

Vertical Poetics: Robert Lax and the Question of Form

垂直诗学：罗伯特·拉克斯与形式问题

By

Dr Nagy Rashwan (MA. Ph.D. DeMontfort University, UK)

Associate Professor of English Literature,

English Department, Faculty of Arts, Damanhour University

nagyrashwan@art.dmu.edu.eg

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الملخص:

يناقش هذا المقال أعمال الشاعر والفنان البصري الأمريكي روبرت لاكس (1915-2000) الذي تشكل تجاربه الشعرية فيما يسميه هذا المقال "الأدبيات الرأسية" منذ منتصف القرن العشرين إضافة فردية خالصة في تاريخ الأدبيات الإنجليزية، حيث يطرح المقال ما يبين أن هذه الفردية الإبداعية لا تعتمد فقط على المؤثرات البصرية المرئية للكلمات المكتوبة على الصفحات وحسب كما هو الحال في معظم الشعر البصري ولكن بمغزى أكبر علي الطرق الخاصة جدا التي يتوظف بها كلٌّ من الشكل والمحتوى ليثري أحدهما الآخر. فأدبيات لاكس تقدم أساليب شاعرية خاصة جدا؛ تساعد المحتوى في الإعراب عن دقائق الأبعاد البصرية لقصائده بطريقة يجعل منهما أى الشكل والمحتوى ناطقين، كلاهما في الاستقبال، وهو ما يبرر النقص الحاد في الرؤى النقدية التي تعرضت لها أعمال لاكس عبر العقود الماضية. فبدلاً من تعريف لاكس كجزء من أدبيات الشعر المجسم أو حتى البصري بشكل عام بكل ما يشمله من

أشكال وأطياف مثلما فعل القليل من النقاد، يقدم هذا المقال ما يفيد أن أعمال لاكس تقدم منهاجًا فريدًا من النسج الشعري، تمتزج فيه وتختلط الأبعاد التقليدية والحديثة ، والبصرية واللفظية، والمجردة والحسية معًا في معادلة شعرية خاصة جدًا تحقق الدهشة الجمالية في التلقي وإحساس الروعة والاكتشاف في أثناء القراءة.

الكلمات الدالّة: روبرت لاكس، الشعر البصري، الشعر التجريبي، أدبيات القرن العشرين، شعر ما-بعد-الحداثة .

Abstract:

This article discusses the work of the American poet and visual artist Robert Lax (1915-2000) whose experiments with ‘Vertical Poetics’ since the mid-twentieth century have marked what might be seen as a unique aesthetic endeavor in the history of English poetry. As this article will argue, such a position of uniqueness does not rest on the visual effects of the written words on the page alone as most experimental Visual Poetry does, but, more significantly, on the very special ways in which both form and content complement one another. Arguably, Lax’s poetics offer identifiably particular ways of employing content to convey the delicacies of the optic dimensions of his poems in such a way as to make both continually active in reception. This is partially the reason behind the utter lack of critical appraisal which Lax’s poetics have been exposed to over the past few decades. Rather than simply identifying Lax’s poetics with Concrete or, more generally, Visual Poetics, with their many denominations and forms, as few critics have done, this article will argue that it offers a very particular method of composition that integrates the conventional and the non-conventional, the visual and the verbal, the optical, the abstract and the linguistic, all together in a unique poetic formulae inspiring sublime feelings of wonder, surprise, and discovery.

Key Words: Robert Lax, Visual Poetry, Experimental poetry, Twentieth Century Poetics, Postmodern Poetry.

1- Who is Robert Lax?

“The last unacknowledged major poet of the post-sixties generation” (Kostelanetz 6), is perhaps one of the best statements to describe Robert Lax and his poetic’s cultural value. It was written by *The New York Times*’ columnist Richard Kostelanetz in February of 1978 with other more definite descriptions of Lax as “among America’s greatest experimental poets” (6). However, as long-term friend, biographer and critic S. T. Georgiou suggests:

A cloud of obscurity, of "unknowing," has veiled much of Lax's life and work. Though among America's greatest minimalist and abstract poets, his "withdrawal from the world" has partly resulted in this lack of attention and widespread critical acclaim which had never bothered Lax, who for over thirty years made the remote Greek isles of Kalymnos and Patmos his literary and spiritual workshop. Only in the last ten years has an increasing number of titles by and about Lax come to print, helping to cast a more popular light upon the man. (Georgiou web)

Here, Georgiou highlights two important facts surrounding Lax’s life and poetics. Firstly, it highlights the lack of critical attention offered about his work and life for which Lax’s reclusive nature was partially responsible. Secondly, it emphasizes the sort of deep spirituality that colors most of his life and poetic choices as will be apparent in the coming pages.

Born in November 30th 1915, in Olean, New York, Lax joined Columbia University, St Bonaventure College to receive a Bachelor degree in English in 1938. This is where he met many of the then-not-so-famous poets of the *Beat* (Reisman 2) and *Black Mountain* (Theado 10) generations like Jack Kerouac (1922-1969), Allen Ginsberg (1926-1997) and Robert Creeley (1926-2005). More significantly, it is where he met his life-long friend and spiritual companion Thomas Merton (1915-1968); a Christian monk and religious intellectual whose interaction with Lax during their life-long friendship had the greatest of impacts on both their lives. Merton's writings about spirituality and artistic contemplation gained popularity and critical acclaim in the 1950s and 1960s following the publication of his first book *The Seven Storey Mountain* in 1948 in which audience first heard about Robert Lax and his poetic experiments, and in which he comments on Lax as follows:

He was a kind of combination of Hamlet and Elias. A potential prophet, but without rage. A king... A mind full of tremendous and subtle intuitions, and every day he found less and less to say... without embarrassment or nervousness at all, he would often curl his long legs all around a chair, in seven different ways, while he was trying to find a word with which to begin. He talked best sitting on the floor. (173)

As a life-long friend, Merton, as stated above, emphasizes the deep spirituality of Lax's unique personality and his insights into life and the arts. This description summarizes much of Lax's personality and attitude towards life and its many challenges and tribulations. The sort of quietness and calmness of spirit with which Lax, in Merton's description, expresses himself is combined with the sort of "subtle intuitions" evident in his poetic's artistic views and choices. As will be discussed shortly, these traits in Lax's

personality is revealed poetically in his work's spiritual themes, in the kind of hermetic wisdom deployed by its content, and through his unique choice of the general vertical form perhaps to represent the relationship to the universe above.

From the year 1941 to 1948, Lax had occupied a number of teaching and editorial positions in the *New Yorker*, The University of North Carolina, The Time and Parade in New York city, Connecticut College for Women, and Hollywood Goldwyn Studios' writer's teams. He also received a fellowship to study philosophy at The University of North Carolina, and began a dissertation on the works of Thomas Aquinas. In 1950, he finalized his last version of his book-long poem *Circus of the Sun* published by Journeyman Press nine years later. Both collections of poems *Tree*, and *The Juggler*, were published by *The Hand Press* during this period. Lax founded the magazine *Pax* which ran to 16 issues in which he produced major parts of his work including *Two Poems*, *Three Poems*, *Four Poems*, *Five Poems*, *27th and 4th*, and *The Anxious Man*. The final issues of *Pax* published many more of Lax's poems including *Two Fables*, and *The Sea*, and *A Problem in Design* in 1961, and *A Square Canvas* in 1962. This was the year in which Lax had published some of his most significant work including *New Poems*, which was followed by *Sea and Sky* in 1965 and *Black and White* in 1966.

In the mid-1960s, Lax had moved to live permanently on the Greek Island of Kalymnos and then on Patmos, where he remained for 35 years (Lippin web). This was his retreat from life, his special recluse from the noise of the world. It suited his personality to live near the sea with simple surroundings and possessions. Working as an English teacher in a local school, the life on the island seemed to have suited Lax's natural inclination towards contemplation and peace of mind. It seemed to have given him the chance to distance himself from the struggling endeavors of the bustling city life and its materialistic gains.

During the 1970s, Lax met the Swiss graphic designer and photographer Bernard Moosbrugger with whom he founded *Pendo Verlag Press* dedicated to the publication of his work translated into German which opened up a whole new spectrum of audience for his poetics in Europe. Around 1987, Lax started an archive for his work at the university of St. Bonaventure in which he eventually became the first visiting professor of poetics, and by which he was awarded an honorary doctorate in 1990. Two years earlier he had published *33 poems* by New Directions. In 1996 he also published *Love Had A Compass* by Groove books. He returned home to Olean in 2000 following the re-publication of his *Circus Days and Nights* by *Overlook*, where he quietly passed away in his family's home.

There are very few critical works that discusses Lax's life, but not so much his work. Two books are the most prominent; *The Way of The Dreamcatcher: Spirit Lessons with Robert Lax: Poet, Peacemaker*, Sage (2002) by Georgiou S. T., and *Pure Act: The Uncommon Life of Robert Lax* (2015) by Michael N. McGregor. Both are, more or less, biographies of the poet and his life including his work. To date, no serious discussion of Lax's poetics in the context of 20th century's aesthetic experimentation has been conducted (McGregor 15).

Lax's spirituality and individual way of looking at life and beauty are reflected in the choices of poetics both formally and thematically, which nearly all tend to be about the core wisdom of love, goodness and living in harmony with nature.

2- Critical Reception

In the last 23 years since Lax has passed away, most of the approaches to his work has remained largely confined to discussions of his life and the wisdom of his spirituality. Mostly blogs and book reviews, such articles simply reiterate the significance of his life choices and its educational

impact on his close friends and biographers mentioned in the two books above. J.S. Porter for example focuses on the effects of Lax's spirituality on his life-long friend Thomas Merton arguing that "Merton and Lax constantly encourage each other...taking keen and sustained interest in each other's work. Merton believed that *Circus of the Sun* was one of the great book-length poems of the century, and Lax believed that Merton's work was unparalleled in its depth and reach" (57). In an earlier slightly larger article, Porter comments: "He wants to make a thing—that's what he calls his poems, they're things, as if stones — that will stand repeated contemplation: a thing that will stand long contemplation" (9).

Similarly, Robert Hirschfield, sees his work as a "reordering of the accepted verbal cosmology" but largely echoing Lax's life where "there was no seam between walking, praying and writing" (4). Again, Robert Stone suggests Lax's work invites "intense concentration on individual words and syllables" and surveys his major publication and life events. Jeannine Mizingou is another commentator on Lax's life and spirituality who follows, more or less, the same path of concentrating on the life story and spiritual journey of Robert Lax, rather than on the poetics of his work. She argues:

Throughout his poetry, Lax is highly affirmative of humanity, life, and the divine. In a world where humanity has become more violent and destructive to humankind and nature than in any other era in history, poetry that is unceasing in its celebration, affirmation, and praise of humanity, life, and the divine is likely to be shunned. (99-100)

While such approaches serve very much to bring forth the extraordinary life of this pioneer experimental poet, they seem to avoid some fundamental questions regarding the nature of his

aesthetics. Those questions naturally concern his poetic philosophy of composition and the more general context of 20th century's experimental innovations by major poetic figures such as Stéphane Mallarmé (1842-1898) and Guillaume Apollinaire (1880-1918) as perhaps the very first experimental poets to utilize the typographical or visual aspects of language in their poetics. Other visionary 20th century poets include William Butler Yeats (1865- 1939) of the modern movement, Ezra Pound (1885- 1972) of Imagism, and Haroldo de Campos (1929=2033) of the Brazilian Niogandres poetic group whose experiments seem to have influenced many future generations of poets. It is ironic that some of those critics who offered biographies of Lax's life, have themselves resented this lack of critical attention to his work. As one of them has delicately put it, Lax's work is "not widely enough known or appreciated" (Georgiou 20).

3- A Vertical Poem: Definition and Difference.

It is perhaps important at this particular juncture to offer for analysis a sample of Lax's poetry in order to ascertain the most general characteristics of his poetics and demonstrate what this article means by Vertical Poetics. The following poem by Lax was first published in 1970:

what if
you like
to draw
big flowers,

but what
if some
sage has
told you
that
there is
nothing
more
beautiful

nothing
more
beautiful

than a
straight
line
?

what should
you draw:
big flowers?
straight lines?

i think
you should
draw

1958, 1961, 1969. This
version first publ. in "R. L.: Fables",
ed. by Emil Antonucci with
Laxman Press, New York 1970

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big flowers
big flowers

big flowers
big flowers

big flowers
big flowers

big flowers
big flowers

until
they become
a straight
line.

(Lax 144-5),

“*A Problem in Design*” seems to be a folding poem. It is a poem, in other words, that seems to unfold vertically, or un-scrolls physically as readers discover its content one line at a time. Despite its wholesome appearance on the page, its reading seems to necessitate its vertical unfolding from top to bottom as readers roll their eyes on those very pages. Its content seems to be phased significantly at intervals of one section at a time, entailing *vertical* reading regardless of readership habits. Readers might be inclined to, or used to, a reading where each line, more or less, offers a partially completed sense. With this poem, this does not seem to be the case. By itself, each line seems to be nonsensical until, and unless, reading is completed perhaps to the very end of the poem where these lines as a whole finally make sense. It is as if the poem fundamentally rejects linear reading, insisting only on a vertical wholesome reading in order to make sense both semiotically and aesthetically. Semiotically, the repetition of the phrase “big flower” and the general lay-out of the other words as a straight vertical line, combine in their totality to represent the argument of the poem for the validity of the straight vertical line. Without their whole appearance as such on the page, the poem’s argument would not, it seems, make much sense. Aesthetically speaking, the representation of the straight line by the repetition and the layout of the words seems itself surprising and also beautiful or wonderful.

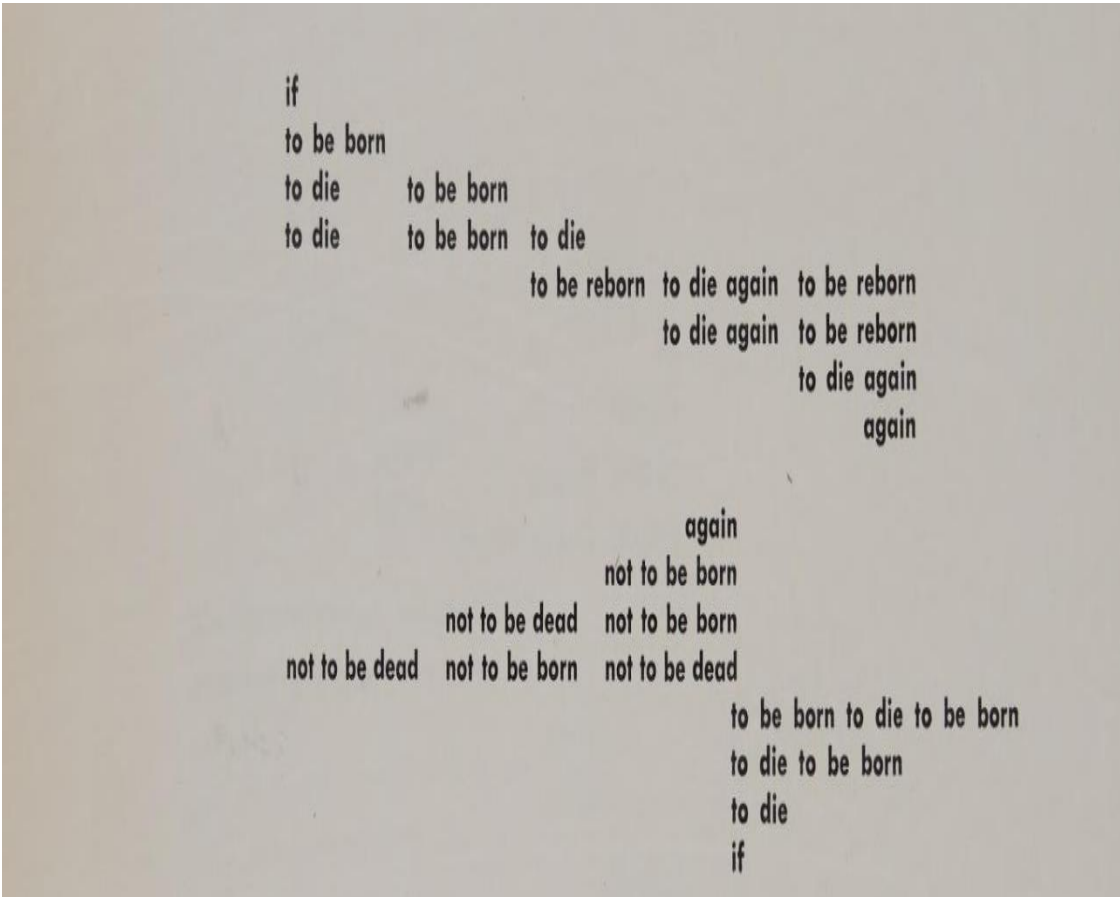
“*A Problem in Design*” seems to truly present a problem in design insofar as it asks about the aesthetic validity of a straight line as the simplest most beautiful premise in design. “Flowers”, as big as can be imagined, and any other object traditionally conceived of as beautiful, would perhaps be even more so when designed straight. This is what the poem seems to argue for: the beauty of what is presentable as straight, particularly in a poetic language where every phrasal repetition consolidating the straightness of its form, adds to its final surprise and beauty. Readers might be surprised by the question, by the unfolding unpretentiousness of the words, by the

simplicity of the argument and, finally, by the uniqueness of its conclusiveness. Indeed, a straight line is beautiful, when language emulates its simplicity both visually and by way of actually meaning to investigate and redefine it. The question asked by the poem seems itself to be a statement of redefinition upholding this form as beautiful and eternal.

However, the question that seems to beg for an answer at this particular juncture is: what makes Lax's philosophy of form and general aesthetic and cultural impacts basically different from any other experimental poetics; visual or non-visual, since the beginning of the twentieth century? It seems, at first sight, relatively easy to ascertain the difference posed by Lax's poetics from most linear experimentations in modernist poetics since the end of the Victorian era. The visual aspects of his poems, as is the case with most Visual Poetry (Willard 4); or the poetry that utilizes typographical lay-outs of words on the page as optical aesthetic factors, might be enough to substantiate such difference.

Whereas most Visual Poetry, including Lax's, utilizes the typographic aspects of language as essential parts in the poem's formal approach to structure, most linear poetry does not seem to do so. By the same token, while most linear poetry actively maintains syntactic and grammatical linearity, most Visual Poetry also does not seem to have that concern. Instead, it prefers minimal linguistic input, sometimes a single word, or phrase, structured optically in certain meaningful shapes on the page. However, the distinctiveness of Lax's poetics seems to reach much deeper levels than the simple argument for visual versus non-visual formal concerns. This is particularly important in the light of the idea that most linear poetry does not seem to be completely devoid of all optical or visual dimensions in readership. Linear poetry too has concerns regarding the way it is presented visually on the page in lines, sentences and stanzas, or orally when read aloud. The visual versus non-visual argument does not, by this rationale, seem to be a question of type

as of degree. Here are two samples from early modern poetry by William Butler Yeats (1865-1939), and from early Visual Poetry by Haroldo de Campos (1929-2003) of the Brazilian Noigandres Group.



(de Campos 104)

10 *The Stolen Child*

Where dips the rocky highland
 Of Sleuth Wood in the lake,
 There lies a leafy island
 Where flapping herons wake
 The drowsy water-rats;
 There we've hid our faery vats,
 Full of berries
 And of reddest stolen cherries.
Come away, O human child!
To the waters and the wild
With a faery, hand in hand,
For the world's more full of weeping than you can
understand.

Where the wave of moonlight glosses
 The dim grey sands with light,
 Far off by furthest Rosses
 We foot it all the night,
 Weaving olden dances,
 Mingling hands and mingling glances
 Till the moon has taken flight;
 To and fro we leap
 And chase the frothy bubbles,
 While the world is full of troubles
 And is anxious in its sleep.

Come away, O human child!
To the waters and the wild
With a faery, hand in hand,
For the world's more full of weeping than you can
understand.

Where the wandering water gushes
 From the hills above Glen-Car,
 In pools among the rushes
 That scarce could bathe a star,
 We seek for slumbering trout
 And whispering in their ears
 Give them unquiet dreams;
 Leaning softly out
 From ferns that drop their tears
 Over the young streams.
Come away, O human child!
To the waters and the wild
With a faery, hand in hand,
For the world's more full of weeping than you can
understand.

Away with us he's going,
 The solemn-eyed:
 He'll hear no more the lowing
 Of the calves on the warm hillside
 Or the kettle on the hob
 Sing peace into his breast,
 Or see the brown mice bob
 Round and round the oatmeal-chest.
For he comes, the human child,
To the waters and the wild
With a faery, hand in hand,
From a world more full of weeping than he can
understand.

(Yeats 19)

The two poems quoted above by the Brazilian poet Haroldo de Campos, and the modernist poet W. B. Yeats seem, at first sight, to be intrinsically different at least in terms of form. De Campos's utilizes a small number of vocabulary and very few phrases in a seemingly minimalist way. It does not contain a single complete sentence with subject, object and verb all together in

one line. Instead, it employs repetition of single words like “born” or “die” in phrases like “to be born”, “to be reborn” and “to die again”. The repetition of these phrases as well as their general lay-out resembling windmill blades seem to convey the cycle of life and death, dissolution and rebirth. In terms of form, the poem seems to employ two distinctive methods. The first is stylistic, where repetition, word economy and concentration are employed to impart maximum significance. The second is optical, where the general shape formed by the layout of words on the page seem to mimic the shape and movement of windmill blades re-emphasizing the meanings conveyed by the words. Both methods combine to aesthetically represent the meaning intended by utilizing both verbal and visual dimensions of words. It is as if the poem argues that the cycle of life and death is very much symbolized by the windmill blades as they move around and around in a perfect circle.

In terms of content, this seems to be a contemplative poem that attempts to summarize human existence into its most basic facts of life and death, screaming futility and worthlessness of all in between. The shape of the windmill blades going around and around is physically formed by the way in which words like birth, death and rebirth are arranged. Phrases like “to be born / to die/ to be born / to die / to be born / to die” metaphorically represent the continuity and pointlessness of life and death. It is as if the poem wants to say that humans are born to die, only to be reborn again after decay and dissolution in vicious pointless circles. The visual lay-out of the poem then participates in the final aesthetic impression reached in readership by the meaning of the words and their repetitive pattern. The poem offers a contemplation of the futility of life when humans are born only to die again, and get reborn into new life in a vicious circle of life and death going around like blades of a windmill.

The same sort of emphasis on the futility of life is reiterated by Yeat's poem. The motif repeated at the end of each stanza "Come away, O Human Child! / To the waters and the wild / With the faery hand in hand / for the world in more full of weeping than you can understand", invites the better nature of humanity "human child" to abandon the fakery and misery of modern life "more full of weeping" and reconnect with nature "the waters and the wild" as perhaps a representative of truth, living his/her truer innocent nature "with the faery hand in hand" away from the misery in the world that is too unjustifiable and unjust to "understand".

From the beginning of the first stanza, the poem contrasts what it views as the worthiness and beauty of wild life, to the futility and "weeping" of modern life. The speaker describes the "the rocky highland" of beautiful nature where "flapping herons" and "drowsy water rats" live on a "leafy island", and where, as a child, the speaker enjoyed filling his "dreamy vats" with wild "berries" conveying utter happiness and harmony. The second stanza still more forcefully describes the beauty of that unspoiled nature. The "moonlight" shines on the "the grey sands" with glittering sparkle, where the speaker "foot it all the night" "dancing" and "mingling" amongst friends with no concerns or troubles "chase the frothy bubbles", while the modern world is "anxious in its sleep" full of hardship and oppression. The third stanza continues the same argument, describing still more beautiful scenery of water falls gushing from hill tops forming "pools among the rushes" so plentiful and fresh they could "bathe a star". The speaker catches "slumbering trout" which are very much part of the dreamy world of wild nature "whispering in their ears" while "leaning softly out". The last stanza, invites that true human "The solemn-eyed" to join the speaker in his dreamy wild world of nature away from the misery of modern conditions no more yearning for the sounds of nature "lowing of calves on the warm

hillside” of hearing “the kittle on the hob”. The true human will then be among all such natural and beautiful scenes and away from the misery of modern life.

While de Campos’s poem speaks about the futility of life at large, and contemplates the dizzying possibilities of its cycles in existence, Yeats’s speaks of the futility of modern life only and celebrates the wild unspoiled version of it among nature’s untouched features and characteristics. Both condemn certain aspects of life, and both seem to advocate certain dis-concern towards its ordinarily celebrated gains and wins. They both seem to see the truth about life, not in the material rewards sought after by most people, but in the realization of its deep triviality and ultimate passing. That is why in de Campos’s poem, the emphasis is placed on the recycling of birth, death and rebirth, and in Yeats’s, on abandoning material gain for living in the wild.

In terms of form, however, Yeats’s poem is largely linear. It utilizes full sentences in regular poetic lines forming familiar stanza formation with iambic tri-meter and tetrameter rhythms running from beginning to end. The poem offers a linear argument attempting to convince its readers of its view points with actual complete sentences describing the beauty of nature and the happiness humans should feel when enjoying their lives within it, according to the poem’s point of view. There is a repetition of lines at the end of each stanza from beginning to end to increase the emphasis of the poem’s argument and ensure its delivery of its message. Where de Campos’s poem utilizes repetition as part of its optical as well as semantic signification process, Yeats’s utilizes it as very much also a part of its semantic signification process without much reference to any particular optical or visual effect. In Yeats’s poem words, phrases and sentences represent themselves as such without resorting to any outside shape or form to back or re-animate their meanings. De Campos’s poem’s minimalist use of words is aesthetically balanced by their

reordering into a visual form outside of the language used itself, which is, in this particular case, the shape of windmill blades.

However, Yeats's poem too has visual and sonic aspects to the way in which it appears on the page or sounds in utterance. The sonic harmony of rhyme balance, with its motif's repetitive positioning at the end of each stanza, both when read out loud and when looked at on the page very much offers an added influence into its general aesthetic impact. It is may be feasible to argue that the poem's familiar visual and sonic structure plays a role, however given or minimal, in its general aesthetic perception. The way in which the poem reads visually harmonized by its rhythm, rhyme and general layout on the page with its repeated motif and defined beat testifies to this also visual and sonic portions of its impact in readership.

However, Lax's poetics, is somewhat different from most Visual and early modernistic poetry. Written in linear form, Lax's above quoted poem would read as follows: "what if/you like/to draw/big flowers// but what/ if some/ sage has/ told you/ that/ there is/ nothing/ more/ beautiful// nothing/ more/ beautiful/ than/ straight/ line/? // What should/ you draw/ big flowers?/ straight lines? // I think/ you should/ draw// big flowers/ big flowers// big flowers/ big flowers// big flowers/ big flowers// big flowers/ big flowers// until/ they become/ a straight/ line". Readers will probably observe, after reading this poem in this linear fashion, that it is grammatically correct, except perhaps for the repetition, which is formally necessary (acting themselves as a long line) and aesthetically pleasing. They would probably observe that it is very much readable and quite fathomable in a linear fashion. Nevertheless, its reading in this way seems to fundamentally undermine its whole impact and reason for existing in this form making it not only ordinary and mundane, but also counter-indicative to its own argument. Its formal argument, as is probably clear, is to offer *the straight line* as an alternative to any other form, including the linear, and its

vertical lay-out enacts its very argument in practice. It has to be laid out in this particular form to enact its own argument and impact readers aesthetically in this particular way.

Significantly, its general lay-out on the page as a vertical; straight line, redefines its whole aesthetic impact from simply informative to beautifully integrational visual/verbal celebration of structural inquisitiveness. The enactment of the straight line by the words in such a lay-out, as well as the meaning conveyed by the words themselves as an argument of simplicity and beauty, both explain how such celebration is performed by the poem. Words referring to questions of form arguing for the straight line as the purist and most influential, are themselves the components of a vertical straight line from top to bottom. The reason behind such choices of form is simply to offer a belief in the inherent beauty of common forms when defined properly by an enlightened mind. This is Lax's philosophy of form and life both at the same time. McGregor observes:

Several people who knew Lax have said he found what Merton was looking for: a kind of solitude, simplicity, and peace that passes human understanding. Some have even said he was the one who became a saint. None of this would have meant much to him except perhaps as inspiration to others. (393)

The aim of Lax's poem then is not to reach the most condensed "minimalist appropriation of language" as in the case with most Visual Poetry (Solt 10) including de Campos's quoted poem above. Nor it is to simply argue for a life choice in an already familiar and tested linear language as in the Case of Yeats's above quoted poem. It is not also to present a linear poetry packed to the top with referential symbolism, multilayered codifications and complex philosophical and ideological questions as is the case with many experimental movements such as Objectivism, Imagism (Flemming 18), or Surrealism (Reisman 1-4, Neil 7). One critic at least, Marjorie

Perloff, terms such modernist poetries as “the Futurist movements” and characterizes them as “increasingly elitist and formalist in their concern for self-sufficient structures and aesthetic distance” (16). Another prominent critic, Christopher Beach saw such modernist poetries in what he calls “the Pound tradition”, including *Objectivism*, *Surrealism* in addition to *Imagism*, among other movements, as fundamentally and purposefully elitist:

Pound and other Modernist writers had used "history" for their own ends: to build a case for the relative inferiority of the present state of civilization, an inferiority that could be rectified only by the establishment of standards of "culture" based on elitist models gleaned from the past. (83)

Lax’s poetics is seems decidedly different from this, combining grammatical and stylistic soundness with Visual Poetry’s most defining formal aspects. However, it does so in an arguably unique almost irrepealable way. On the one hand, it redefines traditional grammatical and stylistic correctness by use of vertical repetition and the visual typography:

big flowers

big flowers

big flowers

big flowers

big flowers

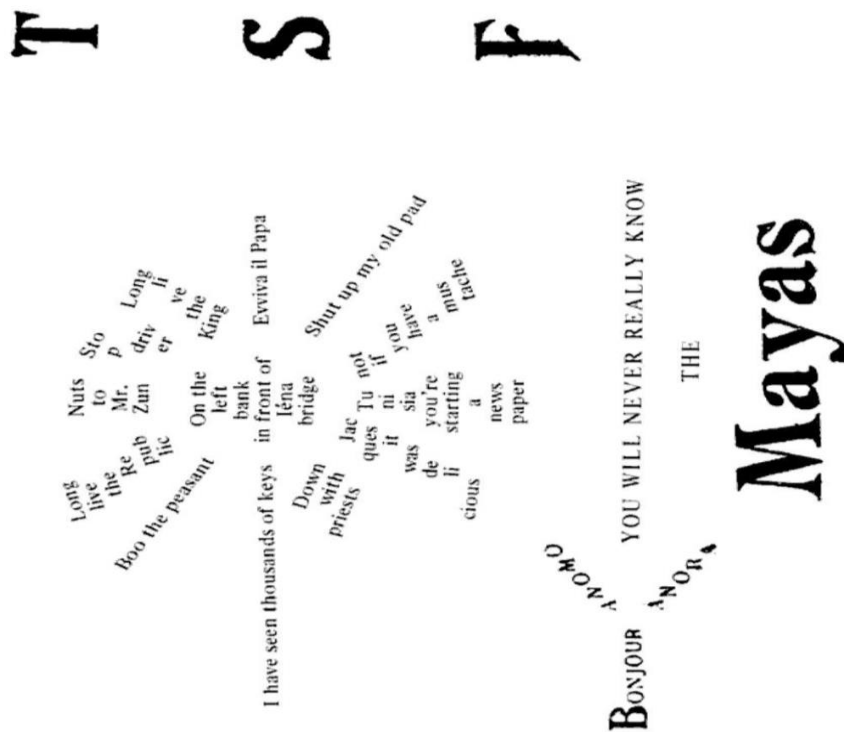
big flowers

big flowers

big flowers

On the other hand, Lax's poetics question Visual Poetry's reliance on outside forms choosing a form that is of language and not outside of it. It is still a line, and many languages are still written in this vertical way like Chinese and Japanese, not to mention ancient Egyptian and Sumerian. Chosen for its profound simplicity and beauty, the straight vertical line had been the way in which most ancient Egyptian, Chinese and Sumerian civilizations presented their temple carvings and papyrus writings. On temple carvings as well as in scrolls, those ancient civilizations wrote only in vertical lines. It seemed to them as the simplest most effective delivery means for specific information and general meanings alike. So, the vertical line is not, in itself, an outside form represented by the typographical layout of the words in poems like a windmill. Instead, it is very much akin to how language is perceived and written to this day, even if it were not English. The vertical line is also the direction of prayer, of heaven-earth relationship, of the essence of transcendence to above and, as such, is also a form of crystallization of Lax's own life belief in "solitude, simplicity and peace" as McGregor's above quote indicates.

By contrast, most Visual Poetry does not offer such negotiation into form. There would be no apparent questioning of the forms in which works are presented. On the contrary, forms are offered as givens; ultimate and final. Here is an example from the work of the pioneer Visual poet Guillaume Apollinaire (61):



Apollinaire's *Ocean Letter* offers a complex typographical design that does not seem by itself recognizable at first sight. Readers might wonder about the representation intended in this poem and the meanings it entails. Soon after the initial encounter with this poem, readers might recognize that the general typographical lay-out of the poem is structured to mimic ancient Mayan temple complex design, with its road ways, pyramids and walls. The lay-out is obviously symbolic particularly when references like "The Mayas", "Long live the Republic", "Long live the King" are taken into consideration. In other words, this poem seems to offer a decidedly political content urging readers to consider ancient civilizations, like the Mayan's, as templates for the ways in which new civilizations should be constructed and ordered. It states its political preferences; its conditions, so to speak, for the reproduction of the greatness of ancient

civilizations. It declares those preferences in phrases like: “Down with Priests”, and “Evviva il Papa (Long Live the pope)”, “Boo the Peasant”, “Anomo (lawless)”, “Anora (longs/misses)”. These preferences seem to be aspects of the civilization hoped for, with less “Peasant” and “Priest” input, and more freedom; “lawlessness”, and spirituality represented by the ‘pope”.

The form is, more or less, imposed on readers by the very existence of the poem as such. The poem’s general typographic symbolism and historical referentiality, with all their different components and parts, are previously decided for readers to “get”, depending on the depths of their insights and intellectuality. This is not the case in linear poetry where lines, in and by themselves, are familiar enough for readers and poets alike, and where “form” is mostly seen as the order of ideas and impressions left by the general meanings of these lines as defined above. Here, as in most Visual Poetry, the form is both visual and verbal, or typographic and iconographic, where both meanings and designs combine to offer specific aesthetic and intellectual contents. Significantly, the form in this poem is stratified into various layers of symbolism complementing and redefining one another. Phrases like “stop driver”, “shut up my old pad”, and “Jaques it was delicious” or “Tunisia you’re starting a newspaper” seem more as playful, better still, ironic. For example, the phrase ”stop driver” seem to mimic traffic guidance signs on roads while “shut up my old pad” seem to utilize slang language of everyday conversation perhaps between friends. These phrases work to contrast the seriousness of the design with the simplicity and playfulness of their general meaning.

This layer of ironic, or playful commentary further complicates the general message implied by the form by adding a distractive element to the overall impression or meanings presented. The irony stems from the contrast between the seriousness of the mimetic temple design and the universal message it works to deliver, on the one hand, and the playfulness of meanings implied

by such phrases and sentences as “shut up my old pad”, on the other. The sentence “I have seen thousands of keys”, in its representative position as the entrance pathway to the round complex of Mayan temples which also looks like an irregular flower, symbolically suggests that the “keys” to rebuilding great civilizations are available and abundant; “thousands of keys”. However, its simple structure and direct meaning ironizes this seriousness of the general form and adds a further playful layer to the general impression received in readership.

This imposition of form on readership where each word is placed precisely to represent a part in the overall layout of the shape poem represents, and where phrases function architecturally as well as verbally, is a constant feature in almost all Visual Poetry since the beginning of the twentieth century. Apollinaire and Mallarmé are perhaps the first 20th century poets to actively use this Visual method in their poetries as critics such as Francis J. Garmody (5) and Marvick, Louis Wirth (15) argue. Most Visual Poetry offers specific representations of objects or abstract designs, both predetermined by the poet and not questioned or wondered about by the poem. As Solt argues “an arrangement of materials according to a scheme or a system set up by the poet which must be adhered to on its own terms” (7). In other words, in most Visual Poetry, representational or abstractive, forms, or the visual aspects of poems, are not offered as questions or curiosities of design, but as givens decided by their poets’ political or intellectual agendas.

Here is a poem by the French pioneer Visual poet Stéphane Mallarmé

CHANCE

Down falls

the quill

a rhythmic suspension of disaster

to bury itself

in the primordial spray

whose frenzy formerly leapt from there to a peak

that is blasted

in the constant neutrality of the abyss

NOTHING

of the unforgettable crisis

or else

the deed

might have been achieved keeping in view every result that is non

human

WILL HAVE TAKEN PLACE

a commonplace upsurge is shedding absence

OTHER THAN THE PLACE

a lowly splashing of some kind as if to scatter the vacuous action

at once which otherwise

by its deceit

would have established

the loss

in these indefinite regions

of the swell

where all reality is dissolved

EXCEPT

on high

PERHAPS

as far away as a place

merges with the beyond

outside any interest
 assigned to it
 in a general way
 by a certain obliquity in a certain declivity
 of flames

toward
 what must be
 Septentrion as well as North

A CONSTELLATIO

cold with neglect and disuse
 not so much
 that it fails to number
 on some vacant and higher surface
 the successive impact
 starri
 of a full reckoning in the making

keeping watch
 wondering
 rolling on
 shining and pondering
 before finally halting
 at some last point that sanctifies

Every Thought emits a Dice Thro

(Mallarmé 177-181)

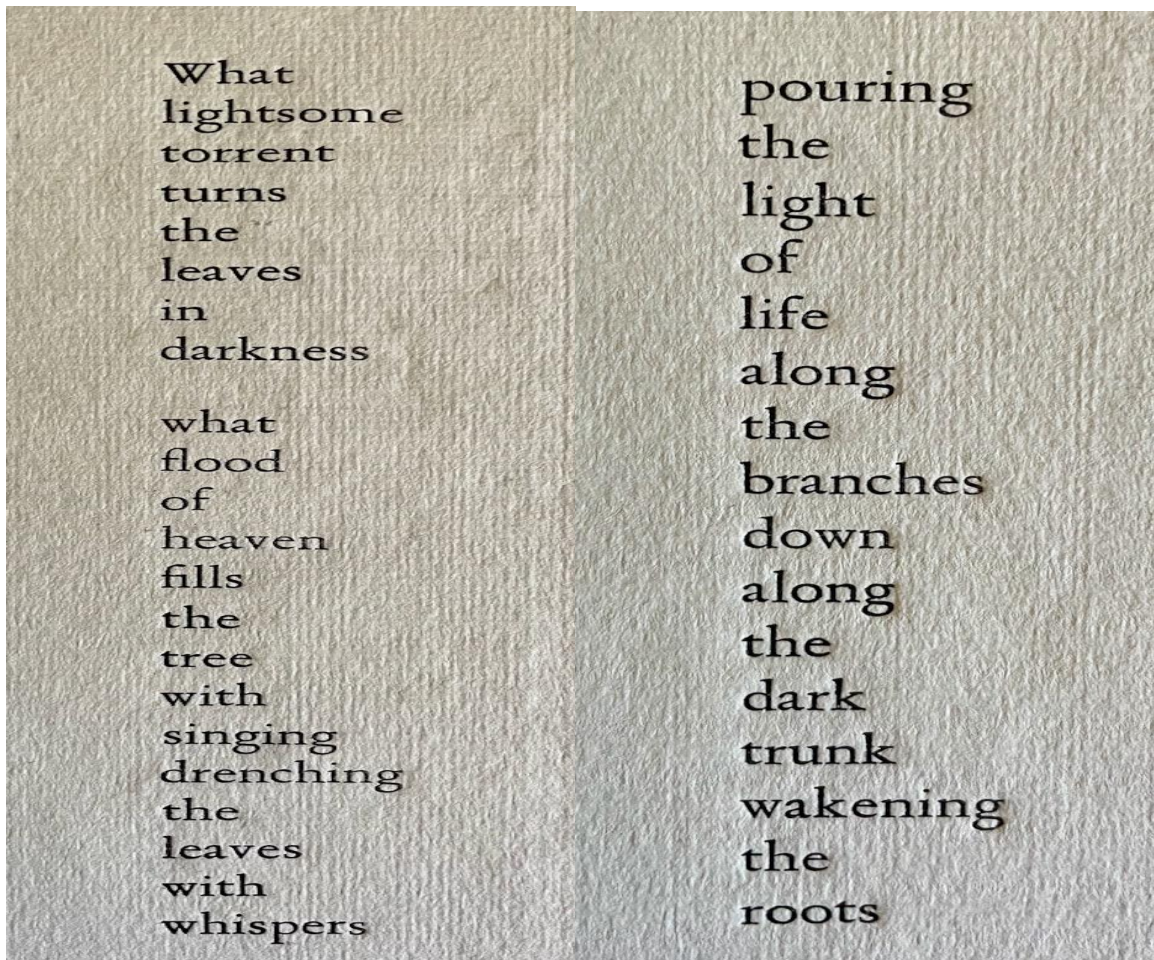
The poem's general typographic lay-out is mainly abstract. That is, it is decidedly representative of abstract thought and lacks resemblance to any familiar object or structure available for readers. It is, in other words, impressionistic in form attempting to entice specific psychological reaction in readership rather than a specific message or statement. However, the poem's combines verbal

and formal facets and attempts to offer multiple layers of meanings, or significances, when received in its totality.

The overall theme of the poem seems existential, discussing the intricacies of “reality” and “chance” from a Nihilistic perspective. Phrases like “where all reality is dissolved”, “its deceit”, “merges with the beyond”, “shedding absence”, and “every thought emits a dice throw”. all seem to lament the haphazard nature of existence; “indefinite regions”, and question its validity: “the unforgettable crisis”. Between “chance” and “reality”, the poem seems to argue, lies the important question of how and why; “keeping watch, wondering”, humanity exists in its current form, “certain obliquity”, “a certain declivity of flames”. The general lay-out of the poem cuts through any form of linearity that might be at the background of readership, so that readers are not allowed to presume phrasal continuity or coherence. Like most modern experimental poetics, this poem relies heavily on fragmentation and ambiguity to install a sense of loss and a basis for existential curiosity.

Unlike Apollinaire’s *Ocean Letter*, Mallarmé’s *Chance* offers a non-representational form where vocabulary and phrases are distributed almost haphazardly on the pages to entice certain abstract impression on readers in order to further deepen its existential questioning of the play between “chance” and any tangible reality perceived thereafter. However, both representational and non-representational formal poetics offer their visual aspects as fixed, preordained, and unnegotiable determination by their respective poets; there only to be unlocked and navigated through by readers. Their insistence on non-linearity, fragmentation, and a certain degree of ambiguity, places them firmly within the larger modernistic anti-conventional impetus permeating since the beginning of the twentieth century which eventually culminated in such movements as *Imagism*, *Surrealism* and *Objectivism* among many others.

Lax's poetics seems again decidedly different from that. The vertical line in which most of his poems appear is a negotiable form offered mostly as a question for discussion by readers rather than a determination by the inventor or the genius. This is done not only by the actual argument of the poem as we have seen in *Problem in Design*, but more significantly by his poems stylistic and grammatical readability, soundness, familiarity and simplicity. This is also done through his choice of subject matter which mostly does away with any unfathomable abstractions regarding being, existence, or the ideal civilization. It is done by the avoidance of excessive codification and referentiality to history, music, or mythology. In short, it is done by the profound simplicity of form and utter pleasure of insightfulness into the ideal emotional and mental uniqueness of humanity at large. Here is another poem by Lax, which he transcribed himself on sheets of special paper:



(Lax web-archive)

The theme of the poem itself is vertical. It discusses how the heavenly light; “flood of heaven”, “Lightsome torrent”, perhaps of love and compassion, pours down from above downwards on nature that might be sad “dark” to fill it up with joy and happiness; “fills the trees with singing dancing”. This image itself enacts the direction of the form chosen by the poem and is perceived in readership accordingly. With each word and article, the sensation of the image’s meanings and impression is actively enacted by the reading process itself being visually structured in the very direction of the meanings intended. Vertical, here, is not just a simple choice of shape, but a philosophy of form; because it re-defines the whole relationship between the reality perceived

and the cosmos in which it is situated. It is argued for as the simplest most accurate perception tool of this relationship and perhaps the only way to fully comprehend and deal with it.

Significantly, the poem starts with a question word; “what”, as an exclamation and rhetorical emphasis both at the same time, imparting a sense of wonder and indeterminacy on the form. Unlike most Visual Poetry, the form is presented here as a curiosity rather than an imposed predetermination. More significantly, unlike most modernist experimental poetics, there is no fragmentation, excessive referentiality, symbolism or a recanting to ancient mythology or history. There is no abstraction or emphasis on subliminal sensations of meaning, nor ambiguity or an emphasis on unresolvable existential dilemmas and conundrums. Above all, there is no pretense of knowledge, and the consequent presentation of tens of pages, (in some cases hundreds like Pound’s *The Cantos* (4), or Zukofsky’s “A” (5)) offering tens of references, ambiguities and impressionistic sensations of abstract transcendental concepts and ideas. Instead, here there is a straightforward wonder in the utter simplicity and richness of the ways in which visual form complements and enriches imagery and meanings. There is familiarity of grammar and style and utter surprise in their smooth unpretending integration into curiosities of form/content and sensations of beautiful discovery and being.

Lax's poetics is unique in this particular regard. It utilizes aspects of classical, modern, visual, and linear poetics all at once in ways that does not register foreign to its subject matters or aesthetic reception. Arranged vertically, words are easily comprehensible, while the effects of the form as a whole redefines their meaning visually to deepen their aesthetic and intellectual impacts in a unique poetic formula, perhaps unprecedented in the history of experimental poetry.

how	1.	lie	be
		in	
to		bed	pre
start			sent
		for	
the		a	to
day		while	
			the
right:		&	
		look	mo
tips		at	ments
from			
		the	as
the		ceil	
		ing	they
mas			
ters:	2:		pre
			sent
	3:		
			them
	4:		selves
	5:		to
			you

--

Here is another example from Lax's *Peacemaker* (2, 3)

bring	the	who
peace	real	ev
		er
to	chal	you
the	lenge	
		know.
mo	in	
ment		start
	life	ing
let	is	
		with
the	this:	?
mo	to	start
ment		ing
bring	bring	
peace		with
	the	
to		your
	best	self
you		
	out	--
--		
	of	

The three most significant aspects that seem to define the Vertical Poetics of Lax's work can perhaps be crystalized as follows. Firstly, is of course its philosophy of form which points at a drastically different formal relationships than ordinarily perceived. Whereas most linear and visual poetics organize their linguistic components either visually or linguistically, or both, to represent some object or some reasoning outside of themselves, in Lax's Vertical Poetics they eliminate that distance of representation to become themselves an embodiment of their intended aesthetic message. In the excerpt above, readers cannot help but follow the vertical direction of ascension upwards through the meanings iterated "lie / in / bed / for / a /while / and / look/ at / the / ceiling" while mimicking the very physical movement of ascension by the act of reading itself. The form here does not "represent" anything, but rather is itself the act of ascension

demonstrated by the meanings of words and by the direction of reading them. Verticality here, becomes not simply an optical effect; symbolic and semiotically significant in some insightful way, but a redefinition of poetic formal relationships acting dramatically rather than representatively. Verticality here becomes a redefinition of the whole relationship between man and the cosmos rather than simply a way to write poems.

This is the second aspect of Lax's Vertical Poetics which concerns content or theme or the message intended, offering a kind of universal, cross-culture, wisdom or spirituality at the heart of his poetry's philosophy of form. Sentences like "be / pre/sent/ to / the mo/ments / as / they / pre/sent/ them/selves / to / you", "bring/ peace/ to/ the/ mo/ment/ let/ the/ mo/ment / bring / peace / to /you", do not only emphasize contemplative spirituality but offer actual means with which readers might get into deeper touches with their inner beings. They do not only offer encouragement but actual instances and methods of contemplation and insights into being in the world. This is why their message is universal as it carries no identifiable identity traits, and touches only on the most common areas of human sentience. Here are some of Lax's own thoughts on the matter:

Anyone can produce poems concerned with the world, and what to think about the world...and there are many entries in my journals in what I ask myself what can we do about the world... our idea with (the magazine) PAX was to take pieces and put them in order; in a "harmony of order"... As far as art goes, I think that beauty is the tranquility of order, by letting the world see what harmony and beauty there can be in the world when people are working on art instead of on war.

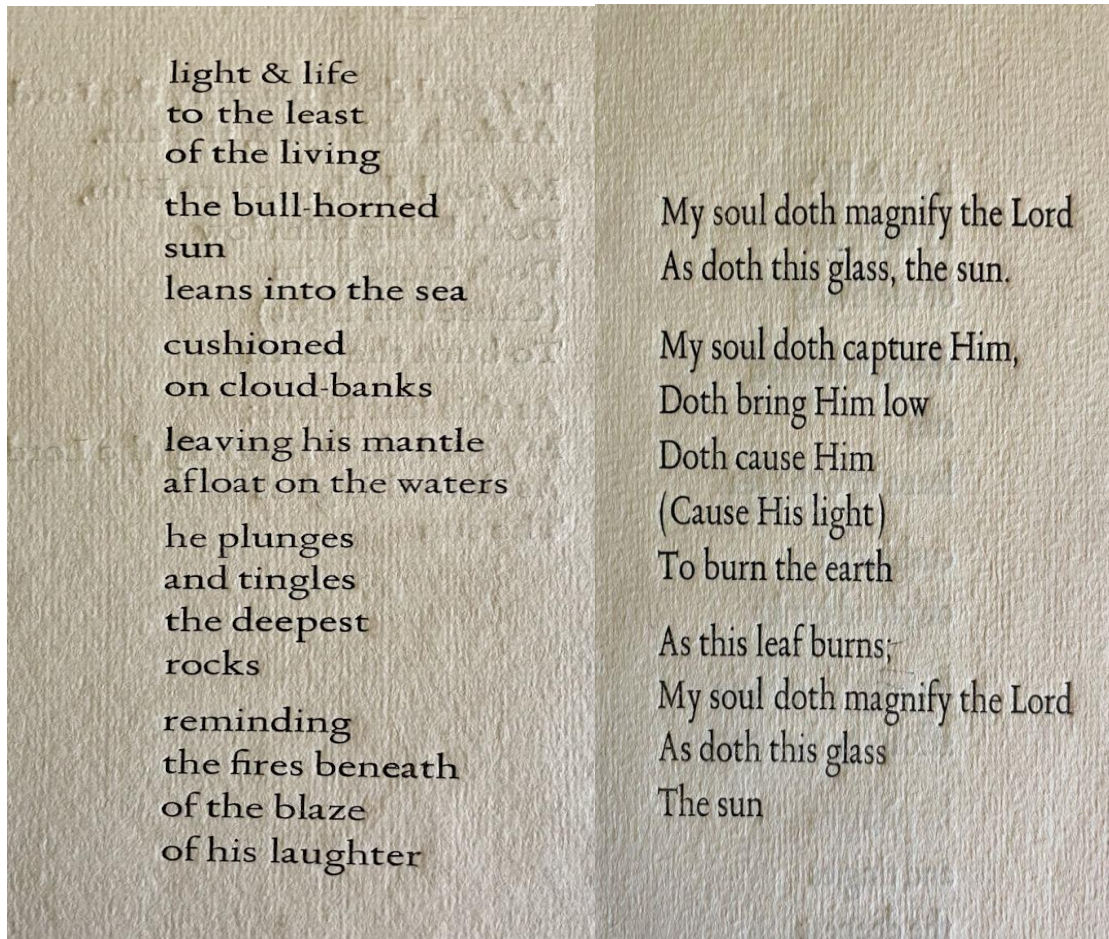
(168)

This “tranquility of order” manifests itself in Lax’s poetry not just in terms of universal thematic content, or unique formal presence, but most importantly in the actual sonic and visual readership movements on the page. This is the third aspect defining the vertical poetics of Robert Lax; its sonic effects. On the left-hand side of the first page in the excerpt above, readers might notice a stake of numbers from 1 to 5 embodying the actual time of contemplation the poem asks its readers to enjoy while “looking at the ceiling” in order to “bring peace” to “oneself”. The syllabic characters of each number seem to correspond to the syllabic divisions of words before and after it, which simply increases the drive towards “tranquility” and “order” hailed by the poem. Most words are divided syllabically and re-arranged so as not to be pronounced as a whole, but in, more than one syllable in a general slowing down effect that redefines these words’ sonic and semiotic impacts in readership by simply slowing down their utterance in speech. This sonic effect beautifully echoes the contemplative message offered, backed by the visual division of the words on the page, as part of the overall embodiment of content through the dramatic enactment of form. Some of the very few critics who have discussed Lax’ s work, have passingly hinted to this aspect arguing that “his poems are inadvertently defiant in the way they make readers stop, stay with each word, each syllable. They have to reset old notions as to what words actually are, what syllables are” (Hirschfield 5).

4- Vertical Poetics: Summarizing General Characteristics

The very first feature of this type of poetics, as discussed so far, and is going to be discussed in the following pages, is obviously its principle refrain from dismissing all traditional sentence structure and grammatical soundness. A typical Vertical poem by Lax does not in

principle avoid traditional grammatical correctness even when using minimalist approaches to vocabulary and style. Despite its obvious emphasis on the visual aspects in perception, there is no deliberate destruction of canons of linguistic flow or conventions of semiotic coherence. The point in his poetics does not to be to assert distinction as it is to look for means with which, in his view, poetry reaches its maximum potential in beauty; both visually and verbally. Unlike most modernist poetics which decidedly dismisses conventions of style and grammar as basically mundane and politically conformist, Lax's Vertical Poetics utilizes these very conventions in a totally different light, giving them a new lease on life by re-discovering their integral visual and verbal potency in reception through simplicity and depth. Here is a poem from McGregor's internet archive of Robert Lax, which he printed himself on canvas in grey color vertically as is all of his work.



The poem utilizes the contrast in color between the grey rough background and the dark smooth typeset of the letters on which it is set in order to maximize and focalize its verbal image of the soul magnifying “the Lord” just as the contrast on colors and textures magnify the impressions received in readership by the image of a soul magnifying God in reality. The repetition of the image does the same sort of emphasis or magnification both visually and verbally. Verbally, it asserts and emphasizes, but on the visual/verbal grounds, the repetition utilizes the color and textural contrast to enact that very emphasis and embody its effects in reception.

The poem is a spiritual celebration of God as pure light and his tools in reality represented by the rays of the sun; “the sun / light and life”. It describes how the speaker feels in his love for God and his understanding of how God is in all things; “leaving his mantel/ afloat on waters”,

“plunges/ and tingles/ the deepest /rocks”. It is a contemplative spiritual poem that offers insight into God’s grace, and the ways in which the speaker feels it is manifested in the world.

However, formally speaking, the poem offers largely sound grammatical structures and syntactic coherence. Sentences like; “my soul does magnify the lord/ As does this glass the sun” sound quite intact in coherence and general structure. Yet, its visual layout, though utilizes conventional sentence structure, is still true to the vertical philosophy of composition that defines Lax’s poetic distinction. The direction of light from heaven to earth, coincides quite beautifully the vertical design of the poem and the way in which it unfolds in readership from top to bottom. The light moves from heaven to earth and so is the idea of the speaker’s soul concentrating this light; “as does this glass, the sun”, reaching every object in reality: “leans into the sea’ and “tingles every rock”. To readers familiar with Lax’s Vertical formal approach and the ways it always complements subject matters in unique visual/verbal integrated wholes, this is exactly what is expected. Maximum simplicity of phrasal structure, familiar coherence and fathomability, and maximum impact of spiritual and aesthetic effects and insights, but mostly, an enactment of the theme by the visual performance of the form.

This leads to the second most typical characteristic of the Vertical poem which has to do with its general philosophy of presentation that this article calls *Vertical Poetics*. The Vertical poem enacts the world alongside its vision. It chooses subject matters and imagery very much akin to its directions in visual presentation, making every syllable, word, or phrase act in the unfolding direction of readership like an ancient scroll that has to be read vertically. Here is another of Lax’s poems from the University of California Archives:

how	slow	the
best	&	lat
to	gen	est
spend	tle	of
	---	man
	gen	y
this	tle	---
mo	&	to
ment?	slow	day
---	---	at
move	---	this
slow	to	mo
---	day	ment
slow	in	8.50
moves	this	A.M.
---	room	---
gen	it's	now
tle	Tues	8.55
&	day	A.M.
slow	---	

(Lax 82)

“*Trains of Thought*” is yet another of Lax’s poems that enacts his poetics’ vertical philosophy of form. The poem is divided into three unequal columns each of which invites reading at the very exact pace of walking slowly while thinking; “gently” and “slowly”, “in this room”. Even the time span of exactly how slowly the paces are, is defined by this poem; 8:50/AM, Now/ 8:55/AM”. The form itself embodies the sensations and impressions suggested by the subject matter as if acting in a drama where syllables and words are characters performing roles of a verbal/visual scene perceived in imagination by their positions on the page. Quite observable is how the poem starts at the middle of an obvious extended monologue, which seems to conclude with its very beginning; “how/ best to / spend /this /moment”, followed by a pause represented

by several hyphens, then beginning again with the phrase “this mo/ment”, followed by a question mark.

The poem offers a conclusion for that monologue as if to say that all other thoughts and concerns boils down to simply redefining the pace of your mind; the rhythm of your being, to become “slow” and “gentle”, to become;” the lat/est /of /man/y” living in the now; “to/day/ at /this/ mom/ent”, rather than in the past. The division of syllables define the pace and enact the rhythm for which the poem argues to be the wise way of living. This is precisely how Lax’s philosophy of form performs its magic in readership.

The final characteristic of Vertical Poetics in Lax’s work has to do with the choice of subject matters. An overwhelming concentration on spirituality and proverbial wisdom, as has been demonstrated, in close integration with the verbal and visual qualities of the poems themselves, define most of this poetry. The above poem typifies this general attitude towards life and the art of living. “Wizard-like hermit and sage”, “a dreamcatcher” with “wisdom and love” (13) is how long-term friend and biographer Georgiou, S. T. describes Lax’s personality. In turn this very much also describes the kind of themes and subject matters his poetics always offers.

It goes without saying that there are many more features to Lax’s poetics which are common in many types of 20th century experimental poetics such as the Visual aspects of words, the simplicity of structure, the minimalist approach to verbal expression and the familiarity of syntactic formula. The work of Apollinaire and Mallarme, as demonstrated above, and of many early 20th century poets such as Auden and Yeats testify to many of these features and more. However, Lax’s poetics encompasses all such features and fuses them in a unique pot of visual verbal word-performances that redefines, as demonstrated, the very fabric of their presence as

such. With Lax's work, simplicity and fathomability take on a wholly different role of surprise and sublime actuation that readers smile at their own perception of them in awe and gratitude.

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