

The Power of Disruption: Depiction of the Hyperreal in Contemporary Poetry

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Abstract— *The contention that the form of a work of art, rather than its content, is the true bearer of ideology, justifies the increased awareness and caution on the part of the gender fluid writers in manoeuvring form. Writers belonging to non-binary identities are highly sensitive to the inadequacy of existing forms. They seek to escape what they see as the confining, imprisoning effects of artistic forms that have become too hackneyed to suit their new themes. Xan Phillips represents a generation of poets who dismantle inherited poetic norms to forge new, identity-inflected aesthetic possibilities.*

Index Terms— *Form and content, Fragmentation, Gender fluid writers, Hyperreality, Resistance, Xan Phillips*

INTRODUCTION

Reality is not static, nor is it a homogenous entity. It changes with every person and each perception. It is a heterogeneous totality consisting of different parts. The complex and incomprehensible experiences provide people with a reality too chaotic to be subjected to a definitive analysis. Bergonzi's remarks are relevant in this regard: ". . . we have no common sense of reality. We are saddled with all kinds of relativistic structures of consciousness. We do not believe in there being one reality 'out there' as undoubtedly as Tolstoy did" (200). What any fictional writing has done to its readers is reconciliation with the realities of life by serving to "blur the distinction between illusion and reality, between fact and fiction, between symbol and what is represented." (Lennard J Davis, 3). Thus all genres of fiction essentially fashions one's reading/ misreading of reality.

Writers who have experienced the dissolution of a material reality have attempted to experiment with both the content and structure in their writings. Traditionally, the content refers to what the authors desire to communicate to the readers, while form refers to how they choose to express it. Thus, form and content denote two aspects of the work, mutually dependent and incapable of existing independently.

There is a meaningful correlation between the thematic content and the formal devices employed by the writer to express it. As "contemporary reality is qualitatively different from all that has preceded it" (Gerard Graff, 10), the content itself is challenging. Moreover, it is not the material in the raw that the reader encounters in a literary work, but the material as shaped and structured by formal devices. That is why writers are continually experimenting on the fabric and the fashion. Incidentally, the Latin word 'fingo' from which 'fiction' originates means 'to form' or 'to fashion.'

Form as Resistance

What startles us to a new perception is a new way of presentation. The complexity and conflict endemic in the content result in the invention of new forms capable of representing them. Writers of the contemporary age in their attempts to read the world by structuring experiences find the existing tools inadequate. They seek to escape what they see as the confining, imprisoning effects of artistic forms that have become too hackneyed to suit their new themes. Power in its myriad manifestations is a key contributor to this fluid reality. These power structures have devastating influence on the lives of people who do not wield power. Literary texts, especially by those on the receiving end, articulate values of an unquestionably political nature. The preponderance of those who occupy the centre and the absence of an alternative for those in the liminal space are presaged in early women writers such as George Eliot and Emily Bronte. This lop-sidedness is all the more distinct in the contemporary cultural discourse. Resistance becomes an integral part of struggle forcing the readers to see things in a new light, through a disruption of the patina of the familiar and the conventional. Experimental forms are employed to reflect the fragmentation and disarray of modern life or to explore the nature of

memory and experience. Form informs and structures the content.

Writers belonging to nonbinary identities are highly sensitive to the inadequacy of existing forms. They have expressed their acute misgivings as to the working of the dominant ideology and structures and stressed the need for escaping the entrapment of received notions and the morass of conventional structures. A transformation in form invariably signifies a transformation in ideology. Gerog Lukacs draws attention to the social significance of literary form, when he says that “the truly political element in literature is the form.” (22). His contention that the form of a work of art, rather than its abstractable content, is the true bearer of ideology, justifies the increased awareness and caution on the part of the gender fluid writers in manoeuvring form.

Form as a means of resistance is successfully operated in poetry. It is, however, very difficult to disentangle form and content. It is important to examine the particular ways in which the formal operations of these writings function ideologically. The experiments with form in the writings of nonbinary poets are their response against and refusal to conform to the binary reality. The most noticeable feature of the late twentieth and the early twenty first century poetry is the tremendous degree of formal experiment and innovation that it employs.

Subversive Strategies to Represent the Hyperreal

Hyperreality refers to a cultural condition in which the line between what is ‘real’ and what is simulated becomes so blurred that they are experienced interchangeably, or the simulation even replaces the real. In this state, representations, signs, or models of reality become more real than reality itself. The concept of hyperreality emerged within post-structuralist and post-modernist thought and introduced by French philosopher Jean Baudrillard in his *Simulacra and Simulation* (1981), is described as “the generation by models of a real without origin or reality”.

Authors highlight how representations shape perception and compel the readers to question what is ‘real’. They even question representation and emphasize the constructedness of texts. In the landscape of 21st-century poetry, practitioners increasingly favour formal heterogeneity and experimental praxis, privileging innovation over

convention. Thematically, 21st century poetry exhibits marked socio-political engagement, bringing to the fore discourses related to gender fluidity, digital life, mental health, and social justice. This reflects its role as a responsive conduit to immediate historical urgency.

Fragmentation is a potent strategy of subversion in poetry. Madness is projected as a peculiar creative manifestation of the aberrated consciousness. Freaks, outcasts, tarts and perverts are considered to be more imaginative than the apparently normal people. Hallucination, dream, insanity and paranoia are employed with the objective of erasing the rigid demarcations of genders and genres. These states of consciousness structure not only the text but the entire world view. The division between reality and unreality breaks down and is replaced by hyperreality. There is no longer any distinction between the real and the constructed version of the real. Often, the constructed version is accepted or preferred as it helps create alternate worlds.

Free verse that echo vernacular speech dominates contemporary poetry, providing the authors considerable latitude in lineation and structure. It also embraces syntactic fragmentation, telegraphic diction, and disjunctive rhythm, reflecting the cultural condition of epistemic dislocation and contemporary sensibilities. Lines do not conform to traditional rhetorical syntax. The rise of hypertextual and digital poetics known by the term ‘hyperpoetry’ demonstrates how contemporary poetry increasingly integrates hyperlinks, multimedia, and interactivity. Readers navigate poems non-linearly, and composition often unfolds through immersive digital affordances. Visual arrangement techniques, experimentation with syntax, grammar, and word order to defamiliarize language emphasize the reader's role in constructing meaning from the text. Collage and juxtaposition of words challenge traditional notions of poetic craft and intentionality. Offensive or politically incorrect language is deliberately incorporated to provoke the readers. Grammatical errors and misspellings are embraced as poetic devices.

Cacophemism, a literary device used in contrast to euphemism, and Enallage, a grammatical departure like switching tense or number for effect, are intentionally used to create discomfort or intensity, drawing the reader's attention to emotional undercurrents. Deviations from standard language are

deliberate tools that lend authenticity, character depth, or emotional resonance. Employment of non-standard grammar, dialect, inverted sentences, or unconventional syntax are to be read as artistic choices that convey cultural identity, rhythmic variation, and emotional nuance.

In experimental poetry, breaking conventional forms becomes a radical act - a provocation meant to startle readers into new realms of understanding. Techniques like blacking out words or leaving faint hints of erased text create a layered, palimpsestic effect. Even subtle alterations like adding or dropping letters multiply possible interpretations. Defying boundaries reflect the diverse and swift evolution of twenty-first-century global culture.

Queer poets in particular frequently employ experimental devices, blending poetry with other art forms, fracturing narrative, and embracing non-linear composition. By rejecting fixed meaning and linear storytelling, these poets open their work to multiple readings and richer emotional resonance.

Resistance and Revelations in Xan Phillips' Poems
Poems by the contemporary writer Xan Forest Phillips challenges traditional poetic conventions and explores complex themes of identity, sexuality, and social justice. An American poet and visual artist from Ohio, they (Xan prefers to use the gender-neutral pronoun 'they' rather than 'he' or 'she') earned their MFA in Poetry and received the Lambda Literary Award for their debut collection *Hull*. They represents a generation of poets who dismantle inherited poetic norms to forge new, identity-inflected aesthetic possibilities. Their writing frequently navigates intersections of blackness, queerness, historical trauma, and bodily experience, all through innovative, sensuous language and form. They reveal the form of poetry where the visual arrangement of text on the page contributes to its meaning, creating a connection between the written word and the physical appearance of the poem. Visual and textual poems unite to show the way in which poetry can convey meaning and emotion through the visual arrangement of words on the page just as the linguistic content itself. This distinction highlights how poets may prioritize either the aesthetic presentation or the textual elements to enhance their work, allowing for a richer interpretation and interaction with the reader.

"No One Speaks of How Tendrils Feed on the Fruits" was first published on June 26, 2019, as part of *Poem-a-Day* by the Academy of American Poets. Death and decay become transformative and generative in the poem. Phillips has stated that the poem sprang from a confrontation with personal and spiritual decay, amid fears of aging and mortality in a society that often treats survival as precarious: "death in America feels as proximal as missing a utility bill." A fear that paradoxically uncovered unexpected abundance: "When I face my fear of decay in body and spirit, I find that the earth lavishes me with flora."

The poem unfolds as a single, haphazard and uninterrupted stanza without traditional rhyme or meter. There are no punctuation marks or capital letters. This free-form structure mirrors both the thematic dissolution, decay, disintegration and an otherworldly perspective. The layout is uneven, lines break in odd places, and spacing is variable. These choices create visual disarray on the page, reinforcing themes of dislocation, decay, and haunting. They slow the reader's meandering path through the poem, cultivating a sense of disorientation akin to decay or spectral drift.

The speaker of the poem is "dead," and so is empowered to speak from beyond conventional poetic confines. The voice adopts a ghostly, yet commanding tone and asserts power even in decay. Death is not an endpoint but a powerful continuation. The tone oscillates between defiance and revelation. The image of regeneration pervades the poem. The speaker's demise is 'fruitful' and the tendrils feed on its fruits. The dead hands alight on phlox, wild strawberries, and pine. The imagery is that of a body slowly dissolving and cursively moving to become one with the nature's vegetation. The poem too gives that visual effect on the page. Beauty arises from dissolution.

The act of dying becomes a source of wisdom and power: "so all my enemies would tremble at my murmur how it populates their homes." The poet reflects that physical decay reveals surprising abundance: "earth lavishes me with flora" and that "I know more than all my living foes." Death serves to instil fear in the enemies, as even the faint whispers infiltrate the homes of the foes. The poem implicates decay as generative, conferring knowledge and resilience beyond death. The line, "I know more than all my living foes", projects death as enlightenment. In death they have a deeper understanding than the living,

gaining insight from closing the 'oak eyes'. Oak is a symbol of longevity, strength and wisdom. The 'sun-fed design' is derived from the open-in-the-sun experience, the exposure to harsh realities. Because of that strength, decay is inverted into growth. The poem treats death not as an erasure, but as transformation that fosters resilient continuation.

Spatial displacement of the body, "this is my body out of context rotting in the wrong hemisphere," communicates estrangement - both physically and existentially. The speaker's presence has migrated; they exist removed from familiar place, time, and identity. It also hints at the queerness that made the speaker experience 'out of context' in life.

Lines continue to flow irregularly, with fragmented syntax crossing boundaries as in: "I died so all my enemies would tremble at my murmur how it populates their homes." The speaker's demise still "populates their homes" and instills fear in the enemies. This breathless movement creates an unsettling rhythm; capturing death's jumbling of time and voice, giving the poem momentum amid its decay. Unusual words like "pullulating" evoke the image of spreading rapidly. Paired with the poetic "sun-fed design," the language liquidly shifts between organic softness of the fruits and tough texture of the oak. The speaker's closure of "oak eyes" parallels an awakening. It is like a pristine colossal being closes its eyes in fulfilment, ending its tiresome vigilance.

"I Never Felt Comfortable in My Own Skin So I Made a New One", at its heart, is a radical act of self-creation. Originally published in Poem a Day in 2022 by the Academy of American Poets, the poem explores identity in the process of becoming. The speaker rejects an ill-fitting identity and physically sculpts a new one, built from remnants of the natural and the discarded, transformed into something powerful and self-owned. The poem's shifting rhythm, fragmented imagery, and evolving voice enact the chaos and creativity of forging a new self. Form as well as content is disjointed enough to show discomfort, creating a tension between violence inherent in and necessity for claiming identity. The poem unfolds in free verse, with no stanza breaks or consistent rhythm. Its flowing cadence mirrors a subconscious journey, a transformation tracked through memory and sensory fragments.

The poem arrays a sequence of metaphors - cicada husks, nylons, a bird's beak, a mural, flesh and

membrane, mud and plastic. The movement reflects the speaker's evolving self - from cicada to plastic, from evolution to creation, from the natural/real to the artificial/constructed; and finally to proud ownership: "it reeked of wheatpiss and it was mine". The transformation is from discomfort to assertion. The recurring phrase "I was..." emphasizes the shift from an uninhabitable past toward a self-made present.

The poem begins with a grounded moment: "I was on a walk when I was struck by the precarity of the gender that wore me, which moved my matter, wrote books, and fell in love: - a walk that triggers the speaker's realization about their gender's instability. This single line sets a tone of disorientation and self-questioning as the starting point of transformation. Cicada skins and nylons evoke discarded remnants of the body - things once worn, left behind. The beak of a decomposing bird and a vandalized mural of George Floyd combine natural decay and violent erasure. These images function as fragments of identity and history, representing what is left after destruction or shedding. The speaker says, "I was uninhabitable before I snared a man for his hide." This intense metaphor conveys a need to claim a new skin, seeking identity from another to feel inhabitable. It is a metaphor for crafting a self out of external parts. Describing themselves as "not unlike the skin of a drum thriving under a stamina that made music of me before I split," the speaker likens identity to an instrument sustained until rupture. It is a synthesis of the body, identity, and music collapsing into one sustaining, but fragile form. The lines "you wouldn't recognize me now if you saw me in the trees, played out, scattered to the undergrowth" signal disappearance and re-emergence in another form - more dispersed, unrecognizable, perhaps more authentic yet unanchored. This cycle of consuming and reshaping - transforming a life into flesh - membrane - implies the speaker's own reconstitution. The closing lines - "I foraged a life coated in plastic and mud from the highway overpass, it reeked of wheatpiss and it was mine"- anchors identity in gritty materiality. It is an identity forged from refuse and reclamation, rough yet claimed. The pungent rubric affirms the speaker's ownership over their "new skin," imperfect and earthy, but utterly their own. Using nature and bodily imagery - cicada skins, discarded nylons, a mural of George Floyd - Phillips conveys the fragility and reconstruction of self. The final lines,

forged in mud and plastic yet distinctly theirs, emphasize creative reclamation and survival through transformation.

The act of crafting a "new skin" becomes not only personal but collective statement of defiance in face of mutilation or erasure. By weaving the image of a defaced mural into a deeply personal poem about re-fashioning identity, Phillips creates a powerful convergence of the personal and political. The vandalized portrait of George Floyd becomes an emblem of both violence toward marginalized bodies and the enduring impulse to rebuild, resist, and reclaim a sense of self or community. It metaphorically represents how marginalized individuals, even when visible, can be dishonoured or erased.

Phillips's work frequently portrays experiences of estrangement, whether via skin, identity, or containment, and reimagines embodiment as a site of power and persistence. Death, brokenness, and ruin often serve as catalysts for regeneration, beauty, knowledge, and resistance, turning decline into resilience. Consistent vivid imagery of rotten bodies nurturing flowers, air tasting like stones, reclaimed skin built of mud, lands poetic transformation in the tactile and uncanny.

Phillips uses sparse punctuation, lower-case syntax, and enjambment/extensions - structures that feel unstable yet intimate, mirroring themes of identity and rupture. References to racial violence, structural exclusion, and trans identity are woven into lyric intimacy, linking the personal and the systemic. Across poems, survival is framed as imaginative and material reclamation, where bodies, landscapes, memory, and language themselves become acts of resistance.

Xan Forest Phillips crafts poetry that feels both delicate and disruptive; tender in imagery and fierce in social awareness. Their work traverses personal histories and public violence, reconfiguring decay, desire, body, and belonging into bold, sensory experience. Each poem is a fragment of reclamation of identity, memory, and belonging reconstituted through language that lingers uncomfortably beautiful.

Informed readers who bring knowledge and sensitivity to the work are essential and without their insight, the poetic devices may falter, and meaningful engagement on both emotional and intellectual levels becomes unlikely. Inclusion of experimental poems those of Phillips' in anthologies and curricula has prompted a

reassessment of traditional literary categories and blurred the demarcation between mainstream and experimental poetry.

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