disoriented" (1995: 53). The poem showcases how the textual arrangement can create an aesthetic experience and inform the meaning of the poem in a way that would be impossible to achieve on a purely linguistic basis.

3. Influencing the reading process – William Carlos Williams

Another American modernist poet who saw the potential of unconventional text structure as a tool to manipulate the reading process is William Carlos Williams. Williams' keen awareness of how the linguistic and formal conventions structure the thinking process and the implications of this phenomenon for poetry has already been studied in detail. For example, Moore explains

that "syntax was important to Williams because he knew that syntax – and words – constituted thought" and that "orderly logical statements, and the forms of social order that perpetuate such statements are inimical" to the work of the poet (1986: 901). In other words, the rules that govern the syntactical order of the sentence are established to create a structured, logical thinking process. If the poet aims at representing reality which is not orderly or does not conform to the conventional rules of logic, the syntactical order will constitute an obstacle. The only way to create a poem which will successfully represent the unordered nature of reality, its moments of erratic activity which does not conform to societal conventions, is to reject or disrupt the syntax. This is not only true for syntactical rules of language, but also to the formal rules of conventionally structured poetry. By incorporating unconventional typographical arrangements into his works, Williams succeeded in creating poems which explore experiences unabridged and unfiltered by social conventions.

One example of Williams' typographical experiments aimed at enhancing the aesthetic experience of reading poetry can be found in Book III of his epic poem *Paterson*, in the fragment where the lyrical speaker, who is a medical doctor, examines a female patient who fell victim to sexual assault. It seems especially worth studying since it showcases how the typographical arrangement of the poem can guide the reading process in a way that reflects the violence and discomfort related to its subject matter. The fragment begins with the lines: "Haunted by your beauty (I said),/ exalted and not easily to be attained, the/ whole scene is haunted:/ Take of your clothes,/(I said)/ Haunted, the quietness of your face/is a quietness real/out of no book." (Williams 1992: 105). The lyrical speaker describes the scene of the patient being presented to him for medical examination. Crucially, she is *being presented* and not presenting herself, since throughout the fragment she remains utterly passive and uncooperative. This passivity finds its reflection in the quietness described by the speaker as "haunted." The doctor

orders his patient to undress quickly, while her "beauty is attainable," and grows increasingly frustrated and angry when the patient does not follow his instructions. The repeated phrase finally becomes capitalized in the lines "(Then, my anger rising) TAKE OFF YOUR/CLOTHES! I didn't ask you," which unequivocally implies a shouted, aggressive command (Williams 1992: 105). The aggression is once more emphasized when the frustrated doctor tells the rape victim that she smells "like a whore," insulting her (Williams 1992: 106). In her illuminating study of the motif of the female body in Williams' oeuvre, Schnur has aptly noted that while other parts of *Paterson* are frequently interrupted by historical references and sections of prose, this fragment remains uninterrupted, which "heightens its urgency and violence," resembling that of "the sexual violence [the patient] has already suffered (2016: 182)." Indeed, the unobstructed momentum of the verse coupled with the wish of the doctor to "attain" the patient's "beauty," as well as his aggressive insistence that she undress in a quick manner, further emphasized by his insult towards her, turns the medical examination into a violating act. The lyrical speaker's attempt at medical inspection reads as aggressive, erratic, and uncomfortable.

However, the characteristics of the unfolding situation also find their reflection in the arrangement of the text. Indeed, the poem's structure greatly contributes to the discomforting character of the scene described by the speaker. The first line of the encounter, "Haunted by your beauty (I said)," is slightly indented in relation to the next two. Then, the fourth line, "Take off your clothes," is positioned far to the right, only to be completed by the next line "(I said)," positioned far to the left. The following two lines follow a similar pattern to the first three, with the first being slightly indented. However, the following sixth line "out of no book" once more takes the position on the right side of the page, this time isolated from the adjacent lines by a blank space indicating that it functions as a stand-alone stanza (Williams 1992: 105). This irregular pattern of lines and stanzas being arranged into varying positions in relation to each other

continues throughout the fragment. The arrangement prevents the reader from following the poem with their eyes in a steady manner, as they constantly have to look at different points in the text to find the beginning of a following line. For just a moment a pattern seems to emerge within the stanza starting with the line "Put them on the chair", whereas an indented line is followed by a non-indented long line and then by a short one. However, at this point Williams intentionally elongates the sixth line of the stanza, "yourself   .   ." with two widely spaced apart periods, so that the eyes of the reader scan the line forward before rapidly shifting their gaze to the next line (Williams 1992: 105). Therefore, the line is followed by the reader differently than the earlier non-indented short line in the pattern. Thus, the seeming momentary regularity of line arrangement does not change the irregularity of the reading process. It remains unpredictable, with the reader still being forced to follow the text in an unnatural manner. Thus, the reading process of the poem, made chaotic by its textual arrangement, begins to resemble the erratic and discomforting nature of the scene.

Moreover, this effect is further emphasized by the poet's frequent use of enjambments, which introduce line breaks where the reader might not expect them to be on the basis of syntax. Such is the case in the stanza: "(Then, my anger rising) TAKE OFF YOUR/ CLOTHES! I didn't ask you/ to take off your skin./I said your clothes, your clothes. You smell/like a whore. I ask you to bathe in my/ opinions, the astonishing virtue of your/ lost body (I said)" (Williams 1992: 105-6). The line breaks cut across syntactic units, ending every line but the last one with an unfinished phrase. This device contributes to the erratic nature of the reading experience. It creates a text which reads very unnaturally, that is in a way which does not resemble usual speaking or reading patterns. It is a manipulation of language through the means of textual arrangement. By disrupting the syntax's flow with line breaks, Williams disrupts the reading pattern. It becomes fragmented, constantly interrupted, just as the sentences of the poem are. The reading experience thus

becomes even more erratic and strange. This reflects the strangeness of the situation—the discomfortingly aggressive medical examination.

Thus, the analysis of the discussed fragment of *Paterson* provides an important insight into the role of text structure in poetry. It showcases how adopting an unconventional typographical arrangement can make the form of the poem correspond to its subject matter and enhance the aesthetic experience of poetry. Through a well-thought-out structuring of the poem's text, the poet can manipulate both the reading process and the language in a way that will evoke emotions corresponding to those conveyed through the semantic properties of the work's linguistic content. The reader's engagement with poetry can be enriched by formal devices which liken the reading experience to the emotional experience of the situation described by the speaker. Similarly to Cummings, through typographical arrangement Williams influences the reading process to solicit a more profound engagement with poetry in the reader and evoke specific emotions.

4. Multiplying modes of communication
   – Mary Ellen Solt

Modernism was not the only artistic movement in the twentieth century which took liking to experimentation with unconventional text structure. Perhaps it is the representatives of the concrete poetry movement who took textual arrangement most seriously and saw its full potential as a poetic tool. Concrete poetry can be defined as verse that "exploits the potential of the written word as both a unit of linguistic meaning and a purely visual symbol" (Fox 2007). In other words, it is a poetry that relies heavily on the text structure of a poem to communicate meaning through nonlinguistic visual signs. The aforementioned Simmias of Rhodes and George Herbert might be seen as early precursors to the mode of writing that was to emerge as a distinct artistic movement in the 1950s, spearheaded by poets whom Mary Ellen Solt describes as "committed to a new way of

making poems, which would free the poet from the line as his basic structural unit" (Solt 1970a: 422). This new mode of writing would place special emphasis on unconventional text structure. Solt is among the most prominent American representatives of the movement. In addition to her work as a poet, she had a significant impact in promoting concrete poetry, notably by editing the book *Concrete Poetry: A World View,* a publication considered to be "one of the major anthologies of the form" (Fox 2007). Her own works constitute a fascinating study of how the interplay of textual form and linguistic content can inform the meaning of the poem in a way that could never be achieved by conventionally structured poetry.

One particularly interesting poem by Solt is "Forsythia." Its text is arranged into the shape of a forsythia shrub, with the capitalized word "FORSYTHIA" forming the base of the plant. Out of each letter of the word springs up an offshoot in the form of a vertically oriented sequence of letters, which form words when combined with the corresponding letter of the base word—the vertical sequence "ORSYTHIA," which is an offshoot of the letter "F" in the base word forms the word "FORSYTHIA," the vertical sequence "UT" which is an offshoot of the letter "O" forms the word "OUT" and so on. Those offshoots thus form the lines of the poem, becoming a somewhat curious acrostic arrangement, which read "FORSYTHIA OUT RACE SPRING'S YELLOW TELEGRAM HOPE INSISTS ACTION" (Solt 1970b: 243). From each of these words then spring out other offshoots of various length. These are composed of singular letters corresponding to the one at the very base. For example, out of the sequence "ORSYTHIA," beginning with the letter "F" at the base, spring up the letters "F" (Solt 1970b: 243). These singular letters are interconnected with lines of varying length, forming long chains which spread out on the page in irregular directions, though usually with a general tendency to reach upwards. Sometimes they intersect, forming denser clusters of letters. This typographical arrangement achieves the effect of making the structure of the text resemble a blooming forsythia plant. It is a shrub

which produces clusters of bright yellow flowers along the stems while in bloom (Jauron 2005). The long offshoots form the stems, while the letters positioned within them form the clusters of flowers.

This complex text structure is more than just an exercise in unconventional poetic form. Through the innovative typographical methods used by Solt, the poem offers a unique insight into the nature of communication. The resemblance to the titular plant is inherent to understanding the full meaning of the poem. In the natural world, forsythias indicate the advent of spring, as they bloom in early April, even before their leaves are developed (Jauron 2005). In fact, as noted by DeWolf, the wide adoption of the plant in horticulture is owed to "their ability to produce an abundant display of bright color so early in the season" (1971: 41). This means that the blooming of the forsythia shrub is a natural indicator of the coming spring. This function of the plant is a crucial motif of the poem, which describes the plant as "SPRING'S YELLOW TELEGRAM" (Solt 1970b: 243). It is spring's telegram, because it communicates a message from the season, announcing its arrival. Of course, the yellow hue of the telegram refers to the color of the plant while in bloom. The linguistic content of the poem is also written as a telegram would be, with an economical use of words and omissions of grammatical elements which are not indispensable to convey meaning. For example, the speaker does not say "FORSYTHIA *IS* OUT," but only "FORSYTHIA OUT" (Solt 1970b: 243). Reed proposes that the full telegraphic message should be understood thusly: the forsythia is out, indicating the coming of spring, and one should race "to see this harbinger of a new season of growth," "a vivid and colorful missive after a gray dead winter" that instills hope and "provokes a corresponding stir of energy" (2016). This interpretation seems accurate. The poem is a message which informs the reader that spring has come and that the coming of this season brings hope and the renewed energy to take action.

The poem, taking the linguistically reductive form of a telegram, functions as an announcement of spring, just as forsythia does in the natural world. This is why its structural resemblance to the plant is so crucial. It is a statement on the multiplicity of ways in which a message can be communicated. Within one text we see the same meaning being conveyed simultaneously through language and a non-linguistic visual sign, that is through the typographical image of a forsythia. Additionally, as Reed keenly observes, the lines connecting the singular letters into chains resembling the stems of a forsythia, "on closer inspection, turn out to be a mix of dots and dashes that correspond to the Morse code for that particular repeating letter" (2016). This means that if one were to decode this message, they would find all the letters necessary to spell out the word "forsythia," conveying the same concept as both the structure and the words of the poem. This presents yet another form of communication for the reader's consideration, multiplying the number of channels through which the message of the poem can be received and understood.

In her article on visual poetry, Smith positions Solt among the writers who "are choosing to communicate outside of language in order to demonstrate the limits of language, to signal new systems of communications, and to challenge readers in their relationship to the written word/work" (2020: 236). She analyzes a different poem by Solt, "Moonshot Sonnet," in which the poet omits verbal, linguistic elements entirely and composes a sonnet out of nonalphabetic, nonlinguistic markings (2020: 241). "In encountering a non-linguistic poem," claims Smith, "the reader is required to question their relationship to reading, to sound, and to communication" (2020: 254). Such questioning is also prompted by reading "Forsythia," even though, unlike "Moonshot Sonnet," the poem certainly isn't non-linguistic. In fact, its verbal elements remain crucial, even as the work captivates the reader with its striking visual form.

In order to classify "Forsythia" one might find it useful to employ the set of categories developed by Barry to categorize

poems which are specifically designed to employ visuality in their production of meaning. Among such poems Barry distinguishes three categories: "Verbal/Visual", "Visual/Verbal", and "Visual/Verbalist". The distinguishing principle between these three types is the balance between the significance of visuality and the significance of language in informing the poem's meaning. While the linguistic aspect of the text is dominant in Verbal/Visual poems, pieces belonging to Visual/Verbalist poems forego the use of language entirely and base their whole interpretative power on visuals with only a "residual trace" of the verbal element. In relation to these two types, the Visual/Verbal one functions as an intermediate category, "in which the visual [element] is dominant and the verbal [element] secondary" (Barry 2012: 73). Barry explains that in poems of this type, "we first see a visual design which happens to be made of words, and then read the words, if they can be made out" (2012: 77). This intermediate category seems to be the most appropriate classification of Solt's "Forsythia," since despite its strong reliance on visuals, linguistic elements remain an aspect of key importance in interpreting the piece. This relatively balanced interplay of visual and verbal elements in "Forsythia" showcases the multiplicity of modes in which communication can be conveyed and registered simultaneously. The poem inspires the reader to question not only how variously meaning can be communicated, but also just how complex the phenomenon of communication itself really is.

Thus, Solt's "Forsythia" emerges as an artistic study of communication, perceiving signs, and understanding what they imply. It explores the multiplicity of ways in which a message can be put forward to its recipient. Solt creates a complex literary composition integrating linguistic and non-linguistic signs. Different modes of conveying meaning intersect in the poem. They correspond to each other and cooperate in an effort to announce the coming of spring, while still being able to achieve this goal independently. Unconventional structure plays a crucial role in creating this effect, since the shape of the text immediately

points the reader's attention to the correspondence of the visual sign, the shape of a forsythia shrub, and the linguistic sing, the word "FORSYTHIA." The reader is invited to ponder on the relationship of the typographically represented object and the linguistic signifiers that its image is composed of. Structuring the poem in this way also allowed Solt to subtly incorporate Morse code into the text, incorporating yet another mode of communication into her artistic study. The analyzed poem showcases how adopting unconventional text structure allows the poet to create compositions of much greater complexity than the conventional organization would allow. Moreover, it shows how deeply intertwined the role of non-linguistic and linguistic communication can be, an observation which has important implications for both the authors and readers of experimental poetry. In other words, it exemplifies to what great extent text structure can cooperate with language to convey the meaning of the poem. By arranging the text in a deliberate way, the poet can communicate the same meaning simultaneously through more than one channel – not only linguistic, but also visual. Thus, they can enhance the aesthetic experience provided to the reader.

5. Presenting complex issues – Anthony Cody

Experiments in unconventional text structure continue to emerge in contemporary American poetry. Exploring ways of introducing innovation in the arts seems to be crucial, as the artist must necessarily adapt his craft to cultural and technological developments. Text structure becomes a sphere in which they can be addressed and reflected. For example, the increasing importance of information technology led to the emergence of code poetry, that is a poetry which is either written in a programming language or otherwise "integrate[s] computer code in its overall aesthetic" (Rodríguez 2021: 262). Such phenomena showcase a need for poets to adapt and develop new techniques that will reflect the realities of rapid technological advancement and informatization of everyday life. However, it is not only new technology which poetry has to adapt to. The new forms of societal

discourse, shaped by the instantaneous flow of information cu-
rated to conform with the values and tastes of specific audiences
demand the same attention. The poet must learn how to
properly address them. In order to do so, some poets turn to
experimental text structure.

One of such poets is Anthony Cody. In fact, unconventional
text structure seems to be an essential aspect of the author's
poetics. Cody's "use of lineation and arrangement as a form of
division and dispersal," argues Campanioni, "indexes both the
excess and scarcity brought by democratic capitalism, register-
ing the absences and omissions intrinsic to any operation of
representation, as well as to the pathways and divergences of
migration and dispossession that have been produced in its
wake" (2024: 33). Thus, text structure functions as a key ele-
ment of the social commentary which the author's poetry pro-
vides. In his book of poetry *Borderland Apocrypha,* Cody struc-
tures multiple poems as diagrams, which connect poetic verse
with historical, legal and cultural references to create compel-
ling artistic studies of the experience of Mexicans and Mexican-
Americans in the USA, with emphasis on the unfair treatment
they have historically experienced and continue to experience to
this day. "In line I am a lot of things, and since I am a lot of
things I am everything he cannot imagine" is one of the poems
from the book which adopts this diagrammatic structure. The
work is composed of the titular sentence and four sub-poems,
which branch down and remain connected to it by straight ver-
tical lines. Each sub-poem corresponds to a specific underlined
part of the sentence. Thus, the poem functions as a diagram.
The lines chart the flow of the poem from specific parts of the
sentence to the stanzas, seemingly independent from each other
as textual units. The stanzas continue the fragments of the sen-
tence and consequently develop their depth. This reflects the
complicated nature of the experience of the lyrical speaker. The
sentence expressing the complexity of the speaker's identity as
a person of Mexican descent in America becomes complex itself
through the diagrammatic arrangement, as each underlined

fragment thereof is provided with depth by the sub-poem charted from it. In her review of *Borderland Apocrypha*, Pérez notices that "the speaker's identity is inextricable from the history and politics in the book" (2020). In the analyzed poem, the textual structure of the piece contributes greatly to conveying the idea of this inextricability to the reader. As Moran explains, Cody's "diagrams organize and map out the relationship between dissimilar, or seemingly disconnected forces such as personal history, cultural stereotyping, and historical violence" (2022: 9). Indeed, all these different influences take part in the creation of the speaker's identity and experience, and they are all being addressed by Cody in different sub-poems, which ultimately merge into the overhanging sentence. Thus, the diagrammatic form provides a set of personal, historical and political references with a discernible character of interconnectedness and complexity.

In fact, "In line I am a lot of things, and since I am a lot of things I am everything he cannot imagine" is so complex that the analysis of the entirety of the poem's content should be addressed in a separate, dedicated article. Therefore, this paper will focus on only two of its sub-poems. The first and third sub-poems emerge as most interesting from the perspective of typographical arrangement, as their text is structured to represent racist narratives and their impact on the perceived identity of the speaker. After the first two lines, the first sub-poem becomes divided by a blank space which isolates the word "you" from the rest of the poem, visualizing the idea of the alienation of the other. After the third line this blank space divides the text into two separate structural units, parallel to each other. One is composed of the single word "you," the other is a column composed of lines "cross. you/ carry. you/ quiet. you/ come. you/ invite others" (Cody 2020: 19). The repetition of the word "you" coupled with the words "cross," "carry," "quiet," and "come" is crucial. As Moran rightly observes, the words "reproduce the semantics of border crossing narratives," such as crossing the border illegally and encouraging "chain migration" of countless

other immigrants (2022: 8). Indeed, they are reminiscent of the semantics used in narratives of a migrant invasion supposedly endangering national safety, wealth and demographics, such as are sometimes presented in reports by certain conservative media (Moran 2022: 1). The lines consisting of these words coupled with the word "you" illustrate how the concepts related to illegal border crossings are being assigned to the Mexican or Mexican-American, signified here by the pronoun "you," creating a stereotypical identity. Of course, this identity, developed by media narratives, remains separate from the actual identity of an individual, signified by the unmodified, isolated "you" on the left side of the poem. The individual is made to face the manifold versions of their identity functioning in the cultural discourse informed by racial stereotypes. This is represented by the "you" on the left side facing the sequence of lines with the same pronoun modified by vocabulary evocative of border crossing narratives. Thus, line arrangement is used to present a complex social issue with an economical use of language.

The third sub-poem continues to explore the problem of racist discourse's impact on the ethnic minority member's identity imagined by the majority population. Here Cody uses the motif of a specific racist narrative – that of the great replacement. Duignan explains that the proponents of this conspiracy theory claim that growing nonwhite populations will take control of majority-white countries with the help of the domestic elites, destroying "their host-countries' distinctive cultures and societies," eventually leading to the elimination of the entire white population (2024). Cody likely chose to include the theme of this narrative because it can be easily weaponized against Mexicans and Mexican-Americans in the USA. After all, in 2020, when the poem was written, Hispanics were the nation's largest nonwhite ethnic population and people of Mexican descent at that time formed the majority of that group (Funk 2022). In fact, in the years before the book's publication the theory has been embraced by some media personalities affiliated with outlets targeted towards right-leaning viewers. This helped to disseminate

the narrative among their target audiences, namely conservative Americans (Duignan 2024). The Hispanic population in the United States continues to grow to this day (United 2024), which unfortunately fuels the rhetoric of the proponents of the great replacement theory. Cody's use of the motif of white replacement is not confined to the poem in question, as Moran also identifies it in another part of *Borderland Apocrypha* (2022: 21). The narrative thus seems to be a recurring theme. In the third sub-poem of "In line I am a lot of things and since I am a lot of things I am everything he cannot imagine," the author tries to poetically represent its impact.

It begins with expressions of defiance, such as "not leaving here," "not putting my hands up," "not willing to vacate the premises," so the speaker immediately establishes themselves as unwilling to submit to authority. The third line is composed of repeated phrases "not me" and "not you" (Cody 2020: 19). The spacing between words within the line is smaller than in the adjacent lines. This gives the words the impression of being condensed, crowded, and struggling to be contained. The repeated alternating negation of "me" and "you" in connection with the unusual density of the text resembles a struggle between the two pronouns. Here, unlike in the first sub-poem, "you" refers to the white population, and it is the Hispanic lyrical speaker who speaks in the first person singular. Thus, the line illustrates racial struggle. The potential outcome of this strife is seen in the following lines: "I am I am I am I am I am I am I am I am I am I am I am I am I am I am I am./ The echo of your extinction./ The bones buried./ The month of remembrance uttered in a dead tongue" (Cody 2020: 19). The previous long line composed of the nonwhite "me" and the white "you" is replaced by a similarly long line, where only the nonwhite first person singular remains. This mimics the vision of the great replacement – a multiracial society dominated by the growing minority group, which displaces and eradicates the original ethnic majority.

The speaker then presents this vision as a part of their identity, saying that they are the echo of the white population's

extinction, their buried bones and the advent of the time when the existence of white people will only be remembered as history, through a month dedicated to their commemoration. The "dead tongue," which the lyrical speaker refers to, is English. The expression implies that the English-speaking majority has been displaced by immigrant Spanish speakers. The poem showcases how a racist narrative can eschew the identity of the Other, and cause them to be perceived by the majority as an existential threat. To white Americans who believe in the great replacement, this threat must become synonymous with any Mexican. In other words, in the imagination of those convinced by the theory, being an existential threat becomes an integral part of the Other's identity, framing them as enemies. This phenomenon is especially dangerous in the contemporary cultural climate, since racist theories can be easily disseminated through media targeted at those, with whose viewpoints such narratives might align, generating racial hatred. The danger of racial violence is still felt by minority populations. The lines of Cody's diagram, which connect the sub-poems with the titular sentence, are shaped like gallows, which signify lynching. This resemblance has also been noted by Moran (2022: 9). The gallows become a structural element of the poem, reflecting constant awareness of the threat of racial violence in the experience of an ethnic minority member. Once again, the poet uses the poem's diagrammatic arrangement to convey meaning through a non-linguistic device – the shapes created by lines embedded in the text.

The poetry of Cody constitutes an excellent study of text structure as an artistic tool. The diagrammatic verse allows the poet to visually illustrate the complexity of the addressed social issues, which find their representation in an innovative form of poetics depending heavily on typographical arrangement. The fact that contemporary poets still choose to experiment with the structure of the text reflects not only an underlying need for poetry to adapt and look for new ways to engage with social issues, but also the suitability of formal arrangements to convey

meaning in a more impactful way than language. Perhaps this is because of the aesthetic shock that such arrangements evoke in the reader. In the age of an instantaneous flow of information, a visually nondistinctive statement might simply get lost among other communication. However, a statement whose textual organization distinguishes itself from all others and shocks the recipient through its formal arrangement will draw focus and demand that the reader pay attention and study it closely. It is possible that now more than ever poets need to take full advantage of the unconventional text structure to draw attention to their work. This is especially true for poetry that aims to address pressing social issues, which is exactly the kind of literature that Cody's *Borderland Apocrypha* belongs to.

6. Conclusions

In conclusion, the analysis presented here of selected poems by American authors clearly indicates that unconventional text arrangement informs the meaning of the poem and the aesthetic experience produced by it. Adopting an experimental approach to typography allows the poet to more accurately represent the experience of the speaker, as exemplified by Cummings' poem, "i". Specific typographical arrangements can also allow the writer to influence the reading process in a way that reflects the emotional character of situations described by the lyrical speaker, as showcased by the analyzed excerpt of Williams' *Paterson.* Moreover, the study of Solt's "Forsythia" reveals how unconventional text structure can be used to incorporate multiple modes of communication in the poem, allowing for the creation of complex artistic compositions. Finally, the analysis of Cody's poem from *Borderland Apocrypha* offers insight into how experimental textual arrangements can provide the means to present complex social phenomena with an economical use of language and address contemporary issues in a way that will most effectively assure the reader's engagement with the verse. All of the analyzed poems succeed in achieving the defining role of poetry

delineated by the definition mentioned at the beginning of this article, that is "evoking the concentrated imaginative awareness of experience or a specific emotional response" (Nemerov 2024). However, they do so both through linguistic and non-linguistic means. In the analyzed poems, text and language function on equal grounds, both playing a crucial role in conveying meaning and evoking an aesthetic experience. Therefore, text structure emerges as a tool that can be just as important to the poet as language is.

References

Barnstone, Tony (2014). "Ivory towers and war Machines: William Carlos Williams and the humanities under fire". *William Carlos Williams Review* 31/1: 33–52. *JSTOR.* www.jstor.org/stable/ 10.5325/willcarlwillrevi.31.1.0033.

Barry, Peter (2012). "Concrete canticles: A new taxonomy of iconicity in poetry". *American, British & Canadian Studies* 18: 73–86. *EBSCOhost*, research-1ebsco-1com-1uda8izmi0062.hansolo.bg.ug. edu.pl/linkprocessor/plink?id=9a30d846-ce59-3fcf-aa8c-72b41 246d1dc.

Barry, Peter (2017). *Beginning Theory: An Introduction to Literary and Cultural Theory.* Fourth edition. Manchester: Manchester University Press.

Brown, C. C., W. P. Ingoldsby (1972). "George Herbert's 'Easter Wings'". *Huntington Library Quarterly* 35/2: 131–142. *JSTOR.* www.jstor.org/stable/3817021.

Campanioni, Chris (2024). "A different history may emerge: On Anthony Cody's *The Rendering*". *American Poetry Review* 53/3: 33–35. *EBSCOhost*, research-1ebsco-1com-1uda8izmi0062.hansolo. bg.ug.edu.pl/linkprocessor/plink?id=0b77868c-2f8d-386d-b86b -6bcb0c38f3d1.

Cody, Anthony (2020). "In line I am a lot of things and since I am a lot of things I am everything he cannot imagine". In: *Borderland Apocrypha.* Oakland: Omnidawn, 19.

Cummings, E. E. (1968). "i". *Complete Poems: 1913–1962.* New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc., 388.

DeWolf, Gordon P., Robert S. Hebb (1971). "The story of Forsythia". *Arnoldia* 31/2: 41–63. *JSTOR.* www.jstor.org/stable/42953867.

Drucker, Johanna (2006). "Graphical readings and visual aesthetics of textuality". *Text* 16: 267–276. *JSTOR.* www.jstor.org/stable/ 30227973.

Duignan, Brian (2024). "Replacement theory". *Encyclopedia Britannica.* www.britannica.com/topic/replacement-theory.

Fox, Margalit (2007). "Mary Ellen Solt, poet of words and shapes, dead at 86". *The New York Times.* www.nytimes.com/2007/07/03/ arts/03solt.html.

Funk, Cary, Mark Hugo Lopez (2022). "A brief statistical portrait of U.S. Hispanics". *Pew Research Center.* www.pewresearch.org/ science/2022/06/14/a-brief-statistical-portrait-of-u-s-hispanics/.

Hayles, Katherine N. (2004). "Print is flat, code is deep: The importance of media-specific analysis". *Poetics Today* 24/1: 67–90. *Duke University Press.* www.doi.org/10.1215/03335372-25-1-67.

Herbert, George. "Easter Wings". *Poetry Foundation.* www.poetryfound ation.org/poems/44361/easter-wings.

Jauron, Richard (2005). "Forsythias – Bright yellow harbingers of spring". *Iowa State University Extension and Outreach.* www.ex tension. iastate.edu/news/2005/apr/apr0506.htm.

Kidder, Rushworth M. (1979). "Cummings and Cubism: The influence of the visual arts on Cummings' early poetry". *Journal of Modern Literature* 7/2: 255–291. *JSTOR.* www.jstor.org/stable/3831211.

Moore, Patrick (1986). "William Carlos Williams and the modernist attack on logical syntax". *ELH* 53/4: 895–916. *JSTOR.* www.jstor. org/stable/2873179.

Moran, Matthew (2022). "Cross/borders: The transcultural poet as counterwitness in Anthony Cody's *Borderland Apocrypha*". *New American Studies Journal* 73: 1–27. nasjournal.org/NASJ/article/ view/601/1185.

Nemerov, Howard (2024). "Poetry". *Encyclopedia Brittanica.* www.bri tannica.com/art/poetry.

Pérez, Emily (2020). "Borderland Apocrypha by Anthony Cody". *RHINO Reviews* 3/6, unpaginated. *RHINO Poetry*, www.rhinopoetry. org/reviews/borderland-apocrypha-by-anthony-cody-reviewed- by-emily-perez.

Peterson, Rai (1995). "Readable silence: Blank space in E. E. Cummings' poetry". *Spring* 4: 45–56. *JSTOR.* www.jstor.org/stable/43913207.

Reed, Brian (2016). "Mary Ellen Solt's 'Forsythia:' An Appreciation". *Singular Vispo: First Encounters.* Edited by Nico Vassilakis. *Academia.* www.academia.edu/78917158/H_N_Werkman.

Rodríguez, Jorge Forero (2021). "Code, poetry and freedom". *xCoAx 2021: Proceedings of the 9th Conference on Computation, Communication, Aesthetics & X.* Edited by Miguel Carvalhais, Mario Verdicchio, Luísa Ribas, André Rangel. Porto: i2ADS, 261–276. *Academia.* www.academia.edu/61236188/Code_Poetry_and_Free dom ?sm=b.

Schnur, Kate (2016). "'I found another to admire': The thing of the female body in William Carlos Williams's medical narratives". *William Carlos Williams Review* 33/1–2: 172–188. *JSTOR.* www.jstor.org/stable/10.5325/willcarlwillrevi.33.1-2.0172.

Simias (2015). "Wings". *Theoriticus. Moschus. Bion.* Edited and translated by Neil Hopkinson. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 564. *Loeb Classical Library.* www.loebclassics.com/view/simias-pattern_poems/2015/pb_LCL028.565.xml.

Smith, Kristen (2020). "Un-sounding: A new method for processing non-linguistic poetry". *English Studies in Canada* 46/2–4: 235–257. *EBSCOhost.* research-1ebsco-1com-1uda8izmi0062.hansolo.bg.ug.edu.pl/linkprocessor/plink?id=6dbbbe8d-5fd0-31bb-8f07-2cda32d0429f.

Smith, William (ed.) (1867). *Dictionary of Greek and Roman Biography and Mythology.* Vol. III. Boston: Little Brown and Company. *The Internet Archive.* www.archive.org/details/DictionaryOfGreekAndRomanBiographyAndMythology/Dictionary%20of%20Greek%20and%20Roman%20Biography%20and%20Mythology%20-%20Vol%203/page/n1/mode/2up.

Solt, Mary Ellen (1970). "Concrete poetry". *Books Abroad* 44/3: 421–425. *JSTOR.* www.jstor.org/stable/40124559.

Solt, Mary Ellen (1970). "Forsythia". *Concrete Poetry: A World View.* Edited by Mary Ellen Solt. Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 243.

United States Census Bureau (2024). "New estimates highlight differences in growth between the US Hispanic and Non-Hispanic

populations". *United States Census*. www.census.gov/newsroom/press-releases/2024/population-estimates-characteristics.html.

Whitlock, Baird W. (1986). "The sacramental poetry of George Herbert". *South Central Review* 3/1: 37–49. *JSTOR.* www.jstor.org/stable/3189124.

Williams, William Carlos (1992). *Paterson*. Edited and prefaced by Christopher MacGowan. Revised edition. New York: New Directions Publishing Corporation.

Adrian Trojak
ORCID: 0009-0006-3549-2895
Faculty of Languages
University of Gdańsk
ul. Wita Stwosza 51
80-308 Gdańsk
Poland
adrian.trojak@phdstud.ug.edu.pl