

Semiotics and poetic practice in the work of three New Zealand poets

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Abstract

This PhD by exegesis and creative project examines the poetry of three contemporary New Zealand poets: Alistair Paterson, Alan Loney and Michele Leggott in the context of the relational axes, comprising syntagmatic and paradigmatic relations. It addresses the question of what the relational axes can tell us about poetry which can then be used in practice. After due consideration of the implications of binary oppositions in the discourse and of features such as codes, the discussion considers Jakobson's insights into the relational axes and ideas that problematise understandings of the sign, such as Riffaterre's theory of representation and Derrida's elaboration of the originary nature of writing. The analysis accommodates theoretical evolution from structuralism to poststructuralism, postmodernism and assemblage theories.

Poetry is richly susceptible to semiotic analysis because of the way it highlights language. I describe examples of the interaction between the axes through techniques such as metonymy and metaphor. Work that features distinctive layout invites a discussion of how the use of page space may be conceptualised and what effects are gained by it. The idea of space being used to score music was made popular by Charles Olson and has been a justification for experimental typography, but this is just one possible function. I describe various functions for the use of space in the poetry discussed, and I argue that its use is paradigmatic as well as syntagmatic, since it often subverts the definition of the syntagm (which is singular and linear). I argue that the use of space constitutes an act of substitution for language.

I have encountered few attempts in the literature to systematically articulate the variety of effects which space can yield, and this is important work that I extend here. The appendix attempts a provisional taxonomy of the use of space, via reference to the analysis of poetry in chapters two, three and four. These instances are charted and grouped together to gain a better understanding of how space contributes to meaning, and to encourage the use of page space in suggestive and embodied ways. At the same time, I acknowledge that it is one avenue of many by which multiplicity of meaning can be achieved, and reflect on the way Michele Leggott's poetry, for example, has moved away from spatial experiments yet found other ways to attain multiplicity, often through an articulation of competing codes. My creative project responds to ideas in both the poetry analysed and the theoretical components, investigating formal structures as syntagmatic confines; the idea of the centre being outside structure; the place of written language (as opposed to speech); social context; selection and substitution in poems; spatial relations, misdirection and the unity of the whole. It does so in a variety of forms with an emphasis on hybrids.

Key words: semiotics; poetry; New Zealand; relational axes; space; Alistair Paterson; Alan Loney; Michele Leggott.

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