Difficulty in Anglo-American Poetry:

A Linguistic and Empirical Perspective

DAVIDE CASTIGLIONE, BA, MA

Thesis submitted to the University of Nottingham for

the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

September 2015

Abstract

This project sets out to develop a model for a study of *difficulty* in poetry as systematic and nuanced as possible. In doing so, it endeavours to make a significant theoretical and practical contribution to the fields of stylistics, poetics and literary theory. Throughout the twentieth century, the notion of difficulty in poetry has never ceased to interest linguists, literary theorists, psychologists and researchers in education. The popularity of the notion among non-specialist is equally significant, as it is not uncommon for readers to justify their lack of interest in poetry on the grounds of its supposed difficulty. Notwithstanding this, the dynamics of text-reader interaction – the defining trait of difficulty, as argued in Chapter 1 – remains notably underexplored. This thesis addresses this gap in the literature by (a) providing a psychologically plausible and linguistically sound account of difficulty; and by (b) unifying under a coherent framework the insights offered by a large body of materials – from critical readings of literary works to anecdotal evidence, from psychological models of comprehension to controlled psycholinguistic experiments.

In terms of methodology, a linguistic, text-based approach is intertwined with an empirical, reader-based one. This combined effort leads to an in-depth analysis of a set of poems from both perspectives (Chapter 3 to 5). Such a qualitative approach allows for the identification of textual and readerly components typical of difficulty. On the textual side, I identify twenty-four features, called *linguistic indicators of difficulty* and affecting all the linguistic levels – graphology, syntax, lexis, semantics and text structure. Based on scholarly remarks and experimental evidence, these indicators are likely to hamper readers' comprehension and thus increase the processing effort they require. These two main readerly dimensions of

difficulty I qualify as *online* (i.e. affecting the processing effort in actual reading) and *offline* (i.e. affecting the post-reading understanding of a poem). In turn, online and offline difficulty are cued by observable readerly behaviours (e.g. interpretive uncertainty, slowed-down reading, statements of rejection) that are explored in Chapters 4 and 5. Overall, difficulty is viewed as a response phenomenon that has a strong linguistic motivation.

For reasons of focus and critical consistency, the model is applied to twentieth and twentieth-first century Anglo-American poems only. This temporal restriction acknowledges the critically established connection between difficulty and modernism (e.g. Adams 1991, Adamson 1999, Diepeveen 2003). The case studies from Chapter 3 to 5 focus on Wallace Stevens, Ezra Pound, Susan Howe and Jeremy H. Prynne as representing different aspects of difficulty. Chapter 6 extends this purview to a larger corpus, featuring Gertrude Stein, T. S. Eliot, E. E. Cummings, Hart Crane, Charles Olson, Dylan Thomas, John Ashbery and Charles Bernstein. All these poets have been deemed 'difficult' by other critics, so the corpus rests on an intersubjective agreement that was missing in previous accounts. The hope is that the model proposed will be fruitfully extended and applied to non-Anglo-American literary traditions as well as to poetry written in earlier centuries.

Keywords: difficulty, Anglo-American poetry, stylistics, empirical approaches, reader response, processing effort, comprehension, modernism

Publications

- Castiglione, Davide (2013c). 'The channel of (mis)communication: semantic and pragmatic deviances in two poems by Geoffrey Hill and Susan Howe'. Online proceedings of the Annual Conference of the Poetics and Linguistics Association (PALA).
- Castiglione, Davide (2013b). 'The semantics of difficult poems: deriving a checklist of linguistic phenomena'. *Journal of Literary Semantics*, 2013; 42(1): 115-140.
- Castiglione, Davide (2013a). 'Sereni e il processo traduttivo: analisi sincronica e diacronica di una versione da Williams' [Sereni and the translation process: synchronic and diachronic analysis of a translation from Williams']. *Strumenti Critici*, 2013, a. XXVIII, 2.

Acknowledgments

The spark that has kindled this project harks back to one day like many, except that I was leafing through a book of one of my favourite poets and suddenly found myself absorbed and fascinated by a few lines that were stubbornly escaping me. It took me four years to begin to understand what was happening to me during that moment. These four years have been full of anxious exploration and intellectual excitement; there have also been moments of discouragement, but these, in hindsight, turned out to pave the way for long-sought solutions. This project would have been much less valuable, in objective and in personal terms, had not been for all the people who have supported me in so many ways.

First and foremost, I am grateful to my lead supervisor, Dr Violeta Sotirova, for her unfailing guidance. She made me realise how subtle and nuanced a stylistics analysis has to be. She has also taught me that unwarranted claims and one-sided arguments are the worst enemy of scholarship. I will treasure her example and will do my best to follow it in the pursuit of my academic career. A huge thank you goes also to Dr Neal Alexander, who was my second supervisor during the first two years of the project. He has provided useful advice and book references that have given this thesis a stronger literary basis than it would have otherwise been possible. Professor Kathy Conklin has also provided valuable advice and encouraged me to explore the pioneering potential of psycholinguistics in shedding light into literary phenomena.

In addition, I wish to thank my fellow researchers, in particular Louise Nuttall, Eric Rundquist, Lizzie Stewart, Nicola Thomas and Emma Zimmermann, who agreed to proofread parts of this thesis and made perceptive comments which have influenced the finalised form of this thesis.

I am also indebted to Lorenzo Mastropierro for giving me methodological advice regarding the analysis of some of the data in Chapter 4. Along with the my peers mentioned before, Yaxiao Cui, Arwa Hasan, Jennifer Sanchez-Davies and Anna Päivärinta have enriched my views on stylistics and have contributed to insightful discussions during our Stylistics and Discourse Analysis Reading Group meetings. A thank you goes also to the anonymous participants that provided the data for Chapters 4 and 5, and to the University of Nottingham for granting me a European Union Research Excellence Scholarship, without which this project would not have been possible.

My stay in Nottingham would have been less meaningful had I not met Didko and Nelly, whose friendship has accompanied me throughout my highs and lows during the last three years. From Didko I have learned many things, among which how to recognise a good wine from a bad one and how to make a good graph; Nelly has been sympathetic towards my concerns and worries, always giving wise and discreet advice. I have also been lucky to meet Delia, Bruno and little Vanessa: their determination, vitality and delicious meals have refreshed me many times. My dearest friends outside Nottingham have also been an unbelievable source of support, laugh and relief: thank you Bonač, Dario, Eleonora, Giacomo, Roberto and Silvia.

Thanks to my wonderful family, who has believed in me and supported me during all these years, both emotionally and financially. Last, but not least, thanks to Rossana and to her wandering love for life which I share; thank you for sharing with me the best and truest part of this life-changing experience.

Table of contents

Abstract ... 2
Publications ... 4
Acknowledgments ... 5
Table of contents ... 7
Table of figures ... 10
List of tables ... 11
Introduction and outline of the thesis ... 12
1 Difficulty in poetry: the state-of-the-art ... 15
1.1 The typological enterprise ... 15
1.2 Language-centred approaches ... 21
1.3 Reception-oriented approaches ... 31
1.3.1 Yaron's empirical approach to difficulty ... 38
1.4 Recurrent themes in literary criticism and theory ... 43
1.4.1 The representational problem ... 43
1.4.2 The plurality of difficulty ... 44
1.4.3 Elitism, obscurity and its philosophical roots ... 48
1.4.4 The production side: poets on difficulty ... 52
1.5 The notion of difficulty: revised ... 55
2 Components of difficulty ... 59
2.1 Models and constructs ... 60
2.1.1 Comprehension and literary processing ... 60
2.1.2 Meaning in language and meaning in poetry ... 69
2.2 Linguistic indicators ... 76
2.2.1 Orthography and aspects of graphology ... 77
2.2.2 Lexis ... 78
2.2.3 Syntax ... 81
2.2.4 Semantics ... 87
2.2.5 Text structure and discourse features ... 96
2.2.6 Beyond language ... 104
2.2.7 Linguistic indicators of difficulty: an overview ... 107
2.3 A working model for the study of poetic difficulty ... 110
3 The linguistic indicators in six poems: a stylistic study ... 119

3.1 Mark Strand – The Late Hour ... 125
3.1.1 Narrativity and coherence ... 126
3.1.2 Syntax and line ... 134
3.1.3 Posited processing and comprehension ... 135
3.2 Wallace Stevens – 'What We See Is What We Think' ... 138
3.2.1 Problems of reference and unusual word combinations ... 141
3.2.2 Apposition and analogy. The noun phrase series ... 148
3.2.3 Posited processing strategies ... 152
3.3 Geoffrey Hill – Stanza '33' ... 153
3.3.1 Coherence and degree of textual dependence ... 154
3.3.2 The ambiguous status of the addressee ... 161
3.3.3 Lexical density and Latinate vocabulary ... 162
3.3.4 Posited processes and reading strategies ... 166
3.4 Ezra Pound – an extract from Canto LXXXI ... 168
3.4.1 Proper nouns and encyclopaedic knowledge ... 170
3.4.2 Narrativity and problematic speaker identification ... 172
3.4.3 Presence and lack of coherence ... 174
3.4.4 Solving the controversy through posited processing ... 178
3.5 Susan Howe – *A small swatch bluish-green…* ... 181
3.5.1 Blurred constituency and structural ambiguities ... 183
3.5.2 Ideational shifts and unusual collocations ... 188
3.5.4 Deferred symbolism and intertextuality ... 190
3.5.5 Reading strategies and posited processes ... 192
3.6 Jeremy Prynne – Lobster-orange, shag in parvo… ... 193
3.6.1 Referential disruption and avoidance of deixis ... 195
3.6.2 'Empty' narrativity ... 201
3.6.3 Implied author and juxtaposition technique ... 204
3.6.4 Posited processing and reading strategies ... 207
3.7 Conclusion ... 208
3.7.1 The indicators: revised and compared across the poems ... 208
3.7.2 A note on authorial intention ... 215
3.7.3 Interim summary ... 217
4 Testing offline difficulty ... 219
4.1 Empirical research on poetry comprehension ... 219
4.2 Aim of the study ... 224
4.3 Method ... 225

4.3.1 Participants 225
4.3.2 Materials 226
4.3.3 Design 227
4.3.4 Procedure 230
4.4 Results and discussion 231
4.4.1 Self-assessed comprehension 231
4.4.2 Comprehension problems 232
4.4.3 Topics and inferences 241
4.4.4 Enjoyment, 'deep' meaning and compensatory strategies 258
4.5 Conclusion 261
5 Testing online difficulty 265
5.1 Reading time as a measure of processing effort 265
5.2 The use of reading times in the processing of literature 266
5.3 Aim of the study 271
5.4 Method 271
5.4.1 Materials 271
5.4.2 Participants 273
5.4.3 Design 275
5.4.4 Procedure 277
5.5 Results and discussion: online difficulty and processing profiles 278
5.6 Conclusion 292
6 The various manifestations of difficulty 295
6.1 The corpus 296
6.2 A stylistic survey of difficulty 300
6.3 Conclusion 319
7 General conclusions 323
7.1 The significance of the findings 323
7.2 Future directions 329
Appendix A 333
Consent form for research study 333
Appendix B 334
Processing profiles for the poems by Strand, Stevens, Hill, Howe, and Prynne 334
References 336

Table of figures

Figure 1 Kintsch's Construction-Integration model (adapted from Harley 2008) ... 60
Figure 2 Basic components of comprehension (adapted from Zwaan 2004) 61
Figure 3 A neurocognitive model of literary reading (from Jacobs 2014)..... 67
Figure 4 A working model for the study of difficulty in poetry..... 112
Figure 5 Processing differences between difficult and accessible poems 117
Figure 6 - The personal questionnaire (offline difficulty study) 225
Figure 7 The pencil-and-paper questionnaire for the comprehension task..... 228
Figure 8 Self-assessed comprehension per poem 231
Figure 9 Three interpretive comments by participant 10..... 255
Figure 10 Participants' enjoyment of the six poems 258
Figure 11 The personal questionnaire (online study)..... 273
Figure 12 On-screen instructions for the reading task 277
Figure 13 Visualisation of average reading speed per text 282
Figure 14 Processing profile for the Ballard extract..... 286
Figure 15 Processing profile for the Pound extract 286
Figure 16 Processing profile for the Strand poem 334
Figure 17 Processing profile for the Stevens poem 334
Figure 18 Processing profile for the Hill poem 334
Figure 19 Processing profile for the Prynne poem..... 335

List of tables

Table 1 Linguistic indicators of difficulty 108
Table 2 Six poems as case studies for the indicators: an overview 124
Table 3 Co-occurrence of 'blue', 'vault' and 'sky' in the COCA 143
Table 4 Some occurrences of 'Yes I know' in the COCA 155
Table 5 Distribution of the linguistic indicators of difficulty in six poems 211
Table 6 Difficulty-related findings in empirical research 219
Table 7 Comments verbalising local comprehension problems 233
Table 8 Wordlist for responses to Q3 - Strand 244
Table 9 Wordlist for responses to Q3 - Stevens 246
Table 10 Wordlist for responses to Q3 - Hill 247
Table 11 Wordlist for responses to Q3 - Pound 249
Table 12 Wordlist for responses to Q3 - Howe 249
Table 13 Wordlist for responses to Q3 - Prynne 251
Table 14 Summary of elicited responses per poem 261
Table 15 Possible numerical factors influencing reading speed 280
Table 16 Average speed and SD across lines per text 282
Table 17 The corpus of poems surveyed: an overview 298

Introduction and outline of the thesis

From scholarly accounts to informal remarks by readers, *difficulty* is among the most tenacious concepts fuelling the debate on twentieth and twentieth-first century poetry. On one hand, its everyday usage tends to occur in derogatory contexts: a difficult poem is a hurdle for readers, who often respond to it defensively. On the other hand, some literary scholars consider difficulty a defining property of great literature. The proliferation of near-synonyms such as *obscurity*, *opacity* and *ambiguity* further complicates the picture, while the presence of a website devoted to the issue (arduity.com) testifies to the interest difficulty arouses also among non-specialist readers. The presence of competing terms, the pluralism of attested stances, and the rift between specialised and everyday accounts all witness the impact exerted by this construct. However, perhaps because of its very popularity, there is little agreement on what actually difficulty is and how it can be best captured and analysed. What is needed is a clarifying effort that will pave the way to a satisfactory definition and application of this concept. This is the overall goal the present work sets out to pursue. More specifically, the thesis addresses the following research questions:

1. How can previous accounts of difficulty converge into a definition of the phenomenon that makes it amenable to a stylistic and empirical investigation?
2. Is it possible to isolate a set of linguistic features that have a demonstrable share in the attribution of difficulty?
3. Is it possible to tease out, both speculatively and empirically, the readerly processes demanded by the linguistic configuration of difficult poems?

4. Is it possible to provide an explanatory basis for critics' and readers' intuitions that there are different kinds of poetic difficulty? In other words, is it possible to build a taxonomy starting from the nuanced interaction of linguistic features and effects, rather than establishing a pre-analytic grid?
5. Is the model developed in the thesis able to answer questions and problems posed by previous accounts?

Question 1 is addressed in Chapter 1, which provides a broad and multifaceted picture for difficulty mainly from the perspective of literary theory. Question 2 is addressed in Chapter 2, 3 and 6. More specifically, Chapter 2 focuses on the relation between linguistic deviance and impeded comprehension in order to break down difficulty into its several linguistic and response components. The interaction of such components is applied to stylistic analysis in Chapter 3 and 6. The former chapter offers six in-depth stylistic case studies of single poems while engaging with critical controversies on the texts and authors examined. The latter provides a more flexible survey of how difficulty is instantiated in a wider range of poems and poetic extracts. The linguistic framework adopted in these two chapters is eclectic and integrational, combining insights from traditional grammar, systemic-functional linguistics, cognitive poetics, corpus evidence of deviant collocations and ideas from pragmatics – both Neo-Gricean and Relevance Theoretic. In short, all these conceptual tools are recruited insofar as they shed light on specific aspects of the texts under scrutiny. While I am well aware of the different theoretical implications of each framework, such implications do not seem to exert an appreciable impact on the analytic practice itself. Very much in the practice-oriented spirit of stylistics, I make

an explicit attempt to overcome 'the territorialism and competitiveness of linguistic schools' (Austin 1994: 136).

Chapter 3 also addresses the speculative side of Question 3 (but see also Dillon 1978). It does so by detailing the reading process for each poem analysed, integrating the results of the stylistic analysis with the psychological constructs and processing operations outlined in Chapter 2. The empirical side of Question 3 is addressed in Chapters 4 and 5 instead. Chapter 4 reports the results of a comprehension task on the set of poems stylistically analysed in Chapter 3. Using these very poems again, Chapter 5 draws on psycholinguistic methods to establish a cline of difficulty based on processing effort cued by reading times. Overall, these two chapters explore and test the range of readerly responses associated with difficulty.

Question 4 is a central concern of the thesis, and as such it is addressed from Chapter 3 to 6. The texts of the poems are constantly compared, and the same applies to the readers' responses to them. The aim is that of identifying which component or 'area' of difficulty each poem elicits more strongly. This operation is carried out in the belief that 'stylistic studies are essentially comparative in nature' (Halliday 1971: 341). Finally, Question 5 is addressed at various points in the thesis, especially in the partial conclusions to each chapter and in the general conclusions (Chapter 7), where indications for further research are also provided.

The ambition of the thesis is the construction (Chapter 2), validation (Chapters 3-6) and evaluation (Conclusion) of a model to study poetic difficulty in a principled manner. If successful, similar models may be developed for specific response types, thus building specific 'grammars' for each effect.

1 Difficulty in poetry: the state-of-the-art

This first chapter provides a comprehensive overview of what difficulty and related concepts have come to signify for scholars from different traditions. The review mainly adopts a chronological approach that allows us to appreciate the conceptualisation of difficulty over the last decades. In the interest of clarity, this approach is complemented by a thematic one whereby the sources examined are grouped according to their emphasis, premises and approaches. Studies are grouped into 'typological' (Section 1.1), 'language-centred' (1.2) and 'reception-oriented' (1.3). This categorisation also allows for recurrent themes associated with difficulty to emerge – these themes are negotiated in section 1.4. The chapter concludes by identifying the most relevant gaps in scholarship whilst proposing a working definition of difficulty (1.5).

1.1 The typological enterprise

Although the concept of literary difficulty 'begins with commentary on Homer and Holy Scriptures' (Adams 1991: 23), the rise of critical studies centring on difficulty parallels the rise of Modernism in the early twentieth century. As early as 1917, Viktor Shklovsky described poetic language as 'a *difficult*, roughened, impeded language' (1998 [1917]: 22; emphasis added). A decade later, I. A. Richards published his foundational work *Practical Criticism* (1929), thus becoming 'the first Anglo-American literary critic to be largely concerned with the notion of difficulty in reading' (Touponce 1991: 54). The typological enterprise began shortly after, when Richards' most talented disciple, William Empson, published his *Seven Types*

of Ambiguities (1930). Empson provides a wide definition of ambiguity which brings it close to common-sense intuitions about difficulty:

> 'Ambiguity' itself means an indecision as to what you mean, an intention to mean several things, a probability that one or other or both of two things has been meant, and the fact that a statement has several meanings. (Empson 1930: 7)

Empson uses ambiguity in an extended sense, as the above definition implies and as he himself admits (1930: 1). Such a wide definition gives him enough scope to work out a classification in the remainder of his work. He does so by analysing a range of poetic excerpts from Medieval English literature (Chaucer) up to a then contemporary author (Eliot). Although he crucially grounds ambiguity in 'the degree of logical or grammatical disorder' of a poem (1930: 62), Empson's types of ambiguity are far from clear-cut.

Under the first type Empson groups 'comparison' and 'false antithesis' (1930: 28) since they 'leave it to the reader vaguely to invent something, and make him leave it at the back of his mind' (1930: 29). The second type occurs instead whenever 'two or more meanings are resolved into one' (1930: 62) and Empson mainly exemplifies them through syntactically ambiguous passages. It therefore seems that the taxonomic principle at work here is the conflict (first type) versus coexistence (second type) of multiple meanings. In the third type, 'two ideas, which are connected only by being both relevant in the context, can be given in one word simultaneously' (1930: 130). According to Empson, the pun, the allegory and the continued metaphor are responsible for this third type of ambiguity. As for the fourth type, it 'occurs when two or more meanings of a statement do not agree among themselves' (1930: 168). Again, the coexistence (third type) versus conflict (fourth type) of meanings arguably underpins the

taxonomy. Yet, rather confusingly, the only difference Empson acknowledges between the third and the fourth type is to do with the presence or lack of authorial self-awareness: 'I put into the third type cases where one was intended to be mainly conscious of a verbal subtlety' (1930: 168). The remaining types are formulated in a manner that makes them either unverifiable ('an ambiguity of the fifth type occurs when the author is discovering the idea in the act of writing', 1930: 195) or hardly distinguishable from previous types ('the seventh type of ambiguity involves both the anthropological idea of opposite and the psychological idea of context' 1930: 251). Overall, the taxonomy depends on the critic's own introspection and it rests on what is sometimes vague critical language. Of course, the advances made by scholarship since Empson's publication help to explain and justify such weaknesses.

Three decades later, Press (1963) developed Empson's typological enterprise by offering a wide-ranging perspective on the phenomenon of poetic obscurity. Press has chapters on both the textual side of poetry (entitled 'vocabulary and syntax', 'reference', 'themes and images') and its contextual embeddedness ('common readers', 'indifferent writers', 'private countries', 'public worlds'). Such a catalogue, I believe, serves the critic as a set of convenient labels for breaking up his arguments, but fails to illustrate how the identified facets of obscurity interact and intertwine. This would have occurred, for instance, had Press returned to previously analysed extracts under the varying angle of each specific chapter.

Having said that, Press does make insightful remarks, some of which predate motifs that were to emerge in later criticism (see 1.4). He begins by denouncing some of the misuses that *obscurity* may give rise to:

> Indeed the very notion of obscurity in poetry is one of those convenient platonic abstractions – comfortable and sanitary dug-outs

> as Aldous Huxley calls them – into which men retreat to guard their prejudices from the blast of uncomfortable facts. (1963: 2)

While the 'artificial' (i.e. semiotic) nature of the construct cannot be denied, there is still a real, experiential basis to the phenomenon it designates. It is this important basis that is overshadowed in Press's work by social and ethical considerations such as those that surface in the extract quoted (e.g. 'prejudices'; see also 1.4.3).

In the 1960s and early 1970s the typological drive behind Empson (1930) and Press (1963) had waned due to a surge of linguistic approaches to difficulty that attended instead to textual phenomena (see 1.2). It was only in 1978 that a philosophically-minded scholar such as Steiner revived the typological enterprise in his influential essay 'On Difficulty'. In this work difficulty is given prominence for the first time over ambiguity and obscurity, and as Vincent remarks in a recent review of the work, 'He [Steiner] has, after all, become an unavoidable figure for critics discussing difficulty' (2003: 8). Steiner's starting point is very much a common-sense question: 'what do we mean when we say: 'this poem, or this passage in this poem is *difficult*?'' (1978: 18; emphasis is the author's). In order to answer this question, he develops a fourfold typology that is appealing due to its ease of application. His four types of difficulty ('contingent', 'modal', 'tactical' and 'ontological') are ordered following a cline of increasing abstraction from the written artefact: from the textual level to the very conditions of its existence. Next, each type is presented and discussed.

Contingent difficulty stems from a mismatch between the encyclopaedic knowledge presupposed by a text and that available to readers, who therefore need to 'look up' a word, an expression or an allusion. Steiner grounds this type in the lexical level (e.g. rare words,

technical words, neologisms) and exemplifies it through Pound's *Cantos*. He further argues that solving a contingent difficulty leads to empirical understanding but not to genuine comprehension. While the distinction is important, the current thesis treats 'understanding' and 'comprehension' as synonyms while adding an interpretive level (see Chapter 2).

Modal difficulty 'lies in the eye of the beholder' (1978: 33), having to do with the reader's inability to cope with unfamiliar modes of expression. It is therefore heavily dependent on *literary competence*, that is, readers' familiarity with the conventions regulating literary production and reception (see Culler [1975] 2002). Steiner illustrates this type by discussing a seventeenth century lyric by Lovelace in which a parallel between hunting and Eros is drawn, so that an expression like 'angry shafts' is made to stand both for the arrows and the phallus (30). As Vincent puts it in his interpretation of modal difficulty, 'the reader experiences the state of not inhabiting the subjectivity, or epistemic position, that could make sense of a poem' (2003: 5).

Tactical difficulty 'has its source in the writer's will or in the failure of adequacy between his intention and his performative means' (1978: 33). This type concerns those stylistic devices contrived by poets and resulting in difficulty. Vincent attempts to question this type by showing how intentionality, associated by Steiner with the tactical level, applies to the contingent level too. In order to do so, he reports an interview in which the poet John Ashbery admits to having purposefully used an unfamiliar word (indexed under the 'contingent' label by Steiner) (Vincent 2003: 7). Vincent's criticism seems misdirected, though, as Steiner never claimed that the contingent type excludes intentionality. A fairer criticism would concentrate on Steiner's choice to illustrate his *tactical difficulty* through syntactic and grammatical examples only, arguably to preserve a neat but

ultimately artificial correspondence between linguistic levels and difficulty types.

Finally, *ontological difficulty* 'confront[s] us with blank questions about the nature of human speech, about the status of significance' (1978: 41). This type stands at the furthest remove from the actual text and therefore it is not associated with any specific instantiation. Steiner identifies its origin in the nineteenth century disenchantment of the artist with the society. He sees this existential condition exemplified in Mallarmé and Heidegger, who strived to break 'the chain of exemplary inheritance' (43) from Homer's public-focused narrative. More prosaically, this difficulty type can be conceived as the outcome of self-reflexive, metalinguistic reading modes that were gaining currency, through deconstruction, at the time when Steiner was writing his essay.

Although Steiner assesses his own classification as only provisional, he appears confident that his types encompass all sorts of difficulties experienced by readers (1978: 47). Yet, his typology is necessarily crude and, as I have shown, there are some conceptual problems within the tactical and ontological types. Another criticism, advanced by Vincent (2003: 4), is that Steiner's types only make sense from the perspective of a 'penetrative' reading mode (e.g. reading to decipher, to understand, to 'get' a message). This issue is further discussed later, when reviewing the most radical exponents of the receptionist viewpoint.

In spite of its shortcomings, Steiner's work arguably remains the most solid attempt at a typological classification of difficulty. Its applicability can be inferred, for instance, in Baker's review of a poetry collection by Geoffrey Hill (2002). Without citing Steiner and without drawing upon his terminology, Baker links the difficulty of Geoffrey Hill to 'the mass of learning applied to it' (contingent difficulty) and the difficulty of Jeremy Prynne to his writing techniques aimed at resisting interpretation (tactical

difficulty). Consider also how easily the following remark by Shklovsky predates Steiner's modal difficulty: 'the usual poetic language for Pushkin's contemporaries was the elegant style of Derzhavin; but Pushkin's style, because it seemed trivial then, was unexpectedly difficult for them' (1998 [1917]: 21; see 1.4.2 on diachronic issues and aesthetic history).

1.2 Language-centred approaches

The categories developed by typological approaches to difficulty may have intuitive appeal, but they ultimately work like top-down grids imposed on the phenomenon they purport to explain. The language-centred approaches emerging in the 1960s provided a corrective to this situation. These approaches are less keen on establishing typologies and instead focus on some of the linguistic micro-components leading to difficulty. It would be misguided, however, to assume that language-centred approaches set themselves against typological studies. In fact, in a paper unanimously regarded as foundational for stylistics, Jakobson (1960) openly endorses Empson's position:

> Ambiguity is an intrinsic, inalienable character of any self-focused message, briefly, a corollary feature of poetry. Let us repeat with Empson (1947): 'The machinations of ambiguity are among the very roots of poetry'. Not only the message itself but also its addresser and addressee become ambiguous. (1960: 5)

Jakobson's position is in turn echoed by Fabb, asserting that 'verbal art is experienced as aesthetic because it exploits to the full every option for making verbal behaviour difficult' (2002: 217). In his seminal paper, Jakobson further connects ambiguity to the medieval distinction between

ornatus facilis and *ornatus difficilis* (1960: 5). As explained by Garavelli, the latter is characterised by a higher density of tropes than the former (2010 [1988]: 280).

In contrast to her predecessors, Nowottny (1962) gives equal weight to both ambiguity and obscurity, alongside *allusion* (1962: 147-173). When it comes to ambiguity, she seems to build on Empson's definition while contextualising and clarifying it: '[ambiguity] is now associated with such concepts as ambivalence, tension, paradox and irony, and with interest in metaphor and symbol as means by which the poet can *evade or transcend unequivocal assertion*.' (1962: 147; emphasis added). To illustrate the point, the author discusses a syntactic ambiguity by Andrew Marvell in which 'sound' can be read both as a noun and a verb. While ambiguity is usefully clarified by both definition and exemplification, obscurity remains a slippery concept. Nowottny links it to the 'freedom to multiply significant meanings', leading to a 'language purified of colour [that] seems to the reader to be opaque' (1962: 219). In Nowottny's formulation, obscurity absorbs some of the senses ascribed by Empson to ambiguity (i.e. the multiplicity of senses). Unfortunately, her evocative but sometimes vague language (e.g. 'language purified of colour') partly undermines the linguistic approach she avowedly endorses. This limitation is less Nowottny's fault than a by-product of the unclear (back then) separation between linguistic analysis and literary criticism. The resulting merging of descriptive and evaluative comments is therefore not unique to her, as Jakobson has been criticised by Attridge for similar reasons (1987: 18).

Nevertheless, Nowottny makes subtle linguistic remarks; for instance, when analysing Thomas's 'There Was a Saviour', a poem that presents 'considerable difficulty' (1962: 188), she notes that the shifting tenses and pronouns makes it difficult to follow (188; see 3.5.1). The analysis represents an occasion for dealing with both textual allusions (the tracing of

Eliot's influence in Thomas's lines) and extra-textual ones (the historical situation referred to in the poem). Finally, the lack of a necessarily direct connection between 'difficulty of diction' and 'difficulty of theme' (221) and the hurdle represented by the lack of 'a real context of situation' in all poems (154) are other points well worth bearing in mind.

Nowottny's contribution is extended by Leech (1969). His seminal monograph on the language of poetry is widely regarded as a foundational text in the field, and remains impressive today due to its scope and rigour (but see Semino 2002: 29 for a critique of Leech's assumption that there is a unique and well-defined 'literary register' in poetry). Leech complements traditional rhetoric with descriptive linguistics while occasionally venturing into aesthetic evaluation. He is more careful than Nowottny, however, in not turning this interdisciplinary interaction into an indistinct cohabitation.

The premise from which Leech tackles difficulty is the strong interrelation between linguistic deviation and comprehension: 'a linguistic deviation is a disruption of the normal processes of communication: it leaves a gap, as it were, in one's comprehension of the text' (1969: 61). This is the main assumption behind the current thesis, as I emphasised in the abstract. The catalogue of linguistic deviations provided by Leech includes neologism, *functional conversion* (i.e. a word fulfilling a function usually extraneous to its grammatical class), changes in the transitivity rules of verbs, typographic and semantic deviations (Leech 1969: 43-48; see Chapter 2). Leech also highlights the relation between 'semantic oddities' and the rhetorical figures embodying them: oxymoron, paradox, tautology, pleonasm and periphrasis (1969: 132, 137-143). Later in his career, he returns to the relationship between linguistic deviation and enhanced interpretive effort: 'dysfunctional features, e.g. distortions of linguistic norms, obscurities and ambiguities, challenge the reader to find new avenues of interpretation' (2010: 116). A

similar concept appears under the name of *decodage maxime* ('maximum decoding') in structuralist stylistics (Riffaterre 1971: 71).

Another merit of Leech is that of refining ambiguity by building on the efforts previously made by Empson and Nowottny. Semantically, both grammatical and lexical ambiguities 'can generate homonymy, polysemy or a combination of the two' (1969: 205). Rhetorically, ambiguities result in puns (1969: 209-211; for a manifold discussion of puns, see Culler (Ed.) 1988). Together with linguistic deviations, ambiguities are instrumental in creating what Leech terms the 'indeterminate significance' (1969: 215) of the poetic text. Such overall indeterminacy is pragmatically enhanced by the distance between the 'given situation' provided by the text and the 'inferred situation' reconstructed by the reader. According to Leech, the resulting 'contextual implication' of a poem (1969: 190) is much less constrained than in other text-types, thus making poetic communication particularly open to interpretation.

A decade later, Dillon (1978) analyses demanding literary texts by combining linguistic analysis and insights from psycholinguistics. The current thesis supports his assumption that 'paradoxically, we can learn about how we read simple texts by analysing the source of our troubles with difficult ones' (1978: xxix). His selection of texts reflects this commitment:

> Most of the examples are drawn from five writers with deserved reputations for difficulty: Edmund Spenser, John Milton, Henry James, Wallace Stevens, and William Faulkner. Each of these is difficult in some areas but not in others. We can in fact establish a taxonomy of difficulty: a principal source of difficulty in Stevens has to do with appositives; relations of Subject and Object are more problematic in Milton than in others; identification of main verbs is unusually problematic in James, and so on. Further, we can describe which

> structural predilections of particular authors create difficulties of perception and comprehension. (1978: xxx)

First, Dillon selects canonical authors from the sixteenth century (Spenser) to the twentieth (Stevens and Faulkner). Second, he proposes that difficulty could be thought of as a map of which 'some areas' (1978: xxx) are occupied by specific stylistic preferences (see also 3.7.1 in this thesis). In doing so, Dillon pays tribute to the taxonomic tradition reviewed earlier, and in fact Empson is often cited in his work. Of course, Nowottny (1962) and Leech (1969) also make numerous remarks on the sources of linguistic obscurity or difficulty by drawing on a range of texts. They have, however, been less explicit than Dillon in associating stylistic preferences with difficulty types. Arguably one of the few limitations of Dillon's work is the initial assumption (which he revises as the analyses proceed) that reading mirrors grammatical analysis. I would contend that the grammatical analysis serves purposes that are exogenous to the study of reading.

Dillon's contribution goes beyond the necessarily brief review given here. He also develops a conceptual framework for difficulty, referred to in the next chapter. It is unfortunate that his work is seldom if ever referenced in more recent studies of difficulty. Arguably, the rise of post-structuralism in the same years overshadowed this 'late-comer' in the same way that it overshadowed Riffaterre's 1978 semiotic perspective on poetry (see 1.3).

Dillon's enterprise appears to inspire Chafe (1991), who proposes a linguistic case study of difficulty by comparing two narrative extracts – one from Henry James's *The Ambassadors* (1903), the other from Edith Wharton's *Ethan Frome* (1911). Chafe reports that James's extract was deemed harder than Wharton's by all six of the reading participants in an informal reading test (1991: 10). He explains these readerly intuitions by

means of linguistic analysis. The first remark he makes is that James's British English is bound to be unfamiliar to the American readers who undertook the test. Chafe further identifies as potential causes of difficulty (a) the decontextualised use of proper names; (b) syntactic embedding; (c) use of negation; (d) passive constructions; and (e) nominalizations leading to detachment. This procedure of explaining readerly verbalised intuitions through linguistic analysis informs the approach adopted in this thesis.

Toolan (1993) and Sell (1993) also propose stylistic cases of difficulty, but in contrast to Chafe (1991), they (a) do not compare two or more texts, (b) more consistently try to ground grammar in the wider context, and (c) restrict their attention to difficulty in poetry. Toolan's approach to Geoffrey Hill's 'On Society and Commerce', defined as 'a difficult poem' (1993: 33), is straightforward and effective. Toolan begins his analysis by assuming that the content of the poem is reflected in its title, which is granted its traditional function of topic-marker. Next, referring the reader to Halliday and Hasan's 1976 study on cohesion, Toolan identifies patterns of lexical cohesion cued by semantically related words. He then relies on the associative axis of language (1993: 34) to interpret selected passages. As a consequence expressions that prove challenging at the syntagmatic level are accessed through paradigmatic considerations. To illustrate the point, Toolan discusses the line 'shrunken, magnified (nest, holocaust)' and the phrase 'fatted marble' in the following way:

> Perhaps 'nest' and 'holocaust' are antonymically intended, particularly if we link 'nest' up with the mention of 'home' three lines earlier: a nest is small and compact (like Holland in relation to Europe?), domestic, familial, a protection. And yet 'nest' has other idiomatic links too: 'a nest of vipers', 'a wasp's nest'. (1993: 37)

> the odd phrase 'fatted marble' surely calls to mind [...] the only common collocate of 'fatted', in 'fatted calf'; and the latter expression's association with (propitiatory?) sacrifice has a complex relevance both to this stanza and the whole poem. (1993: 39)

The language of the poem is repeatedly contrasted to patterns of everyday language, which allows for the appreciation of the emergence of new meanings. Toolan's linguistic inferences move beyond stylistic description and towards literary interpretation. This procedure is particularly apt to account for the context-activated puns (e.g. 'classic falls', 'catches his death', 'in relief') and polysemic words (e.g. 'custom', 'use') skilfully deployed by Hill.

While Toolan's approach extends from text to (linguistic) context, Sell goes the other way. He outlines the context of reception of Eliot's *The Waste Land* and then proceeds to apply conceptual tools from pragmatics. In particular, he suggests that *The Waste Land* flouts each of the four maxims that constitute Grice's *cooperative principle* (Grice 1975). For instance, if the maxim of relation states that speaker and listener should be able to see why things are relevant, in *The Waste Land* there is a problem of relevance 'between the poem's five parts, and between the main passages within those parts' (Sell 1993: 139). Likewise, the *maxim of manner*, stating the need to be clear, ordered and concise, is infringed by 'the abruptness with which the voices are introduced', which 'was one of the things which caused the first readers most difficulty' (1993: 144). The *maxim of quality*, according to which the speaker should be trustworthy, is undermined by Eliot's irony: 'the teller is not being entirely frank [...], and it is precisely here that *The Waste Land* has always seemed such a riddle' (144). Each of these strategies challenge 'readers to do a lot of the sense-making for themselves' (138). As Sell's case study shows, the application of Gricean

maxims to a literary work can be explanatory, yet it could be misleading to equate Grice's idealised conversational rules with the fortuitous meanders of literary communication. If adopted, Gricean pragmatics would still be in need of a more bottom-up stylistic analysis.

The linguistic works surveyed so far display a strong emphasis on the synchronic relation between the language of poetry and difficulty. The formalist classification of phenomena in Leech and Dillon, for example, prevails over considerations of the historical development of poetic language. This issue becomes crucial when, as in Leech and Dillon, the authors considered occupy an extensive time span, from the Renaissance to the twentieth century. A corrective to this trend is Adamson (1999), a major work in historical stylistics that offers an in-depth description of English and Anglo-American literary language in the nineteenth and twentieth century. Adamson traces the relationship between literary forms and the historically-embedded aesthetic norms that shaped them. Importantly for the current thesis, she analyses a wealth of poetic excerpts that showcase the linguistic innovations brought on by Modernism, which she relates to 'the deliberate courting of difficulty in Modernist aesthetics' (1999: 643).

Her study covers a wide range of linguistic aspects, from context-language interaction (i.e. World Englishes, dialects) to more intrinsic dimensions (i.e. grammar, syntax, semantics) alongside observations on metre, rhythm and figures of speech. The lens through which many of these innovations are interpreted is that of an estranging mimesis of spoken language:

> Olson's topic-skipping may well be the most naturalistic in reproducing the associative leaps and self-interruptions we all practice when we talk to ourselves or to an intimate friend, but put in writing and

addressed to a public audience, it strikes many readers as a perversely difficult form of communication. (1999: 597)

It would be impossible to acknowledge the number of features identified by Adamson in the necessarily cursory review provided here. These features are frequently involved in an attribution of difficulty, and they will be closely dealt with in Chapter 2. For the purposes of the present chapter, it is important to note Adamson's more contextual argument as to why difficulty in poetry seems to be essentially an American rather than a British phenomenon (a fact reflected in the corpus used in this thesis: see 3 and 6.1). Adamson connects the 'ongoing experimentalism' of American writing to 'its system of small presses and campus poets', while the more traditionalist English style she sees as a by-product of 'a centralised literary establishment dominated by large publishing houses looking for mass markets' (1999: 678). While the divide is perpetuated by this social configuration, its historical origin is pointed out by Adams: 'American literature since Thoureau has had a strong tradition of unconventionality generated by a desire to free itself from Europe, creating its own conventions' (Adams 1991: 37).

Another stylistic study closely concerned with difficulty is Fois-Kaschel (2002), who explores the language of the Hermetic poetry of Hölderlin, Trakl, and Celan. Fois-Kaschel endorses a formalist approach that begins with morphology and ends with syntax and semantics. In this regard, Foils-Kaschel argues that obscurity (which she favours over difficulty) is dependent both on 'la distorsion des paradigmes sémantiques et la rupture de l'ordre syntaxique' (2002: 58; ['the distortion of semantic paradigms and the break of syntactic order']; trans. mine). She identifies a number of stylistic hallmarks of Hermetic poetry, such as proper names, neologisms, and verbless constructions – although she acknowledges that the last

sometimes do not pose comprehension problems, since the relevant information can be retrieved in the linguistic co-text (2002: 254).

Despite the merits of her work, there is an unsolved contradiction in one of Fois-Kaschel's main arguments. Relatively early in her monograph, Fois-Kaschel establishes a direct link between difficulty and certain linguistic features – a link that is also the main point of the current thesis: 'Toute poésie considérée comme difficile se distingue par son lexique recherché, une syntaxe accélérée et des énoncés elliptiques' (2002: 72; 'all poetry deemed as difficult is characterised by unfamiliar vocabulary, speeded-up syntax and elliptic utterances'; trans. mine). Apart from the generalising slant of the claim (e.g. '<u>all</u> poetry') and the elusive formulation 'speeded-up syntax', the real problem is that Fois-Kaschel later overturns this claim by asserting that difficulty does not depend on the figures of style or on their frequency (2002: 265). Hence, she dismantles her own project without further explanation. Possibly the emphasis she places on morphological features – almost irrelevant to matters of comprehension – led her to this conclusion. It may also be that the 'a-psychological' stance of her work resists even common-sense assumptions about difficulty. Such disavowal is unfortunate, since language is crucial in the attribution and in the experience of difficulty.

An important point that emerges from this overview is the gradual renunciation of any attempt to define difficulty (or ambiguity, or obscurity) in intrinsic terms. While Nowottny and Leech do attempt a definition, from Dillon onwards linguists have been mostly concerned with detailing the textual instantiations and the contextual implications of difficulty, leaving the 'essentialist' endeavour to literary theory (e.g. Steiner 1978; see 1.1). Perhaps this trend reflects a wider reorientation of literary studies, required to be increasingly context-sensitive but perhaps less audacious in foundational terms. Even more resistant to defining difficulty are the studies

surveyed in the next section, which focus on the contextual implications of the phenomenon – both in social, collective terms, and in psychological, private ones.

1.3 Reception-oriented approaches

It is to an extent unnatural to draw a neat line between linguistic and reception-oriented approaches, as the former do take into account readers and the latter do not downplay the linguistic side of poems. This distinction however makes sense insofar as scholars' emphasis is bestowed upon the text as 'object' (linguistic approaches) or upon the text as 'event' (reception-oriented approaches). In her tripartite author-text-reader model of poetry, Rosenblatt (1978) reacts against text-centred approaches dominant in the earlier decades and conceives of poems in terms of events. Rosenblatt represents a tradition of reader-response criticism that became dominant in the 1970s and in the 1980s, and that can explain the paucity of language-centred accounts in this period (see 1.2; see also Leech 2010: 184 on such a 'flight from the text'). Although scholarly camps tend to regard themselves as alternative or in opposition to each other, the various positions can often be reconciled through being seen as part of a continuum – from text to response, from response to text. After all, both linguistic and receptionist accounts of difficulty originated from Russian Formalism (Shklovsky 1917) and from the practical criticism of Richards (1929) and Empson (1930). Moreover, one should not lose sight of the linguistic bent of some reception theorists such as Riffaterre (1978) and Fish (1980). The following quotation, from Fish himself, may aptly subtitle the entire section:

> Of course, the difficulty is itself a fact – of response; and it suggests, to me at least, that what makes problematical sense as a statement makes perfect sense as a strategy, as an action made upon a reader

rather than as a container from which a reader extracts a message. (1980: 23)

Fish's definition of difficulty is so general that it is virtually all-encompassing (i.e. 'a fact – of response'; 'an action made upon a reader'). In fact, it is less a definition than a general orientation reflecting a distrust of the 'essentialist' accounts dominating the first stage of difficulty studies (see 1.1). Fish implies that it is misguided to equate difficulty with meaning-retrieval – a motif that underpins most of the reception-oriented work to follow (see 2.2.3). Paradoxically, he also equates 'fact' (implying verifiability and objectivity) with 'response' (implying inaccessibility and subjectivity). Read literally, this statement would force reader-response criticism to a procedural halt: how is it possible to reconcile both poles in practice? Fish refrains from working out the implications of his claim, however, while his critical practice privileges the response pole.

Amongst the most text-oriented receptionist theorists, Riffaterre insists that literary reading is a text-driven, 'restrictive process' (1978: 150). Although he too refrains from providing an essentialist definition of difficulty, he usefully distinguishes between obscurity and *nonsense* (1978: 115-166):

> Obscurity bespeaks literariness not just the way nonsense does, symbolizing artifice, or cancelling utilitarian communication. Obscurity betokens literariness by symbolizing the reader's participation in an activity reserved to an elite (1984 [1978]: 150).

According to Riffaterre, while in nonsense writing techniques are foregrounded ('symbolizing artifice') over semantic plausibility ('cancelling utilitarian communication'), obscurity is intrinsically elitist – a motif of

complaint in much literary criticism (see 1.4.3). Obscurity (or difficulty, for Riffaterre uses them interchangeably) is bound up with elitism since it presupposes specific literary competence, as Riffaterre's mosaic analogy nicely illustrates:

> It is only in isolation that the poem is difficult and, when made easy, trite. It makes sense only when read as a metonym of the whole genre – like the antique tessera that was just a shard by itself, but a message when fitted to its matching piece. And its significance lies not in hidden depths, but in the fact of its being a variation on a motif. (1984 [1978]: 163)

Appropriate as it may seem, this remark is implicitly normative as it does not necessarily reflect the way readers approach poetry. It nevertheless sounds plausible that, for the literary reader, 'obscurity results from an interference of the genre's structures and of those of descriptive systems' (150).

As for nonsense, André Breton's line 'Once upon a time there was a turkey on a dike' provides an interesting example. Riffaterre shows that this line is an intertextual scrambling of the hypogram (an infra-text or sub-text) 'diguedondaine diguedindon', a refrain for children. As separate words, 'digue' means 'dike' and 'dindon' means 'turkey': hence André Breton's lexical choices (1984 [1978]: 140). According to Adamson, nonsense writing can be looked at as a precursor of modernist difficulty since it 'promoted the stylisation of semantic deviance' (Adamson 1999: 612). While Adamson and Riffaterre treat nonsense as a descriptive term, Leech regards it as a 'simple aberration' that needs to be distinguished from 'meaningful deviation' (2010: 16). In the interest of descriptive neutrality, Riffaterre and Adamson are followed in suspending all value judgments in this regard.

Reception theory at its most radical can be seen in the essay collection *The Idea of Difficulty in Literature* (Purves 1991), greatly influenced by Fish's conventionalist position. Here all the authors emphasise the non-textual – or only secondarily textual – nature of difficulty. A couple of examples will suffice: Purves considers difficulty 'a social construct' (1991: 2) and locates it within a dynamic, interactional setting: 'The difficulty of a text (D), then, varies with the amount of knowledge (K) presumed by the community sufficient for an individual to demonstrate an adequate (A) and appropriate (A1) articulation of a response to that text' (1991: 166). In this statement resembling a mathematical equation, difficulty lies in the eye of the beholder irrespective of the style of the text. In the same essay collection, this position is taken to an extreme by Hynds: to her, '"difficulty" is not a feature of particular texts, but the result of the similarity or disparity between dimensions of the text and the socially embedded and motivated interpretive processes of particular readers' (Hynds 1991: 117). Although an interactional view of difficulty that is not at odds with that outlined by Purves (see 2.3) is retained, his and Hynds's conventionalist angle is objected insofar as it deprives language of any real influence on the perception of difficulty. Incidentally, it is worth remarking that this essay collection is the first, after Steiner's 1978 essay, to firmly establish difficulty as a critical term overtaking ambiguity and perhaps also obscurity.

Diepeveen (2003) too thematises difficulty from a receptionist angle. He draws on a large number of documental sources – letters, reviews, and essays written between 1910 and 1950 – to explore the historical reception of difficult modernist art and literature. Diepeveen characterises difficulty as a 'powerful aesthetics' and shows how modernist writers drawn upon it to consolidate their place in the literary canon:

> Modernism's difficulty set up the terms and protocols by which readers read and gained access to modernist texts, and it became a litmus test: one could predict both a given reader's response to modernism by his or her reaction to difficulty, and a writer's place in the canon by the difficulty of his or her work. (2003: xi)

Two aspects of difficulty seem to emerge from Diepeveen's monograph: on the one hand, difficulty is a powerful reaction, a response phenomenon; on the other, it is a historically-bound aesthetic construct, one that modernist writers tried to justify as a positive if not necessary stage of literary development. In a sense, Diepeveen's work revives the broadly social and ethical concerns of Press (1963). First, he points out the conceptual slipperiness of both obscurity and difficulty (2003: 47). Secondly, he reviews Eliot's iconic argument (see 1.4.4), according to which difficulty is justified by the complexity of the contemporary world. Unlike Press, however, Diepeveen resists the taxonomic temptation and downplays the linguistic side of difficulty. Indeed, similarly to Fish (1980) and Purves (1991), he contends that difficulty 'does not reside in a set of formal strategies', but that rather it 'arises from the extreme responses it elicits, provoking people to anxiety, laughter, or anger' (2003: 45). A few years later, Sutherland reiterates the point along similar lines: 'difficult art baffles, intimidates, stretches and upsets' (2010: 767). Diepeveen's claim that difficulty 'does not reside in a set of formal strategies' is ill-formulated from the viewpoint of this thesis, as difficulty does have a strong and theoretically sound linguistic basis (see 1.2 and 2.2).

In recent years there has been a steadily increasing interest in difficulty from this receptionist-oriented perspective. Lamarque (2009), in an essay on the elusiveness of poetic meaning, goes as far as to state that 'poetic difficulty arises out of the very expectations that the practice of

reading brings to it' (2009: 419), although he briefly analyses some poetic excerpts from Cummings and Hill. Bernstein's (2011) is a reader-friendly essay that aims to be a practical guide to tackling difficult poems: 'what I want to do in this essay is explore some ways to make your experience with the difficult poem more rewarding by exploring some strategies for coping with these poems' (2011: 3). Bernstein, as a reputedly difficult poet (see 6.1), is admittedly partisan in his own discussion. He outlines a set of key questions that should work as a mental checklist for readers in order to know whether they are reading a difficult poem: 1) Do you find the poem hard to appreciate?; 2) Do you find the poem's vocabulary and syntax hard to understand?; 3) Are you often struggling with the poem?; 4) Does the poem make you feel inadequate or stupid as a reader?; 5) Is your imagination being affected by the poem? (2011: 3-4).

Q2 is text-oriented, and is echoed later by Bernstein's connection between difficulty and style, a concept that is defended and explored in this thesis: 'difficult poems are like this because of their innate makeup. And that makeup is their constructed style' (2011: 5). All the other questions are reader-oriented. In particular, Q1 relates difficulty to lack of pleasure or enjoyment, an issue that will be explored in Chapter 4. Q3 is vaguely phrased and yet it indicates a temporal, online dimension of difficulty that will be tested in Chapter 5. Q4 echoes Diepeveen's point about the polarised, extreme responses typical of difficulty. Finally, Q5 is misleading, since it is nowhere proven nor argued that imagination is chiefly or uniquely affected by difficult poems. Interestingly, like other poets writing on the issue (see 1.4.4), Bernstein does not hold poets responsible for the production of difficulty: 'it is not their [i.e. the poets'] fault that their poems are harder to understand than Billy Collin's, but *some poems just turn out that way'* (2011: 4; emphasis added).

Bernstein's aims are extended in the essay collection *Reading the Difficulties* (Fink and Halden-Sullivan 2013), to which he contributes with a mockingly accessible poem. Like its 1991 predecessor edited by Purves, this collection adopts a tenaciously readerly perspective, albeit cast into a more 'private' (reader-text) mould. In their introduction to the volume, the editors echo Fish's anti-textualist position by arguing that 'there is much more to the experience of "difficult" verse than deciphering non-traditional surface features' (Fink and Halden-Sullivan 2013: 1). It is not surprising, given this premise, that a few sentences later they stress the social and cultural embeddedness of difficulty as stemming from poets' 'resistance to expectations for a relatively unified vision of dominant cultural values' (2013: 2). In another essay, Lazer likewise contends that a readerly approach that is driven by the need to 'get' the poet's message is unproductive (Lazer 2013: 28). The point is independently echoed by Vincent when he questions Steiner's idealised reader for her demands of 'penetrative comprehension' (2003: 4; see 1.1). This stance is rooted in an explicit refusal to consider poetry in terms of self-expression (Lazer 2013: 32). This thesis sides with neither camp; rather, it defends the idea that it is the text that dictates its own preferential mode of reading through its stylistic configuration. This assumption is explored in Chapter 4.

To recapitulate, two main strands can be identified within reception-oriented research: one concerned with the interaction between reader and text, although from a speculative angle (Riffaterre 1978, Fish 1980, Lamarque 2009, Bernstein 2011); and one that takes a more contextual and socially committed stance (Purves 1991, Hynds 1991, Diepeveen 2003, Fink and Halden-Sullivan 2013). None of these authors, however, ventures into an empirical validation of their conjectures. While there are some empirical studies of how poetry is read and understood (see 4.1), only Yaron (2002,

2003, 2008) tests difficulty empirically. Since her work is the most obvious reference point for this research, it is discussed at some length below.

1.3.1 Yaron's empirical approach to difficulty

Yaron (2002) forcefully advocates for reception theory because of its greater coverage and flexibility compared to textualist approaches. Among the key factors taken into account by reception theory, she mentions (a) the influence of the literary establishment (2002: 134) in a vein similar to Diepeveen (2003); and (b) the role played by genre and text-type in shaping response, which she draws from the empirical studies of Zwaan 1993 and Hanauer 1997 (see 2.1.1). In brief, reception theory provides Yaron with a theoretical background for her reader-response tests. Some of the limitations of these tests, as show below, stem from Yaron's neglect of linguistic approaches. Indeed, it is argued that there is no real incompatibility between the two approaches, as both can be subsumed under a larger conceptual model (see 2.3).

Yaron aims to demonstrate that 'difficult and obscure texts do not meet the conditions which allow a construction of a representation' (2002: 135-6). This claim, which anticipates her 2008 definition of the difficult poem (see below), does not distinguish between 'obscure' and 'difficult'. Indeed, Yaron sees no qualitative difference between the two adjectives, and uses the former as an intensification of the latter (for a view which distinguishes between the two concepts, see 1.5). She further argues that the disruption of the reader's mental representation leads to a delinearised reading (2002: 138). In the first experiment she reports, two groups of undergraduate students read a challenging poem by Cummings and a more traditional one by Strand. They were instructed to highlight the 'strange', 'resonant' and 'familiar' words in each poem (this classification, it should be noticed, is psychological rather than linguistic). This poses problems for the

replicability of the test, since what is deemed 'strange', 'resonant' and 'familiar' by readers will vary not only according to the instructions given, but also to the linguistic co-text of each poem.

Methodological issues aside, the results showed that Cummings's poem boosted readers' attention towards the strange and resonant words, a finding that Yaron links to the perceivably higher difficulty of this poem. This finding might not be completely pertinent in casting light on the nature of difficult poems in general, however. First of all, Yaron makes a daring inductive leap from a case study which relies on two poems only. There is no way to prove that this finding is illustrative of the phenomenon of difficulty rather than particular to Cummings's idiosyncratic style. Secondly, this result merely shows which words are foregrounded in the readers' eyes. 'Strange' units were recalled more often in the Cummings poem because they are more frequent than in the Strand poem (3% vs. 0.62% of the total word-count) and because they are comparatively 'stranger' in the Cummings poem – e.g. the neologism *smoothloomingly* versus the moderately unfamiliar *feckless*.

In a second experiment, featuring another poem by Cummings, Yaron found that the attention of the readers was focused on the resonant (culturally and/or emotionally charged) elements of the difficult poem. This time participants were asked to write down the lines they considered important. Those most frequently reported were 'the most who die, the more we live' and 'the single secret will still be man'. While it is true that words such as *die*, *live*, *man* may be deemed resonant, an equally compelling factor is the fact that both lines feature, unlike the others, proverbial generic sentences 'claiming universal truth' (Fowler 1986: 132). The line 'the most who die, the more we live' is also likely to attract readerly attention because it disrupts a grammatical matrix construction. Finally, these lines are spatially foregrounded, occurring at the end of each stanza

and realising a perfect match between line and clausal unit. Yaron's neglect of these formal arguments prevents her from taking into account line-position and syntactic structure as alternative explanations.

A more robust finding is that the participants faced with Strand's poem tended to recall complete textual sequences (clauses and sentences), whereas those faced with Cummings's poem recalled shorter sequences (generally words and phrases). The length of the sequences has been found to inversely reflect the accuracy of their recall: readers tended to re-paraphrase passages of the Strand poem, but left the linguistic surface of Cummings's recalled units unaltered (2002: 150-1). Again, this finding is best explained through a linguistic scrutiny of both poems. The Strand poem (see 3.1 for the full text and a stylistic analysis) is formed of full sentences. By contrast, sentences in the Cummings poem are frequently interrupted by parentheticals, and are particularly difficult to distinguish given an almost total lack of punctuation. Unable to parse clear-cut sentences, participants granted most attention to phrasal units, which therefore were recalled more frequently. Although Yaron attributes this difference in response to the presence or lack of difficulty, it is more appropriate to stress the role of linguistic deviations in the transition from the observed response to the assessment of difficulty.

According to Yaron (2003), once readers have identified conspicuous elements (words, phrases, clauses, and fragments), they proceed to search for semantically related units. This progression is paradigmatic rather than syntagmatic, thus reflecting the notion of delinearised reading that Yaron defended in an earlier paper (2002). This procedure is strikingly similar to Toolan's (1993; see 1.2), but the crucial question remains of whether it is a learned strategy or one naturally prompted by difficult poems. Yaron's test fits the former possibility, since it instructs respondents to note down words in the poem that are semantically related to another set of words previously

identified as 'conspicuous'. What is presented as a finding is better seen as the assimilation of a researcher-directed reading strategy.

In a later and more digressive paper, Yaron proposes the following definition of the difficult poem:

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

This is the first explicit effort since Steiner (1978) to provide a definition. Even so, it must be noticed, the definition applies to specific artefacts (difficult poems) rather than to difficulty itself. Yaron devotes the rest of the paper to detailing the comprehension obstacles mentioned in the definition. These are briefly reviewed here, mainly to point out that (a) they lack linguistic precision and (b) they are in many respects indebted to the very textualist tradition that Yaron criticised in her 2002 paper.

The first category is named 'language', albeit nearly all the phenomena listed are lexical only: neologisms, archaisms, nonsense words, foreign words, invented compounds and rare words (e.g. Mallarmé's *ptyx*). Even though Yaron mentions the use of 'defective syntax' (2008: 136), she never provides an example or a definition of this vague adjective (see Toolan 2014 for a similar critique of Eagleton 1983). The second obstacle stems from 'coherence', a term which should have been subsumed under language, coherence being an important concept in text linguistics (see 2.2.5). Her distinction between different degrees of coherence, from explicit to implicit, seems however a valid one. The third obstacle is named 'the world referred

to' and comprises literary concepts such as allusions, ambiguity, themes and figures. All in all, these are useful headings where Yaron discusses poetic excerpts in the tradition of Press, but without taking stock of linguistic approaches (e.g. Leech 1969, Adamson 1999; see 1.2).

In summary, Yaron's approach suffers from an oversimplified account of the linguistic basis of difficulty, which is mainly confined to the lexical level. In her desire to dispense with grammar and syntax, she instructs her respondents to note down single words rather than phrases (2002: 146). To neglect linguistic units beyond word-level, however, unduly turns poetic meaning into an atomised 'aboutness'. Another reservation concerns Yaron's use of the notion of *representation*, which she inherits from cognitive psychology (see 2.1.1 for a critique of the concept). If representation is thought of as a mimetic/situational concept, as seems to be the case, Yaron's definition of the difficult poem would fail to account for didactic poems which, whilst accessible, do not activate any situational representation; nor would it account for poems which do activate such a situational representation and yet remain baffling (e.g. allegorical poems).

A final limitation stems from the small size of the corpus tested, although Yaron acknowledges the need for a more quantitatively substantial investigation (2008: 129). The validity of the corpus is also questionable in that it relies on Yaron's judgment of difficulty alone, without any appeal to intersubjective validation. Although the approach taken in this thesis is indebted to Yaron's effort to explore difficulty empirically, it seeks to avoid the methodological pitfalls just outlined. At the same time, it sets out to provide a sounder account of linguistic features typical of difficult poems.

1.4 Recurrent themes in literary criticism and theory

The diachronic and conceptual review above has teased out the main strands and contributors to the study of difficulty and of the kin concepts of obscurity and ambiguity. A review of this kind would not be complete, however, without a discussion of a number of side issues that frequently surface in the literature. Five of them will be considered – the representational problem, the pluralism of difficulty, elitism and its philosophical roots, and remarks by difficult poets themselves. These issues allow for a less one-sided, more contextualised view of difficulty.

1.4.1 The representational problem

The notion of representation brought to the forefront by Yaron's definition tallies with analogies between art and literature made by literary critics. For instance, Lopez (2006: 1) titles his chapter on the avant-garde Language Poets 'Limits of Reference and *Abstraction* in American Poetry' (emphasis added). Similarly, Perloff (1981) refers to the 'Anti-paysage of Rimbaud' ('Rimbaud's anti-landscape'), as well as titling a chapter 'Against transparency' in her 1991 monograph on the experimental poetries in the United States. Perloff perceptively argues analogic reasoning can often solve the opacity: 'as for the "impenetrable" imagery, often the appeal is to plain common sense: [...] if a funnel is turned upside-down, its "wrong end" does do a "disappearing act"' (1991: 204-5).

The idea that poetry dismantles mimesis is central in Riffaterre's work (1973, 1984 [1978]: 2), but Leech also likens the difficult poet to the cubist painter (Leech 1969: 219). In his monograph on Mallarmé, Bowie argues that the defensive reaction of the reader faced with a difficult poem is usually that of turning it 'into a picture' on which to irresponsibly

superimpose 'a simple allegorical grid' (Bowie 1978: 10). Finally, Wilkinson points to the impossibility of translating 'into an empirically consistent scene' an excerpt by the American modernist Barbara Guest, where 'objects […] consort on equal terms with abstractions and properties in such a way as *to thwart visual reproduction*' (2010: 761, emphasis added).

The ubiquity of these remarks cannot be fully accounted for by the handiness of the analogy – there must also be some intuitive, intersubjective and experiential basis to them. Yaron's definition captures this important aspect of difficulty – the challenge it poses to representation. Nonetheless, the linguistic indices of disrupted representation remain unclear, since most of the above remarks do not refer to specific excerpts but are syntheses of critical readings or general hints at issues of poetics. Because the ideational dimension of language is implicated in the representational issue, considerable attention will be devoted to it (esp. 2.1.2, 2.2.4, 4.4.2).

1.4.2 The plurality of difficulty

The shift from the notion of difficulty (Steiner 1978, Purves (ed.) 1991) to that of 'difficulties' (Diepeveen 2003, Fink and Halden-Sullivan 2013) subtly reveals the recent refusal of scholars to constrain difficulty to a unitary phenomenon. Virtually all scholars would agree that there is not such a thing as 'difficulty', for countless influencing factors can be pointed out, both synchronic and diachronic. Tuma mentions many of these in a fast-paced, passionate defence of such a plurality of difficulty:

> And it is nowhere written in stone that academics must value difficulty. Nor do complaints about (or celebration of) difficulty typically make

> clear exactly what *difficulty* means; poetry some would call difficult today is not difficult in the same way that, say, Pound is, requiring knowledge of esoteric traditions and a range of languages and histories. The difficulty in reading Maggie O' Sullivan or Allen Fisher is largely a matter of resisting the habits of interpretation taught by the professors who schooled you and them. For Paterson difficulty means cultural elitism, as if the two were synonymous; for Mottram it means that which resists easy consumption. Neither view is much help. (1998: 59)

Tuma brings together chronological factors, individual differences among poets, and some of the ethical implications discussed further below (1.4.3). His central argument is that 'what difficulty means' is ultimately a moot point. Other scholars address the plural nature of difficulty from a less wide-ranging perspective. Vincent argues that 'a poet who is remarkably difficult in one poem may be the standard of clarity and availability in another' (Vincent 2003: 1). Likewise, Bowie suggests that 'Mallarmé's poems are difficult in different ways and at different levels of intensity' (Bowie 1978: viii). Since these remarks apply to the work of a single author, it must apply even more forcefully to corpora of different poets such as those presented in the current thesis (see 3 and 6.1). Indeed, Lamarque selects passages from different poets and argues that they 'seem to resist easy paraphrase, but for different reasons' (2009: 413).

In spite of these distinctions, some scholars envisage a higher conceptual realm where difficulty can be thought of as unitary or, at least, as comprising some universally shared elements. Thus Sutherland wonders 'whether there is really anything cognitively distinct about the experience of radical art' (2010: 769) as if 'radical art' were after all unified against

mainstream or traditional art. Mellors too finds a common denominator of difficult literary works in the sort of experience they assumedly give rise to: 'the prospect of meaningfulness is always shadowed by the spectre of meaninglessness. To be sure, this could be said to be the hermeneutic experience attending any difficult literary work' (Mellors 2005: 167).

Mellors's claim opens a philosophically fascinating digression, that is, the poising of difficulty between meaningfulness and meaninglessness. A few more quotations will suffice to illustrate this idea: examining Stein's poetry, Quartermain paradoxically contends that 'declaring too much, the sentence declares nothing but enjoys serious play' (1992: 23). More judgmentally, Broom (2006: 240) criticises Walsh's poetry for erring 'on the side of too much emptiness'. While there may be some rhetorical pleasure in proposing paradoxes in critical writing, the issue raised by these claims is important since it relates to many of the ethical issues gravitating around difficulty (see the following section). The meaningfulness-meaninglessness issue is not directly relevant here, since this falls outside the remit of the thesis. However, this dichotomy could be negotiated by taking into account Riffaterre's distinction between nonsense and obscurity (see 1.3) to then see whether certain stylistic strategies preferentially prompt critical judgments of meaninglessness or otherwise.

Back to the plurality of difficulty, the chronological aspect mentioned by Tuma is one that meets almost unequivocal critical agreement. Press already stressed how aesthetic assimilation through time turns 'the technical experiments of the innovators' into a 'normal and obvious mode of expression' (1963: 74). Adams follows Press along similar lines (1991: 36), whilst Adamson wryly concludes her account of nineteen and twentieth century literary language (see 1.2) by stating that 'free verse and the disconnective syntax of haiku, which were experimental and iconoclastic forms for Pound […], are now part of the standard repertoire of

schoolchildren' (1999: 679). Even Sell (1993), who is concerned with a more chronologically stable facet of difficulty, concedes that the style of *The Waste Land* 'may actually seem not quite as difficult as it did in the 1920s' (1993: 146).

As seen before (1.2), Sell relies on Gricean maxims to explain Eliot's difficulty. The conversational norms encoded in the maxims are so basic as to be relatively impervious to changes in aesthetic taste. This is why Sell can safely claim that 'much of the business of reading Eliot's text still occurs in precisely the same way as for the first readers in 1921' (1993: 145). Indeed, while it would be audacious to deny that there is a strong historical element to difficulty, the early twentieth century reactions to difficulty documented by Diepeveen (2003) and those of Bernstein's implied yet contemporary reader (2011) are not dissimilar. The apparent disagreements among scholars can be reconciled by introducing a distinction between (a) the initial impact of difficult poems, and (b) the strategies later developed to overcome it. Basic impairment of comprehension processes should be less dependent on schooling, education and aesthetic assimilation than the hermeneutic strategies developed to come to terms with such poems. Throughout the thesis, the focus is on the experiential basis of the impact of difficulty rather than on the strategies to cope with it. Indeed, this latter approach would require another thesis and would presuppose a pedagogical slant. In this respect, the interested reader can consult Salvatori and Donahue (2005), a textbook which 'encourages students to see those moments in their reading when they feel stymied or confused as gateways rather than barriers to understanding' (2005: xi).

1.4.3 Elitism, obscurity and its philosophical roots

Despite its apparent neutrality, Riffaterre's characterisation of obscurity (see 1.3) presupposes literary competence as a filter through which literary works select their own intended audience. The more dense and recondite the intertextual network of allusions, the more severe the test and the fewer the 'worthy' readers. Some critics place considerable emphasis on the elitist nature of difficult poetry: Bowie, for instance, maintains that Mallarmé's *Prose pour des Esseintes* is 'obscure because oracular utterances are traditionally so, being calculated to confound those [...] unworthy of initiation into the higher mysteries' (1984 [1978]: 13). In a similar vein, Mellors claims that 'the *Cantos* are obscure because they are meant to contain wisdom which, although clear in essence, can only be imparted to the "present knowers"' (2005: 5). He returns to the issue later, when he defines the modernist text as an 'embodied enigma [...] for the initiated few' (2005: 30). Mellors appears influenced by Derrida's characterisation of Celan's poems in terms of 'enigma' (1992: 392) or 'crypt […] beyond any hermeneutic exhaustion' (404).

There can be a fuzzy boundary between the text-encoded elitism implicit in the above discussion, and the direct guilt or responsibility of the poets. As Press polemically puts it:

> Some poets look upon any concession to the public as a violation of their poetic integrity, and since they regard intelligibility as the most disgraceful concession of all, it is not surprising that their verse should be obscure. (Press 1963: 100)

According to Tuma, the marginalisation of experimental poetry in Britain is the result of the 'belief that […] the modernist obsession with 'difficulty'

violates this contract between poet and audience' (1998: 121). As with any ethically relevant issues, intentionality crops up in these remarks, and it is often taken as a litmus test for distinguishing between 'good' and 'bad' difficulty (see 3.7.2 on authorial intention). A reviewer, for instance, praised Stevens on the grounds that 'his intention […] is far clearer and more earnestly pursued than theirs [i.e. other modernist poets]' (John Gould Fletcher, quoted in Diepeveen 2003: 58; see also 3.2). By contrast, in Mallarmé's lesser poems 'difficulty itself can sometimes appear as a gratuitous cult of indirectness, a box of tricks, a fad' (Bowie 1978: 150).

All these remarks seem to support White's point that it is not possible 'to separate the degree of intelligibility of a text from moral and epistemological considerations' (White 1981: 13). Taken literally, this claim would jeopardise the whole enterprise of this thesis, which endeavours to be as judgment-free as possible. To overcome the problem, one can appeal to a distinction expanded on later (see 1.5): difficulty as (a) a loose semiotic construct to which a number of value judgments have been, and always can be, attached; and difficulty as (b) a text-based response phenomenon whose immediate experience owes little to consciously held beliefs and preconceptions. It is this second sense that is chiefly explored.

But where does difficulty come from? What are its ontological and epistemological justifications, if any? Why is it sought after rather than avoided by so many poets? When it comes to foundational questions like these, philosophy provides a valid explanatory framework, as it can act as a pervasive intellectual force shaping the work of authors. Sotirova (2013, Ch. 6), for instance, has extensively shown how modernist writers' receptiveness to the philosophy of Heidegger, Bergson, and Buber, motivated and moulded some of their narrative techniques – especially those leading to the weaving of different characters' viewpoints. As far as poetry is concerned, several literary critics have pointed out key

philosophical influences. Heidegger's profound influence on difficult poetry is examined by Steiner (1978), Mellors (2005), and Lopez (2006: 210). Steiner establishes a relationship between 'radical modernism in European poetry' and 'Heidegger's theoretic metaphor' (1978: 44). His critique of Western rationality and his consequent appeal to the pre-Socratics (43) may explain why the new forms of poetry oppose ideational transparency and challenge deep-rooted hermeneutic practices. His influence on modernist aesthetics is eruditely explored by Mellors, who sees in Heidegger 'at once the modernist thinker par excellence and the architect of postmodernism' (2005: 10). Heidegger's Hermetic and Orphic aesthetics, culminating in the readings of poets such as Hölderlin, Trakl and Rilke, as well as his theorisation 'of radical alterity' (2005: 10) chime well with 'the otherness of the obscure text' (2005: 11). *Being and Time* (1927), Heidegger's seminal work, was also a documented thematic and stylistic source for poet W.S. Graham, for containing 'paradox, contradiction and writing about writing' (Lopez 2006: 210).

Most difficult poets writing in the second half of the twentieth century, however, come from a different philosophical tradition. Marxist theory, as revived by the Frankfurt School, is most prominent among American avant-gardists (Tuma 1998: 16). Marx's influence on Zukofsky, an objectivist poet and a friend of Pound, is documented by Quartermain (1992: 60). While the notion of elitism is not extraneous to the Hermetic premises of Heidegger's philosophy, it is harder to see how it can still be applied to poets of Marxist persuasions. The apparent contradiction is weakened once we apprehend that most avant-garde poets conceive of mainstream poetry along the lines of capitalist product, a consumable good (Broom 2006: 226). The mutual misconceptions between the two camps can be appreciated in Noel-Tod's lively if partisan 2009 essay 'A History of Difficulty: on Cambridge Poetry'. Poetry must be difficult – so the reasoning goes – to resist easy

consumption. This strongly held assumption comes at the cost of alienating large portions of audience – hence, avant-garde poetry lends itself to a critique of elitism no less than Hermetic poetry does. As Broom aptly remarks, 'there is a kind of cognitive Puritanism to this kind of description of experimental poetry, with its emphasis on the reader's *work* and its suspicion of easy enjoyment' (2006: 226; emphasis is the author's).

The most influential philosopher for this new generation of poets was probably Adorno, whose work *Minima Moralia* (2005 [1951]) frontally addressed the issue of difficult art in relation to unfamiliarity. Sutherland (2010) discusses Adorno's position at some length, stating that 'the truly radical artwork will not only smoke out the philistine, but will also provoke him into a 'negative relationship to truth', the first step on Hegel's way of despair' (2010: 767). The idea that radical art should 'smoke out the philistine' is again consistent with the elitist outcome of a Marxist aesthetics – ethical integrity presupposes a carefully selected audience. Adorno's and Heidegger's approaches towards difficult poetry are usefully contrasted by Fois-Kaschel: while Adorno considers difficulty an intrinsic textual quality (2002: 75), Heidegger re-enacts the style of difficult poems in his own writing, treating them more as events than objects (2002: 78). Incidentally, the latter approach seems to pave the way for Derrida's radical reuse of Mallarmé and Celan (Derrida 1992).

My brief philosophical survey concludes with Wittgenstein, since his concept of language-game (from *Philosophical Investigations*, 1953) is used by critics to explain experimental poetries. For instance, Perloff contrasts Pound's and Clark Coolidge's poetry by arguing that the 'tightly woven collage surface' of the former 'is replaced by a kind of Wittgensteinian language-game' (1991: 56) of the latter. Along similar lines, Tuma defines the avant-garde poet Tom Raworth 'a Wittgensteinian' in his rejection of a '"picture-theory" of meaning for the contextualism of meaning as use'

(1998: 238). The word *picture* links back to Yaron's definition of the difficult poem and, more generally, to the representational problem (1.4.1). Its salience to the present investigation must then be taken into account when reviewing, in the next chapter, the visual importance that cognitive psychology attributes to comprehension. Overall, with the exception of Sotirova (2013), philosophical influences as identified by critics pertain to the fuzzy realm of aesthetics rather than substantiating specific stylistic choices.

Before moving on to the next section, it must be stressed that issues of elitism and philosophical influences play a peripheral role in the current thesis; they have been included to provide a fuller picture of difficulty. Some of the implications of this study, however, may be judged as a defence of difficulty since I show that this phenomenon is encoded in stylistic procedures that can be linked to specific aesthetic agendas. To dismiss or reject the difficulty, in other words, would amount to a dismissal of the artistry of many poems. Most apologetic or fiercely defensive of all, of course, are the poets themselves whenever their being difficult becomes a constant motif of literary criticism or a constant complaint of readers. This survey of difficulty-related remarks concludes with them.

1.4.4 The production side: poets on difficulty

Poets criticised for their difficulty have various options when facing the charge. Some, like Bernstein (2011; see 1.3) adopt a self-mocking yet pedagogical attitude in the belief that readers can be educated to difficulty. He defends the right of poets to be difficult, but he carefully avoids the confrontational tone of Eliot's 'The Metaphysical Poets' (1999 [1921]). This famous essay originated from a historical context in which, as Diepeveen (2003) reminds us, the whole debate about difficulty was still characterised

by strong emotional overtones. Eliot's defence of difficulty resides in an argument drawing an iconic link between poetry and civilisation:

> It appears likely that poets in our civilization, as it exists at present, must be *difficult*. Our civilization comprehends great variety and complexity, and this variety and complexity, playing upon a refined sensibility, must produce various and complex results. The poet must become more and more comprehensive, more allusive, more indirect, in order to force, to dislocate if necessary, language into his meaning. (1999 [1921]: 289; emphasis is the author's)

The threefold repetition of the modal verb of obligation *must* underscores the seemingly unavoidable existence of difficulty. The studiously impersonal tone ('it appears likely', 'the poet') discards all sense of individual responsibility. In another short essay, Eliot anticipates the taxonomic enterprise outlined in 1.1 by listing four reasons for difficult*y* to arise. The first is to do with the personal motivations of the poet – these could range from aesthetic persuasions to the need of circumventing censorship. The second is the novelty factor, anticipating Steiner's modal difficulty (see 1.1). The third arises from a mismatch of expectations, 'so that the reader, bewildered, gropes about for what is absent, and puzzles his head for a kind of "meaning" which is not there, and is not meant to be there' (1941: 51). The fourth lingers on the negative effects of preconceptions that are externally induced: 'the ordinary reader, when warned against the obscurity of a poem is apt to be thrown into a state of consternation very unfavourable to poetic receptivity' (1941: 50).

Eliot's iconic argument still holds sway among contemporary poets: 'often difficult language in poems accompanies difficult thought, so that the

difficulty of language is part of the whole structure and activity of poetic composition' (Prynne 2010a: 153). Here Prynne displaces the poet's responsibility for difficulty not in the extrinsic demands of society, like Eliot, but rather in the intrinsic praxis of writing ('activity of poetic composition'). This point is echoed by Bernstein when he amusingly complains that 'some poems just turn out that way' (2011: 4; see 1.3).

There is indeed some evidence that difficulty may be a by-product of composition procedures, which would support Prynne's point. Referring to documentary sources, Riffaterre says that 'Mallarme's creative procedure was to start with simple statements and then belabour them to obscurity' (Riffaterre 1984 [1978]: 200). Ashbery's writing procedure strikes me as being very similar: 'I begin with unrelated phrases and notations that later on I hope get resolved in the course of the poem as it begins to define itself more clearly for me' (Ashbery, cited in Altieri 1989: 145). Ashbery's writing procedure may in turn explain why the poet admits 'I never thought of this [the difficulty of his poetry] until it was first pointed out to me' (Ashbery, cited in Diepeveen 2003: 93). Ashbery's unawareness of his own difficulty may perhaps be related to his own writing procedure, as if the poet had little conscious control over his own art. The production side of difficulty is fascinating, and it will be touched upon during some of the stylistic analyses in Chapter 3. In contrast to the textual and the reception sides, however, I refrain from theorising this idea of production. From a conceptual standpoint, this is because here difficulty is primarily viewed as a response phenomenon. From a contingent standpoint, such an enterprise would necessitate another thesis and years of further research. This is nonetheless a promising pathway for future research.

I wish to conclude this section with a suggestive analogy through which the Italian Hermetic poet Andrea Zanzotto describes the notion of difficulty:

> Just think about the electric wire in the light bulb that transmits the light, the luminous message, because of the very resistance imposed by the means. If I need to transmit electricity afar I use very thick wires so that the electricity passes and gets to destination without losses. If, instead, I use wires whose diameter is very thin, the electricity labours to pass and generates a new fact, light or colour. So it happens in poetic communication, where the means is the language. (Zanzotto 1999: 1271; trans. mine)

For all its indirection, this analogy works well for the present thesis, not least because of the primacy it grants to language. In Zanzotto's formulation, the fatigue demanded by difficulty ('labours') is compensated by its potential for novelty ('a new fact, light or colour'). Having arrived, through Zanzotto, to the core of difficulty itself, the last section is devoted to redefining the concept and to setting it apart from its most direct rival, obscurity.

1.5 The notion of difficulty: revised

Concepts grow, flourish and wither throughout literary history. Ambiguity was superseded, in the 1960s, by obscurity; difficulty established itself later in academic circles, although Eliot's essay dates back to the 1920s. Nowadays difficulty is generally preferred over obscurity, although the two terms are used interchangeably by some critics, for instance Riffaterre (1978) and Yaron (2002, 2003, 2008). It may be inferred that my preference for difficulty stems from this recent trend in literary studies. This would be an uncritical inheritance, though. In fact, there are strong

conceptual reasons for preferring one term over the other, and these are provided by those authors who preface their studies with such a terminological caveat.

Prynne (2010a: 160) neatly distinguishes 'difficult' from 'obscure'. He relates obscurity to the lack of encyclopaedic knowledge necessary to make sense of a poem (i.e. Steiner's contingent type), and difficulty to the linguistic techniques adopted (i.e. Steiner's tactical type). Prynne's distinction is consistent with the frequent association between obscurity and elitism on the one hand (1.4.3), and difficulty and resistance on the other (Broom's argument in 1.4.3, and Zanzotto's analogy in 1.4.4). Not surprisingly, scholars of Symbolist and/or Hermetic poetry tend to favour obscurity (e.g. Riffaterre 1978, Fois-Kaschel 2002 and Mellors 2005), whilst scholars focusing on more politically engaged poetries tend to favour difficulty (e.g. Perloff 1991, Vincent 2003, Diepeveen 2003, Fink and Sullivan 2013).

Lattig (2007: 172) mysteriously overlooks difficulty from her otherwise useful survey of synonyms of obscurity (i.e. ambiguity, bewilderment, indeterminacy and undecidability). This striking gap might be explained by her focus on the Orphic and Hermetic tradition of the lyric genre. To White (1981) obscurity is a 'semiotic defence' (1978: 4), thus reinforcing the idea of concealment that the notion entails. White admittedly prefers obscurity over difficulty because he regards the former as 'the indispensable word for a literature which begins positively to adopt darkness as a primary organising metaphor' (White 1981: 17). White indeed analyses late 19th century novels by Meredith, Conrad and James, but language is not his main focus:

> difficulty applies largely to the language of a text, its style or syntax, but often in these novels the obscurity is of a visual nature, a matter

> of oblique point of view or concealed vantage within a scene, and this is not a matter of 'difficulty' but rather one of obscured vision. (1981: 17)

If the visual motif (see 1.4.1) is important in this thesis, then part of its salience may derive from conventional associations of obscurity. In contrast to White, however, the main focus of the present thesis is language – thus difficulty is preferable to obscurity. Moreover, as Vincent (2003: 1) points out, difficulty entails the reading process in a way that obscurity does not. Diepeveen's broad but bounded definition of difficulty is a good starting point: 'difficulty was the experience of having one's desires for comprehension blocked, an experience provoked by a wide variety of works of art ("comprehension" is here defined broadly)' (Diepeveen 2003: x).

Bringing together Prynne's and White's emphasis on the linguistic nature of difficulty and Vincent's and Diepeveen's focus on its interactive nature, it seems that difficulty should be defined both linguistically and in terms of readerly response. It therefore becomes crucial to delve into the contribution of language-centred approaches (1.2) as well as to model carefully the notions of comprehension and of the reading process. A study of difficulty such as the one proposed here is necessary since previous research has underestimated the multifaceted interaction between linguistic features and types of response prompted. According to Vincent (2003: 12), 'any definitional project' of difficulty should account for 'the flux of its status', which has been acknowledged throughout this chapter and specifically in section 1.4.2. The proposed distinction (set out initially in 1.3 and 1.4.2) of difficulty into (a) a semiotic construct and (b) a response phenomenon is reinstated and expanded in the following paragraphs:

(a) Difficulty as a semiotic construct: *difficulty is a loose concept comprising all the theorizations which it underwent and giving rise to a range of post-hoc rationalizations and value judgments on the part of literary critics and everyday readers alike.*

(b) Difficulty as a response phenomenon: *difficulty is a multifaceted text-effect encompassing a wide range of probable readerly outcomes (e.g. from lack of understanding to confusion, from lack of immersion to saturation and frustration) that are demonstrably prompted and guided by certain linguistic features.*

Sense (a) derives from sense (b), since the conceptual apparata of (a), including my own, are attempts to explain the experiential, observable and empirical basis of (b). The research object of the thesis is mainly sense (b), of which two major components are then identified: offline and online difficulty (see 2.3). The next chapter elaborates and formalises the key components of difficulty – the impairment of comprehension, issues of linguistic and poetic meaning, and the linguistic basis of difficulty.

2 Components of difficulty

Based on a careful scrutiny of the concept, the previous chapter defined difficulty as a response phenomenon triggered by certain stylistic features. This definition encapsulates the main disciplines that inform the entire thesis: stylistics, namely the study of 'the relation between language and artistic function' (Leech & Short 2007 [1981]: 11); and the empirical study of literature, which allows us 'to know how readers feel when confronted with particular stylistic devices' (Hakemulder and van Peer 2016: 190). The stylistic approach is at work in Chapter 3, featuring six in-depth analyses of selected poems, and in Chapter 6, featuring a survey of nine poetic extracts. The empirical approach is applied in Chapters 4 and 5, where tests are designed to measure the effects that the poems analysed in Chapter 3 exert on readers. A description of the methods employed will be provided at the beginning of these chapters. The current chapter lays out the foundations preliminary to both stylistic analyses and empirical tests. In particular, it is devoted to identifying key components of difficulty in order to develop a model to be applied in the following chapters.

The chapter is structured as follows: firstly (2.1), I examine models and constructs that pinpoint the mechanisms regulating difficulty in perception. Secondly (2.2), I detail the linguistic basis of difficulty through a list of indicators affecting all levels: graphology, vocabulary, syntax, semantics, and discourse structure. Finally (2.3), I outline a working model for the study of difficulty.

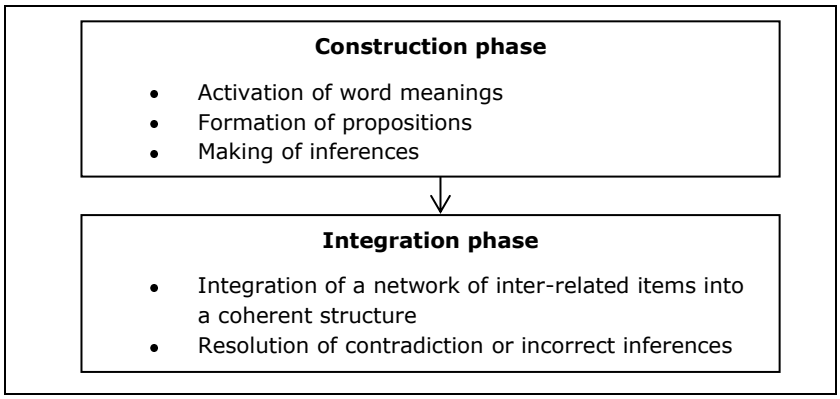
2.1 Models and constructs

2.1.1 Comprehension and literary processing

Issues of impaired comprehension have surfaced in some of the key work on difficulty reviewed in Chapter 1. To name but a few, Steiner (1978) distinguishes between empirical understanding and genuine comprehension (see 1.1); Leech (1969) posits a relation between linguistic deviation and gaps in comprehension (1.2); and Diepeveen (2003) draws a connection between difficulty and lack of comprehension (1.5). It is thus useful to review psychological research on comprehension, since this forms the basis for accounts of literary processing that are directly relevant to the thesis.

Combining psychology and text linguistics, van Dijk and Kintsch (1983) regard *comprehension* as 'a common sense term which dissolves upon closer analysis into many different subprocesses' (1983: 259). Fifteen years later, Kintsch (1998) redefines comprehension more holistically as 'a loosely structured, bottom-up process that is highly sensitive to context and that flexibly adjusts to shifts in the environment' (1998: 94). Kintsch's (1998) model of comprehension is usefully diagrammed in Harley (2008: 386). Figure 1 below reproduces this diagram in the belief that in order to understand a poem one has still to go through the basic stages posited by the model:

Figure 1 Kintsch's Construction-Integration model (adapted from Harley 2008)



Kintsch's C-I model postulates the existence of two interacting moments: one in which word and phrase meanings are accessed as if out of context; and one in which the surrounding context refines those meanings in order to revise the ongoing mental representation. A slightly different model is proposed by Zwaan (2004) and is diagrammed in Fig. 2 below:

Figure 2 Basic components of comprehension (adapted from Zwaan 2004)

Process	Linguistic unit	Referential unit
Activation	Word	Objects and actions
Construal	Clause	Events
Integration	Discourse	Event sequences

While *activation* and *integration* designate the same processing operations in both models, Zwaan's *construal* corresponds to Kintsch's 'formation of proposition' in the construction phase. Being dissatisfied with the formal semantics underlying the term *proposition* (2004: 36), Zwaan borrows the term 'construal' from Langacker's cognitive linguistics (2008: 55-85). His use of the term differs from Langacker's, though. For Langacker construal, which refers to how 'every symbolic structure construes its content in a certain fashion' (2008: 55), works at word-level (e.g. 'aunt' involves a more specific construal than 'relative'; 2008: 55) as well as at clause-level. Indeed, construal seems inherent to language rather than specific to certain grammatical units. By contrast, Zwaan draws a more clear-cut mapping between processing operations and grammatical units, although he later concedes that construals 'often, but not necessarily always, coincide with clauses' (2004: 40). Because difficulty is related to comprehension, this thesis treats construal in a way similar to Zwaan's. While these comprehension models have not been developed to explore literary

processing (see Zwaan 1993 and Emmott 1997 for considerations on the issue), in Chapter 3 it will be shown how the processes they identify can shed light on some of the challenges posed by difficult poems.

The first full-fledged attempt at explaining literary comprehension is Dillon (1978), who attempts 'to construct a model of reading as explicit and articulated as current knowledge will warrant' (1978: xi). To fulfil such an aim, Dillon proposes a conceptual framework that is compatible with the models of comprehension just surveyed. He distinguishes three main processing levels: *perception*, *comprehension*, and *interpretation*. Perception refers to the level where 'one identifies the individuals referred to by the noun phrases and pronouns; the time and place of the actions; motives, purposes of the actions' (1978: xvii). This definition encompasses the important notion of situation model proposed by van Dijk and Kintsch (1983), a key component of comprehension defined as the 'representation of events, actions and situations' (1983: 11). At the same time, Dillon's *perception* includes a higher inferential layer (i.e. 'motives, purposes of the actions') that is overlooked in psychological accounts of comprehension. Dillon's *comprehension* again recalls the notion of situation model, as witnessed by the phrase 'imagined scene' in the following definition:

> Comprehension of definite noun phrases and pronouns takes place in relation to an imagined scene: the referent must be identified from among those present in the scene, or those which can be imagined, as the case requires. (1978: 88)

Finally, *interpretation* is defined as the most abstract level, concerning the reconstruction of authorial intention (1978: xx). I regard this definition as applicable only to *exegetic interpretation*, a type of interpretation whose chief aim is the uncovering of authorial intention (see also 4.4.3.2). The

advantage of Dillon's tripartite division over the models surveyed earlier lies in positing this higher level of comprehension that is central to literary reading.

Fifteen years after Dillon, Zwaan (1993) engages in a similarly ambitious, book-length project on literary comprehension. The two works differ remarkably, however. While Dillon pays considerable attention to qualitative micro-differences in the processing of difficult literary texts, Zwaan is interested in macro-differences between literary and non-literary reading. Zwaan posits the existence of a specific *control system* that guides readers' attitudes towards literary texts. Control systems are 'cognitive mechanisms that help people *act* in situations' (1993: 19; emphasis is the author's), so they can be understood as a set of implicit orientations for different text-types and reading settings. This top-down emphasis does not lead Zwaan to regard literary comprehension as a unitary phenomenon – if anything, the reverse is true:

> Literary comprehension may include ("fluently") reading a literary work for pleasure, interpreting a literary work in-depth, evaluating a literary work (e.g., in the form of a literary critique), and so on. These various processes should be carefully distinguished if valid empirical data are to be obtained. (1993: 4)

This liberal definition contrasts with the narrower ones offered by Kintsch (1998) and Dillon (1978). Zwaan admittedly focuses on 'fluent' literary comprehension only, since his goal is that of singling out the basic elements that discriminate between literary and non-literary reading. In his experiments, he uses texts low in foregrounding (e.g. popular stories rather than poems or modernist novels), so that textual features do not override

the observed effects of the *control system*. In this respect, his work can be regarded as complementary to Dillon (1978) as well as to my own.

Even so, the set of premises or assumptions Zwaan sets out to test are points of departure for the current thesis too. After the Russian formalists, Zwaan assumes that literary comprehension is: (1) enriched by defamiliarisation; (2) attentive to stylistic features; and (3) less subjected to truth criteria compared to other text-types (this appears obvious even by considering the term 'fiction' itself). Points (1) and (2) are at the core of the current thesis, point (3) much less so because poetry does not court truth criteria to the extent that narrative does (but see Riffaterre 1973 for a discussion of realism in the poetry of Wordsworth).

Another assumption he makes is that readers pay more attention to the semantic, propositional level of the literary text (van Dijk and Kitsch's notion of *textbase*) rather than to its referential dimension (the notion of situation model). This assumption can be disproved from various standpoints. First, the propositional semantics underpinning the notion of *textbase* has been persuasively criticised as ill-suited for natural languages (Halliday and Matthiessen 1999: 419). Second, the distrust of referentiality in literature is typical of the structuralist and post-structuralist tradition, thus it should not be overgeneralised (see 2.2.4 for more on this). Third, literature does evoke setting and situations, the stylistic indices of which have been carefully worked out, for instance, by Leech and Short (2007 [1981], Chap. 5). This third point does not imply, however, that the ability to evoke situations is necessarily a defining feature of literature: as Zwaan himself acknowledges, the situation model alone 'is not capable of capturing an abstract referential dimension of text comprehension' (1993: 166). The next section (2.1.2) addresses this level of literary meaning, partly anticipated by Dillon's *interpretation*. Before doing so, it is useful to survey some additional models and constructs elaborated on in literary

comprehension studies, for they help contextualise the new model of difficulty outlined later in the chapter (2.3).

The first and to date only author to have proposed a processing framework for poetry is Hanauer (1997). He describes the model as consisting 'of three basic components: a poetic text categorisation component, a construction component for generating an internal representation of a poetic text and a production component for constructing a written literary interpretation' (1997: 162). The first component can be thought as a sub-component of Zwaan's *control system* for literature: text categorisation is indeed one of the operations that readers perform when faced with a literary text. Beyond the recognition that a text is literary, then, a further step is to assign it a genre, while further distinctions depend on the level of literary competence. The second component echoes the construct of situation model. The third component is dispensable in my view, since poetic processing does not necessarily lead to a written interpretation – in fact, most of the time it does not. What is more, the emphasis on literary interpretation seems to narrow down the scope of the model to a limited population of readers. Regrettably, Hanauer provides no examples of how the model applies to poetic excerpts, and his model is largely silent on the linguistic analysis of poetry. As it stands, it appears ill-equipped to account for the interaction between text features and effects.

More recently, Stockwell (2009) and Sanford and Emmott (2012) have elaborated on the notion of *depth of processing*. Stockwell characterises it as 'intensity and configuration of reading' (2009: 45) which is a function of both readerly (e.g. alertness and attention) and textual variables (e.g. foregrounded textual elements, called *attractors* by Stockwell). It is through this interaction that depth of processing is boosted or mitigated. Sanford and Emmott further conceptualise depth of processing along a cline from shallow to deep. In their view, deep processing is tightly linked to

foregrounding and defamiliarisation (2012: 103), as well as to moderate disruptions of reading fluency (112). During shallow processing, by contrast, 'the meaning of words or expressions is not fully analysed or taken into account', so that 'the outcome of shallow processing is an *underspecified mental representation* of the text' (104; emphasis is the authors')[1]. The thesis will also explore the intriguing paradox according to which difficult poems typically demand deep processing but their readerly import often resembles the outcome of shallow processing. As Sanford and Emmott put it, 'if reading becomes too overloaded, for instance through the use of overly complex sentences, then processing may be more shallow, due to competition over processing resources' (2012: 112). In subsequent paragraphs, the authors discuss experimental evidence showing how formatting devices, low-frequency words and syntactic complexity cause processing difficulties. An extensive overview of these and other stylistic devices is provided in 2.2.

This section concludes by introducing the neurocognitive model for literary reading outlined in Jacobs (2014). The model has been developed after years of empirical work on the processing of literature – hence its relevance to the present thesis. It is diagrammed in Figure 3 below which, despite its complexity, offers 'a simplified version' of the model according to Jacobs (2014: 142):

[1] By now, the reader of this thesis should be aware that *mental representation* and similar formulations are synonymous to the notion of situation model.

Figure 3 A neurocognitive model of literary reading (from Jacobs 2014)

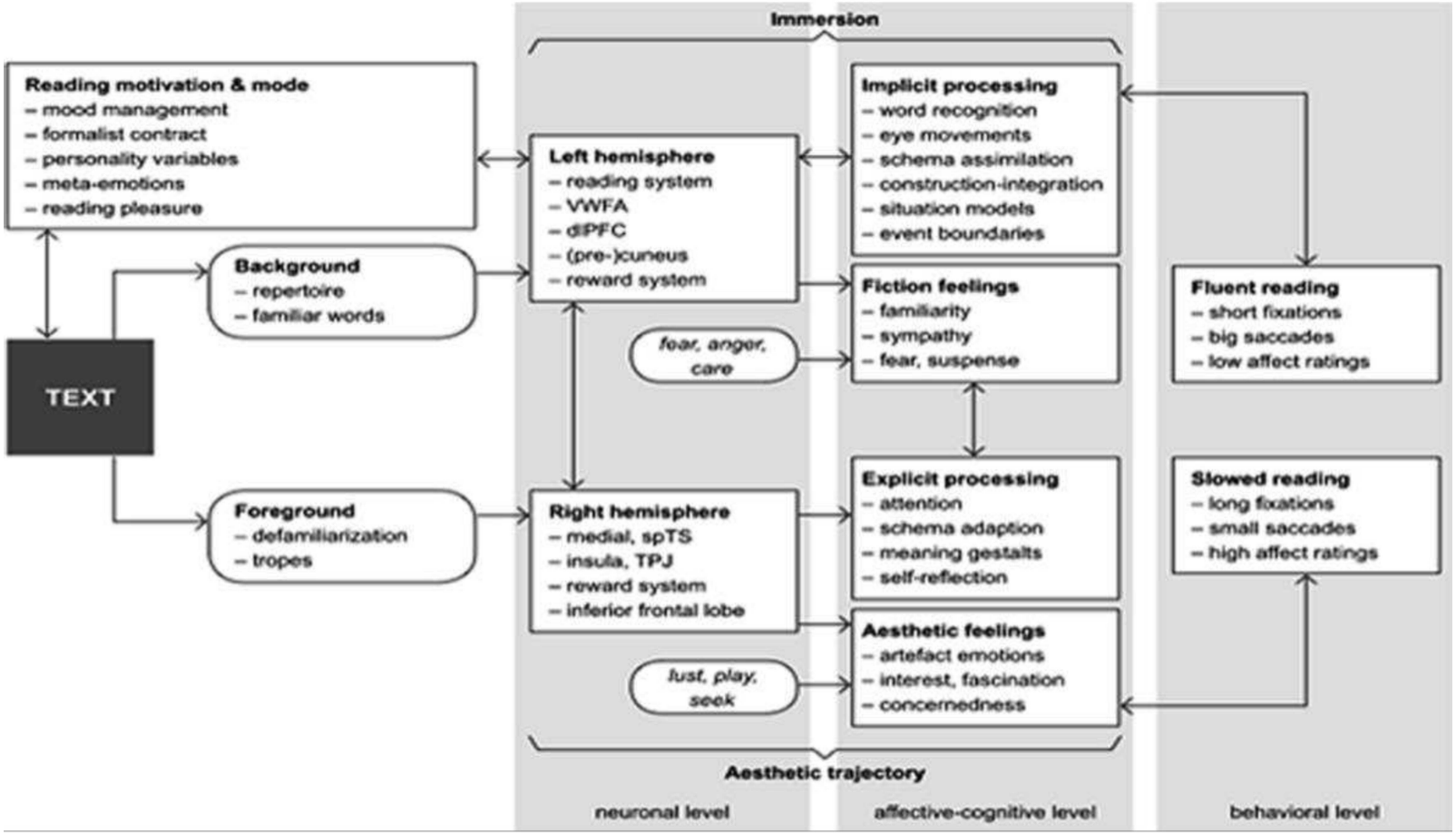


Fig. 3 locates within an overarching framework most of the processing phenomena discussed so far. In the light of Jacob's model, difficulty should be placed at the lower band of the figure. Difficulty is prompted by defamiliarised linguistic patterns of a specific kind (see section 2.2) and leading to (or even overturning) explicit processing and aesthetic feelings (second column, affective-cognitive level) as well as to slowed-down reading (third column, behavioural level). This thesis will not be concerned with the first, neurological column, as 'pointing out correspondences between poetic effects and the topography of the brain has little to contribute to our understanding of how literature works' (Tsur 2010: 512). The interested reader is however referred to Kane (2004), who reports neurological findings supporting the claim that the language of poetry is essentially processed in the right hemisphere – which makes it a genre particularly suited to foregrounding and deep processing.

Given that it is geared to an explanation of literary processing, Jacob's model would benefit from a more detailed account of foregrounding patterns. Indeed, in his paper Jacobs never specifies which tropes are instrumental in creating which literary effects. I provide such an account of *linguistic indicators of difficulty* in section 2.2 and see how they work in practice in Chapter 3 and 6. Jacob's model would also benefit from a literary meaning component, provided in the next sub-section (2.1.2). Overall, through the specific angle of difficulty, this thesis endeavours to make a contribution towards a better understanding of how poetry in general is processed.

2.1.2 Meaning in language and meaning in poetry

From an epistemological perspective, the processing models reviewed earlier treat comprehension as an essentially psychological phenomenon, leading to a subjective overemphasis. Popper argues against such a 'dogma that the objects of our understanding […] are at any rate to be explained in psychological terms' (1979 [1972]: 162). As is insightfully explained by Ching et al.:

> Limited to the cognitive process of reading, the pure psychological model is really concerned with the action of the reader; it is concerned with the function of the text only in so far as this is necessary to understand the psychology of the reader's reaction. Applied in its pure form to literature, such a theory would tend to founder in the affective fallacy. (Ching et al. 1980: 15)

Although these models capture the basic comprehension processes that difficult poems are likely to challenge, none of them – even among the literary models – have much to say about the sort of meaning that readers are expected to find in poetry. Of all the reported definitions of comprehension, only Dillon's explicitly refers to semantics, but even there the meaning level addressed (reference) is not specific to literature. When he ventures into interpretation, what he proposes is a rather limited and limiting exegetic tenet. Zwaan acknowledges the need for a more abstract level of meaning, but he too refrains from advancing any proposal in this direction. Yet, few literary specialists would disagree with Culler's claim that the analysis of a poem's meaning is fundamental to criticism (2002: [1975] 87). Since this thesis engages with contributions from literary criticism (see esp. Chapters 1 and 3), it becomes essential to incorporate

insights from literary theory as far as further levels of meaning are posited for literature.

At the same time, because difficulty is an everyday and intuitive notion (see 1.5), this thesis also takes commonsense wisdom seriously – both in practice, that is, testing the responses of real readers (Chaps. 4 and 5); and in theory, that is, likening comprehension to a meaning-making/meaning-retrieving process. Proposals from semantics will therefore also be considered, as they tackle the nature of meaning itself in relation to everyday experience.

What semantic theories could offer to the study of literature is a point addressed by Culler, who acknowledges the inadequacies of Greimas's structuralist semantics – the most popular theory at the time (Culler 2002 [1975]: 87). In Greimas's theory, words are posited to contain *semes*, minimal semantic features that recur in patterns throughout a literary work. As Culler noted it became apparent, however, that much of the meaningfulness of a literary text was left unaccounted for by the reductionist procedure encouraged by the theory. A semantics which would better suit literary purposes is likely to be 'a component theory within a larger semiotic theory about *meaningful, symbolic, behaviour*' (van Dijk 1985: 103; emphasis added). Cognitive and functionalist semantic theories fit van Dijk's definition, therefore I outline the way they model the meaning-making process through two exemplary cases: Evans's Lexical Concepts and Cognitive Models (LCCM) Theory (2009) and Halliday and Matthiessen's account of ideational meaning (1999).

Evans (2009) elaborates a model to explain how meaning is created, from lexical to discourse level. He makes the radical proposal that words have no meaning outside of context (2009: 12) and therefore criticises componential accounts that posit a fixed meaning for each word. For the purposes of the present thesis, it will suffice to review the operations of

integration and interpretation through which Evans explains how meaning emerges from combining words and phrases up into larger units of discourse. These terms share a common pedigree with the models of processing presented in the previous sections – in fact, Evans acknowledges them to bolster the psychological validity of his own theory. Integration 'proceeds by integrating lexical concepts in "bottom-up" fashion, applying to internally simpler lexical concepts before integrating more internally complex lexical concepts' (2009: 256). Interpretation, on the other hand, 'is guided by linguistic context' and 'by inferential processes relating to extra-linguistic context' (2009: 252). It seems that *integration* as used by Evans is loosely similar to Kintsch's construction (fig. 1) and to Zwaan's construal (fig. 2), while *interpretation* approximates Kintsch's and Zwaan's integration. Finally, the manner in which the outcome of language understanding is outlined by Evans recalls the notion of situation model:

> The outcome, then, of language understanding, involves the activation of non-linguistic representations, which arise due to prompts of the kind provided by lexical concept selection and integration. (2009: 252)

In reviewing the cognitive tradition, Halliday and Matthiessen (1999: 426) contend that its key exponents, such as Lakoff, Jackendoff and Langacker, propose transcendent accounts of meaning. Halliday and Matthiessen's counterproposal is a functionalist yet cognition-based approach to meaning where meaning is interpreted as immanent to language, and a tight relationship holds between grammar and semantics. Polemically, they claim that 'language is not a second-order code through which meanings created in some higher-order realm of existence are mysteriously made manifest and brought to light. […] it is language that *creates* meaning'

(1999: 602; emphasis is the authors'). This criticism would apply to Evans as well, since for him lexical meaning is of a conceptual rather than linguistic nature.

Within the ideational metafunction – a dimension that treats language as a way of representing experience and the world around us – Halliday and Matthiessen distinguish three basic semantic *phenomena*. These are (a) *elements*, which divide into *participants* (things and qualities), *circumstances* (times, places, causes) and *processes* (states and events) (1999: 58). Elements combine to construe (b) *figures*, or configurations of elements (1999: 52). Figures construct reality as holistic gestalts, which the grammar typically realises in clauses. Just as clauses are strung together to form texts, on the semantic plane figures combine to form (c) *sequences*, 'series of related figures' (1999: 50). Whilst elements and figures represent the experiential side of ideation, sequences represent its logical side, concerned with the interrelation of such smaller units (1999: 511). These constructs will be drawn upon in the stylistic analyses (Chapter 3) when necessary, as they allow a language-based account of meaning which can be easily applied to whole texts.

In contrast to Evans, Halliday and Matthiessen do not propose any procedural mechanism for the creation of meaning – they are not concerned with cognitive phases of meaning-making from the viewpoint of a receiver, but with how speakers and writers instantiate the semantic potential of language into texts according to specific contextual norms. Therefore, I retain the phases postulated by Dillon, Kintsch, Zwaan and Evans to illustrate how different poems are likely to be processed by readers, and confine the functionalist contribution to a more immanent sort of textual analysis.

Rigorous as they are, accounts of meaning in linguistics are still deemed of little relevance to poetry. Prynne exemplifies the point when he

refers to Lyons's *Semantics* and Sperber and Wilson's *Relevance Theory* as 'instructive' but 'too elementary to achieve nuanced analysis of poetic discourse' (2010a: 163). Literary theorist Lamarque echoes Prynne by claiming that 'meaning in poetry is fine-grained and context-sensitive to a degree that is not exhibited or demanded elsewhere' (2009: 415). It is possibly the schematic nature of the models themselves that provokes suspicion among literary scholars writing after the structuralist era.

This attitude can be clearly seen in Lamarque himself, when he argues that poems need to be experienced rather than simply assigned meanings (2009: 399). In order to subscribe to this claim, we would need to share its presupposition that meanings are separate from experience, if not opposite to it. This is not the case, though: systemic-functional linguistics, for instance, believes that meanings are central to experience. The title of Halliday and Matthiessen's already reviewed work (*Construing Experience through Meaning*) makes this point adamantly. Still, what Lamarque says is relevant to a linguistic approach to poetry. He explains the elusiveness of poetic meaning on the grounds that 'words, images, allusions and names are rich in range and depth of association' (2009: 419). On the one hand, he refers to textual features that can be linguistically described; on the other, he mentions inferential processes ('range and depth of association') that are explored in pragmatics and cognitive psychology, and that this thesis addresses empirically (see 4.4.3). Lamarque also engages with notions of form and content that have bearings on critical and analytical practice. Against content-biased and form-biased critics, he defends the organicist principle according to which form and content are two sides of the same coin. As a consequence, he characterises poetic meaning holistically, not in terms of 'a comprehensive paraphrase but rather [of] a conception of the poem's themes, its outlook, its significance or value' (2009: 419). The opposition between a

paraphrase (content) level and one implying value or significance is consistent with Zwaan's (1993) remark that literature has a sort of abstract meaning that cannot be captured by a situation model (see 2.1.1).

Literary theorists of various persuasions agree on this bipartition. The level of content has been called *denotative meaning* (Leech 1969: 39), *meaning* (Riffaterre 1984 [1978]: 3, Derrida 1992), *verbalisation* (Hasan 1985: 97), *information* (Perloff 1991: 187), or *sense* (Harker 1994). The higher level, which goes beyond semantics, has been termed *significance* (Leech 1969: 40; Riffaterre 1984 [1978]: 2), *theme* (Hasan 1985: 97), *meaning* or *redundancy* (Perloff 1991: 187), *signification* (Derrida 1992, Harker 1994). These constructs are loosely synonymous, although on closer inspection divergences emerge across scholars.

This bipartition can be exemplified through the *verbalisation/theme* pair proposed by Hasan. *Verbalisation* is a level that 'would permit a paraphrase of the text' since it implies that the reader has 'an idea what the individual clauses of the text mean and what logical relations unite them' (Hasan 1985: 97). At this level, 'a literature text is like any other text' (1985: 97). What counts at this level is therefore the content, subject or topic of a literary work. Next we find the *theme*, 'the meaning of the highest stratum' and 'what the text is about when dissociated from the particularities of that text' (Hasan 1985: 97)[2]. As inferable from Hasan's practice, this is formulated as a brief statement endowed with general values or truths (e.g. "The road not taken' is about the limitations and immutability of human choices'; Hasan 1985: 97; see also 4.4.3). In fact, theme formulation can be regarded as the outcome of literary interpretations (Tsur 2008: 272). Although themes are end-products of interpretation and hence stand at some distance from the semantics of the

[2] This is not to be confused with *theme* used as the counterpart of *rheme* in linguistics.

interpreted text, they are still verbalised, that is, produced by and through language. This is a crucial point: abstract meaning is still linguistic, observable, rather than the fleeting entity that some literary scholars seem to assume it to be. It is worth remarking that the notion of theme is reductionist by definition, as it levels out individual differences across texts. In cognitivist terms, it could be seen as a top-down construct, and indeed Tsur likens it to schemata and scripts (2008: 272). Theme is a central concept in this thesis (see especially Chapter 4 and 5), which justifies its lengthy treatment here.

Before moving onto the next section, a coda is needed to remind the reader that, in spite of the apparently problem-free status of themes, poetic meaning is not only elusive (Lamarque 2009): it can also be highly indirect. Riffaterre provides a useful taxonomy of semantic indirection linked to specific tropes:

> There are three possible ways for semantic indirection to occur. Indirection is produced by displacing, distorting, or creating meaning. Displacing, when the sign shifts from one meaning to another, when one word "stands for" another, as happens with metaphor and metonymy. Distorting, when there is ambiguity, contradiction, or nonsense. Creating, when textual space serves as a principle of organization for making signs out of linguistic items that may not be meaningful otherwise (for instance, symmetry, rhyme, or semantic equivalences between positional homologues in a stanza). (Riffaterre 1984 [1978]: 2)

The stylistic analyses in Chapter 3 and 6 will provide a wealth of instances in this respect, showing how semantic indirection is both meaningful and systematic in difficult poems.

2.2 Linguistic indicators

So far I have reviewed high-order constructs that help in explaining the processing and interpretation of poetry. Yet there is a more tangible level left to address – that of the text itself. Although the language of poetry has been scrutinised by a wealth of studies (see 1.2), to date there has been no explicit attempt to gather and systematise the linguistic features typically associated with difficulty. This is unfortunate, since the development of such a working checklist would make the study of difficulty a principled and theoretically grounded endeavour. This section therefore attempts to identify such features from the existing literature. The heterogeneity of insights and findings that will be drawn upon certainly stems from the ubiquity of difficulty, even under the refined definition offered in 1.5. Difficulty has been ascribed to virtually all linguistic levels and features, and phenomena as diverse as reference and graphology are subsumed under it. In a sense, what is true about register is also true about difficulty: 'there is no easy way to decide ahead of time which linguistic features to investigate for a register analysis, because *almost any linguistic feature can have functional associations and so be useful for distinguishing among some registers*' (Biber and Conrad 2009: 63; emphasis added). In a vein similar to register analysis, one would want some criteria not only to linguistically identify poetic difficulty, but ideally also to account for the commonsense perception that poems can be difficult in different ways. An additional challenge is that some of these indicators of difficulty can be rendered fairly innocuous by the appropriate

co-text. This is why Chapter 3 will examine how the indicators introduced here interact in a selection of poems.

2.2.1 Orthography and aspects of graphology

The preliminary phase of language comprehension, irrespective of text-types and contexts of communication, is *decoding*. As acknowledged by psycholinguists, the code which enables this operation is the orthographic code, which contributes to the reading process alongside the phonological and the meaning codes (Harley 2008: 230). In the written medium, to decode implies to identify known words from strings of printed characters; if this phase is blocked, it is impossible to assign linguistic meanings to each string. Any non-standard use of orthography may thus potentially disrupt the reading process from the outset: it can either slow it down – since word identification can take longer – or impair it, in case the orthography is so deviant that the match becomes impossible.

This discussion is closer to stylistic concerns than it may appear. Adamson (1999: 600-1) has exemplified how writers, especially from the nineteenth century onwards, employ non-standard orthography to achieve various aesthetic purposes. In particular, she discusses eye-dialect, in which non-standard spelling is used as a means of portraying characters comically or satirically (600). Most importantly for the purposes of this thesis, she evidences how accuracy in reproducing characters' speech at the phonetic level may result in unintelligibility (e.g. *fewd* for 'if you had' in an extract from Shaw; 1999: 600; see also Leech and Short 2007: [1981] 169). Compared to drama and fiction, poetry is less concerned with the direct portrayal of characters. An interesting question is hence how and to what extent non-standard orthography is employed in some of the poems

introduced in 3 and 6.1, and which aesthetic purposes may be invoked where this occurs.

Non-standard orthography is only one aspect of graphology, which also subsumes punctuation, character type and size, text divisions and layout (Douthwaite 2000: 207). Douthwaite provides numerous examples illustrating how literary language can turn these aspects into foregrounding devices, from the iconic layout of caligrams to mispunctuation (e.g. 'I am close to. my syster'; 2000: 209). Clearly, these aspects are involved in comprehension phases other than decoding (i.e. word-identification), mostly having to do with matters of emphasis. For instance, changes in paragraph formatting have been shown to influence readers' attention and depth of processing, with better retention of information for mini-paragraphs (Emmott et. al 2006).

Because of the drive towards formal experimentation, twentieth century poetry is likely to exploit graphological devices to a large extent (Leech 1969: 49). Quartermain (1992: 183-4) provides an extreme example of this when he closely discusses a few lines by Susan Howe. Here the insertion of non-linguistic notation (e.g. arrows, mathematical symbols) between common words proves a formidable obstacle to the construal phase of comprehension (see 2.1.1), with further implications for interpretation. All in all, both from an aesthetic and a processing perspective, there are theoretical and empirical reasons to include graphology as a feature amenable to a stylistic investigation of difficulty in poetry.

2.2.2 Lexis

Difficulty of vocabulary can be assessed along various dimensions, of which the most basic are frequency (indexing the degree of unfamiliarity of a

word) and abstractedness, a semantic variable associated with nouns. Typically associated with intellectual formal types of language (Wales 2011 [1990]: 1), abstract nouns are recalled less easily than concrete nouns (Rodgers 1971: 113). Their difficulty is a consolidated finding in psycholinguistics: 'people are particularly slow and make more errors when reading low-frequency exception words with abstract meanings' (Harley 2008: 217).

A very specific subset of nouns, proper nouns, is also relevant to difficulty, inasmuch as they 'depend entirely on outside knowledge' (Brooke-Rose 1958: 43). This can create interpretive problems, as shown by Perloff when she comments on a poem by George Oppen ending with the proper name Mary-Anne. The critic points out the 'odd opacity' of it, since 'the name evokes no image, tells no story' (1991:83). Such a reliance on proper names may seem counterintuitive in a genre which, as pointed out earlier, is not overly concerned with characters. A possible answer to the dilemma is provided by Fois-Kaschel (2002; see 1.2), who discusses the function of proper names in Hermetic poetry at length. She argues that proper names, as 'pure' verbal signs, appeal to the poetics of Hölderlin, Trakl and Celan she focuses on (2002: 170). Here 'pure' can be interpreted as devoid of sense, since linguists have often characterised proper names in this way (Lyons 1977: 197; but Croft and Cruse 2004: 316 report the alternative view according to which proper names are rich in meaning). Interestingly, Halliday traces an unexpected similarity between proper names and pronouns in that both have a unique referent, although 'with pronouns, the referent is defined interpersonally, by the speech situation. With proper names it is defined experientially: there exists only one, at least in the relevant body of experience' (2004: 325). In the Oppen poem discussed by Perloff, the vocative construction hosting the proper name fuels an aesthetic contrast: the name becomes

interpersonally salient as pronouns are, but ideationally is still devoid of sense. It is arguably this flexibility which makes proper names appealing to some poets.

Another dimension that is salient to difficulty is lexical ambiguity. Derrida (1992: 121-2), for instance, lingers on the multiple meanings of the French word 'or' ('gold', a disjunctive conjunction, and a discourse marker used in arguments) as employed by Mallarmé. While he acknowledges (125) the disambiguating perspectives of linguists and philosophers, he still insists on a paradigmatic way of reading poetry which leads from meaning-in-context to semiotic significance:

> Is *or*, here, one word or several words? The linguist – and the philosopher – will perhaps say that each time, since the meaning and function change, we should read a different word. And yet this diversity crosses itself and goes back to an appearance of identity which has to be taken into account. (Derrida 1992: 125)

Lexical ambiguity is also a major area of investigation in psycholinguistics, and Harley's introduction to the discipline devotes an entire section to it. Based on solid experimental evidence, he points out that 'ambiguous words take longer to process even when they are strongly biased by context' (2008: 200). Some models of lexical processing seem to indirectly support Derrida's point: 'There is now agreement that when we encounter an ambiguous word, *all meanings are activated* and context is subsequently used to very quickly select the correct meaning' (Harley 2008: 202; emphasis added; see also van Dijk and Kintsch 1983: 33).

All in all, vocabulary 'serves as a proxy for background knowledge' (Anderson and Davison 1988: 44), so comprehension crucially depends on it. At the same time, though, lexical comprehension should not be

overstated when it comes to poetry. This is because lexical activation should be implemented by higher processes of comprehension (from parsing syntactic information up to integrating larger textual portions) that are, however, challenged by the style and structure of some poems. Stein's 'Patriarchal Poetry', a non-lineated poem almost devoid of content words, is an extreme example of this tendency. Faced with this radically experimental writing, Neel (1999: 90) states the literal senselessness of it, while engaging in interpretive speculations that go far beyond the linguistic meaning of the text (see 6.2).

2.2.3 Syntax

Various researchers, from literary critics and stylisticians to psycholinguists, agree that certain uses of syntax have an impact on difficulty. One crucial dimension in this respect is *syntactic ambiguity*, whereby the same syntactic structure encodes two distinct semantic representations. For instance, in Mallarmé's expression 'la seule continue', *continue* 'operates in the same utterance both as a verb or as an adjective' (1992: 114). In Derrida's philosophical agenda, syntactic ambiguity is a cue to undecidability, a notion stated several times (1992: 114, 115, 120). The line 'and that one talent which is death to hide' from Milton's *Sonnet XX*, is another glaring example of syntactic ambiguity. Stockwell paraphrases it according to various possibilities (2002b: 77), and the interpretive uncertainty already at paraphrase level can be taken as evidence of post-reading difficulty (which I call *offline difficulty*: see 2.3), whereby a grasp of the content is made problematic.

Alternatively, Austin (1986) tackles syntactic ambiguity from a generativist perspective, examining cases like Shelley's 'the grey ruin shook' where *ruin* can be either subject or object and *shook* can be either

transitive or intransitive (1986: 23). He maintains that syntactic ambiguity is not always a carrier of double meaning (27), a stance that contradicts the definition provided above. The contradiction stems from a different way of conceptualising meaning: while Austin only focuses on semantic relations between constituents, I believe that expressive, or non-descriptive meaning (Lyons 1977: 50) should be at the core of any account of meaning in poetry.

Syntactic ambiguity is worthy of the interest of psycholinguists too, since it yields insights into our processing operations. From within text comprehension studies, Frazier points out how 'syntactic ambiguity poses a difficult problem for the processor' (1988: 199) and further makes a useful distinction between *temporary ambiguity* (which can be disambiguated later on) and *full ambiguity* (which cannot be disambiguated). Interestingly, and perhaps contrary to expectations, Frazier also underlines that later disambiguation does not reduce the processing effort (1988: 199). In the model to be outlined soon (2.3), this temporal dimension is duly taken into account.

Other syntactic behaviours in experimental poetry are so radical that they do away with well-formedness altogether. Thoms (2008) specifically focuses on the syntax of Beckett's prose in *How It Is* and *Worstward Ho*, the influence of which on experimental poetry has been argued by Perloff (1985: 145). Thoms notices opposite yet convergent strategies, such as over- and under-punctuation which, although an aspect of graphology (see 2.2.1), have notable bearings on syntax. He argues that, while 'the precise effects of over and under-punctuation may be markedly different', they 'both destabilise the grammatical interpretation of the text in a similar manner' (2008: 65). One of his most substantial claims is that syntactic deviation in literary texts can be interpreted 'by pragmatic inferences with

respect to context' (129), as the perceived spokenness of Beckett's texts does presuppose a communicative context as its ideal background.

Fowler (1971) focuses instead on lines such as 'he danced his did' and 'with up so floating many bells down', both by Cummings. He interprets them as ungrammatical strings while attempting to trace them back to well-formed counterparts through a chain of transformational rules. From a processing viewpoint, what is impeded in the latter example is a structural parsing of the lines, resulting in a defective construal of its ideational meaning. This line is thus close to what Levin (1977: 14) describes as syntactic deviance in nature, impeding all kinds of semantic construal. By contrast, the former example is unproblematic to parse, as *did* unequivocally functions as noun even though it is, lexically, a verb. It is therefore plausible to posit different processing modes for the two strings. In a similar vein, Quartermain calls 'asyntactic' (1992: 183) some lines by Howe in his close reading, and Perloff (1991: 41) ascribes syntactic indeterminacy to the Language poets, an American avant-garde movement. In these latter cases, however, there is little attempt at syntactic analysis. Analysing a poem by Howe (see 3.5), I will add substance and precision to these claims.

A milder type of non-standard syntax is phrase juxtaposition, a widespread phenomenon in twentieth century poetry. Adopting an historical perspective, Adamson (1999: 640) shows how syntax has been increasingly shifting from a clause-based to a phrase-based norm. She crucially mentions how this move 'seems designed to foreground its [of Modernist poetry] potential difficulties, baffling the reader's ability to reconstruct either syntax or message or the train of thought that might hold the parts together' (1999: 641). Among the forms juxtaposition can take, the *free modifier* is worth mentioning for its ubiquity in modernist writing. This 'juxtapositional construction' can be grammatically realised by

participial clauses, adverbs, prepositional phrases and absolute constructions (1999: 635). The difficulty in parsing these structures lies in the fact that 'the modifier-head relationship is unspecified and often unspecific' (635).

Testa draws a similar conclusion from his analysis of twentieth century Italian poetry, hinting at how the use of a nominal style often reflects, on a semantic level, sequences of disjointed entities (1999: 150). Likewise, Stockwell (2002a: 63) observes the indeterminate relations between juxtaposed noun phrases in a poem by Ted Hughes. Comparable structural ambiguities have been noticed, among others, in Mallarmé (Bowie 1978: 7) and Pound (Tate 2008 [1994]: 140). Tate also acutely discriminates between apposition and list, arguing that 'noun phrases which are paratactically juxtaposed can be taken as appositional, and thus coreferential, or alternatively as discrete items, as in a list' (140). The criterion for choosing between the two alternatives is, in principle, the degree of relatedness between the items: elements in apposition are semantically related, whilst elements in lists are only contingently related (Adamson 1999: 641). These observations are frequently followed by a conjectured reading behaviour which, however, tends to be formulated in generic terms. The processing models reviewed earlier will allow to increase, in Chapter 3, the precision and perhaps also the plausibility of such conjectures.

Intimately linked to the technique of juxtaposition is the lack of connectives, another syntactic/cohesive phenomenon that is often pointed out. Analysing 'The Skunk' by Robert Lowell, Toolan (2008 [1986]: 89) notices that its clauses are abruptly conjoined and connectives are missing, which leads him to characterise the poem's tone and style as 'conversational, intimate, reflective, self-oriented, and perhaps dangerously uncontrolled' (89). Lopez stresses how the same phenomenon

in Basil Bunting's 'Briggflatts' makes the discourse set up by the poem hard to follow (2006: 154). The point is reinforced by Adamson, according to whom the removal of connectives 'creates potentially serious problems of intelligibility' (1999: 640). She thoroughly explains how this is the case by comparing paratactic writing to (a) hypotactic writing and to (b) paratactic speech. Modernist writing renounces the information carried by explicit connectives in hypotactic writing; however, its written medium also means that it cannot rely on intonation, as speech does, 'to tell us where the links are', nor can it rely on a disambiguating context as speech events do. Likewise, Anderson and Davison stress how lack of connectives makes it difficult for readers 'to make the correct inference, especially if it is not clear from the context which inferences (if any) should be made' (1988: 32-3). This last claim could be adapted to poetry with the proviso that inferences in poetry cannot be judged according to a wrong/right dichotomy, but rather along a continuum of plausibility.

Compared to phrase juxtaposition, through which syntax is simplified to an extreme, subordination and embedding have been associated with difficulty as indicators of *syntactic complexity*. Chafe (1991), for instance (see 1.2), singles out subordination as one of the determinants that make James's extract more difficult than Wharton's; the reason being, he argues, that subordinate constructs can suspend topics or delay relevant information (1991: 12). Information distribution, deliberately less linear in subordination than coordination, is in fact 'one of the most important factors that determines comprehensibility and coherence' (Harley 2008: 378). Similarly, Sanford and Emmott argue that subordination may disadvantage the information under its scope (2012: 90), hence reducing readerly attention and leading to incomplete, *shallow processing* (114). It is further known that behavioural correlates of difficulty, such as reading speed and recall, are related to 'the number of propositions per sentence',

another measure of syntactic complexity (Kintsch 1998: 285). This evidence suggests then a pivotal role of syntactic complexity in the study of difficulty.

Syntactic complexity in poetry can also be realised through verb phrase delay, resulting in a 'hiatus' (San 2005) between subject and verb. San analyses the phenomenon across a wide range of poetic examples, crucially arguing that 'a sentence characterized by multiple and lengthy grammatical hiatuses may well be termed "difficult"' (137). The difficulty stems, I propose, from disregarding the semantic bond between subject (actors, doers of actions) and verb (processes) through the insertion of comments and specifications that force readers to keep track of two overlapping sources of information.

There is psycholinguistic evidence that parentheticals reduce detection of anomaly and increase processing load (Bohan 2008, cited in Sanford and Emmott 2012: 123). Sound linguistic justification for this is provided by Short, worth full quote:

> these sorts of structures [parenthetical and anticipatory structures], which are sometimes called periodic sentences, tend to be more difficult to process because to understand them properly we need to hold the anticipatory or parenthetical information in our heads until we get to the end of the main clause. As a consequence, these sorts of sentences are associated with *style complexity and reading difficulty*. (Short 1996: 341; emphasis added)

Parentheticals may be signalled by parentheses, which in poetry – according to Testa (1999: 152) and Tartakovsky (2009: 226) – usually foreground the information they contain, contrary to their typical function of hosting secondary information. An important style marker in nineteen

and twentieth century poetry and one initially associated with conversation (Adamson 1999: 594-6), parentheses have also been associated with difficulty in the cases of Cummings (Kidder 1979, cited in Tartakovsky 2009: 242) and Olson (Adamson 1999: 596). Obviously, it is not the graphological sign which leads to the processing difficulty, but the semantic suspension of the main clause caused by the parenthetical.

2.2.4 Semantics

In a survey of poetic extracts defined as difficult by critics (Castiglione 2013), I realised how the semantic component of difficulty was paramount, informing most of the extracts analysed there. In their checklist of linguistic categories, Leech and Short (2007 [1981]: 75) subsume the semantic ones under the lexical heading; however, here they are allocated a section on their own. This is because the narrow focus of my lexis section meant that many semantic phenomena relevant to difficulty have been bypassed. To redress the balance, I will discuss in turn reference, deixis, negation, anomaly and metaphors.

Reference and deixis

Reference can be defined as 'the relation between an element of the text and something else by reference to which it is interpreted in the given instance' (Halliday and Hasan 1976: 309). More technically, it is 'a form of situational (exophoric) presupposition' (1976: 145). Its relevance to comprehension, hence to difficulty, can be adduced by recalling the definition of situation model, 'a mental representation of the *referential* situation' (Zwaan 2004: 37; emphasis added; see 2.1.1). Poetry is a showcase for deviant or untypical plays with reference. As Pilkington points

out, 'in poetry, reference assignment and disambiguation are often deliberately made problematic, requiring greater processing effort on the part of the reader' (2000: 77).

An emphasis on the anti-referential stance of poetry is common in critics of structuralist and post-structuralist persuasion: Riffaterre (1973), for instance, confronts Wordsworth's 'Yew-Trees' only to argue that its referential verisimilitude is effective only insofar as it points beyond itself, to the symbolic system that arguably generated it. Perloff too is anxious to de-emphasise, *pace* Bloom (1973), Wallace Stevens's influence on John Ashbery. She does so by arguing that 'Ashbery turns the Stevens mode on its head by cutting off the referential dimension' (Perloff 1981: 266). This claim has the appearance of a hurried generalisation dictated by the critic's theoretical agenda. Although Perloff uses a couple of extracts to illustrate her point, she fails to offer a semantic explanation of how Ashbery does away with Stevens' referential dimension. A likely explanation would take into account Ashbery's use of opaque deictic reference – a phenomenon that indeed Adamson (1999: 673) illustrates through some of Ashbery's lines ('This is where we are spending our vacation. A nice restful spot. Real camp life. Hope you are feeling fine'). In this extract, demonstrative and personal pronouns are combined with progressive aspect signalling the immediate situational context, so these deictic items cannot be assigned a definite referent.

Apart from influencing the identification of referents, deictic items have been argued to favour readerly involvement in poetry (Jeffries 2008). Jeffries compares the use of deixis in two poems, after an informal test made her aware of the students' overwhelming preference for one of them. In Peter Samson's 'Mittens', the most appreciated poem, personal deixis is consistent, whereas temporal deixis points to the alternation of past and present. The priming of deictic terms allows for a specific situation to be

portrayed, which in turn may account for the readerly sensation of feeling 'invited' into the world of the poem. In 'Pain tells you what to wear' by Mebdh McGuckian, the use of 'you' with a generalised reference (i.e. the equivalent of 'one') leads Jeffries to argue that 'the deictic shift of the reader into the narratorial position is also less than complete' (2008: 81-2). Jeffries suggests a link with the issue of difficulty here, hypothesising that the McGuckian poem 'is difficult to read for those unaccustomed to regular reading of contemporary poetry' (2008: 70). The link between difficulty and involvement will be expanded in Chapter 4, where an empirical test will shed further light on the issue.

A sub-set of deictics, definite articles, are also important in the present investigation, since they function 'as an invitation to supply an appropriate referent' (Adamson 1999: 674). However, Adamson continues, when the referent is too specific to be part of readers' shared knowledge, the effect is one of exclusion. This is what accounts for the difference between Wordsworth's *the vale* and Eliot's *the person in the Spanish cape*, where an indefinite article would have been more expected (1999: 674). Deciding whether to use a definite or indefinite article is obviously a stylistic choice, yet it also affects comprehension. For instance, a study by Loftus and Zanni (1975) cited in Harley (2008: 372) found that the use of the definite article can lead to memory errors. After watching a film involving a car accident, participants were asked if they remember having seen a broken headlight. When the question featured the definite article ('Did you see the broken headlight?), they were more prone to answer positively even though there was no broken headlight scene. The explanation is that 'when we come across a definite article we make an inference that we already know something about what follows' (2008: 372). Of course, the non-factual nature of literature does not lend itself to this kind of testing. Even so, when poets present referents as supposedly

familiar through the definite article, readers may be led to share the poetic persona's presupposition in spite of their exclusion from the world portrayed in the poem.

Negation

Paul Werth defines negation as an 'essentially foregrounding process, whereby some background proposition (asserted, assumed, expected, claimed, presupposed) is focused on and challenged' (1999: 250; quoted in Nahajec 2009: 111). There are grounds for including negation in the list of indicators, since many commentators have argued that negative clauses pose higher processing demands than their positive counterparts (Dillon 1978: 145; Chafe 1991: 17; Hassan and Glucksberg 2006: 1027, cited in Nahajec 2009: 115; Du et al. 2014). As summed up by Du et al. in their experiment on contradictory versus non-contradictory negative sentences: 'negative sentences are much more difficult to process than relevant affirmative sentences' (2014: 461). A possible explanation for these findings is put forward by Nahajec: 'since the intended meaning of a negative is not immediately available, it is more obscure than it need be' (2009: 113). Nahajec's main point is that poetry recruits negation as a special device through which implicit meaning is created. One possible way to test this reasonable assumption would be to probe inference generation in readers provided with two versions of the same text – one stripped off all negating devices, one retaining them. Finally, problems of processing overload are obviously magnified with double negatives (Frazier 1988: 213; Chafe 1991: 17).

Unusual word combination, anomaly, novel metaphor

At phrasal and clausal level, unusual word combinations are a striking phenomenon in poetry, their most obvious effect being the creation of surprise (Jeffries 1993: 70). Jeffries examines the phenomenon at some length, focusing on noun plus verb (e.g. Eliot's 'the jungle crouched'; 1993: 70) and noun plus adjective constructions (e.g. Cooper's 'dislocated lawns', 74). Within the latter construction, she distinguishes between *restricted collocations*, where an adjective premodifies a noun which is not among the typical collocates of that adjective (e.g. Eliot's 'compound ghost'); and *collocational contradictions*, implying 'an apparent contradiction between the two parts of the collocation' (77; Hill's 'slight miracle' is one of the examples she provides). The collocations within the former group tend to prompt a paradigmatic reading whereby the unusual collocate is hypothetically compared with those more likely to be used in a non-literary context. For instance, Jeffries infers the negative connotation of Larkin's 'monumental slithering' by mentioning some usual collocates of 'monumental' and unveiling their typically negative connotation (76). Toolan's 1993 reading of Geoffrey Hill's 'On Commerce and Society' features a very similar example (see 1.2).

Yet sometimes it is usual collocations that come as unexpected in poetry. Carter (1998 [1987]: 253-4) has produced empirical evidence for this claim. After preparing a prose version of Auden's 'Who's Who', he deleted the same words from both versions and tested the predictability of collocations by gap-filling. Results showed that usual collocates – present in the original poem – were supplied for the prose but not for the poetry version: 'little', for instance, was predicted of 'job' by 18% informants for the prose version but none for the original poetry version. Carter

convincingly explains this finding in terms of the readerly assumption according to which poets tend to eschew formulaic language.

On the semantic plane, unusual collocations can result in *anomaly*, an umbrella-term used to cover 'all kinds of semantic incompatibility or contradiction' (Wales 2011 [1990]: 22), alternatively referred to as *semantic deviance* (Levin 1977: 4) or *semantic clash* (Croft and Cruse 2004: 221); or in *tropes*, 'foregrounded irregularities of content' (Leech 1969: 74), especially metaphor, metonymy and irony. The theoretical distinction between the two phenomena is far from unproblematic: Romero and Soria (2013), for instance, challenge the generally accepted view that anomaly is a condition for novel metaphor identification. They do so by re-interpreting relevant psycholinguistic evidence and providing a relevance theoretic account alternative to 'mainstream' cognitivism. Based on research they previously conducted, they propose that novel metaphors imply both contextual abnormality and conceptual contrast, whilst anomalies do without the latter constraint (2013: 49).

From a neurological perspective, Faust and Mashal (2007: 863) report that unrelated noun pairs such as 'wisdom wash' (anomaly condition) are read more quickly than novel metaphorical noun pairs such as 'conscience storm' (metaphorical condition). This is because novel metaphors, activating different right-hemisphere patterns in the brain, are assumed to 'reflect some kind of systematic, although nonsalient, conceptual knowledge' (2007: 867). Assuming that Faust and Mashal's finding is valid also at the level of poetic discourse, then (other things being equal) poems featuring unrelated lists of nouns rather than textually motivated novel metaphors should be deemed easier in terms of online processing, but more difficult to grasp in a post-reading phase. It could even be that the meaningless/meaningfulness dichotomy surfacing in

criticism on difficulty (see 1.4.2) could be explained in terms of anomaly versus motivated novel metaphor.

Cognitive psychologists and linguists with a theoretical relevance background make interesting remarks with regard to the processing effort required by novel metaphors:

> more extensive problem-solving activities are presumably required for new creative metaphors, such as those used in some forms of modern poetry – van Dijk 1972; van Dijk & Petöfi, 1975; Ching, Haley, & Lunsford, 1980; Groeben, 1982. (van Dijk & Kintsch 1983: 313)

> Easy access, as in the case of dead or conventional metaphors, leads to relatively strong communication: a small range of assumptions are standardly made highly salient. Less easy access leads to a more diffuse range of assumptions being made weakly salient. In literary communication it may happen that the effort required is beyond the capability of the reader and he becomes confused or frustrated. (Pilkington 2000: 101)

The first quotation stresses the specialised strategies required to understanding novel metaphors, and hence to overcoming the difficulty. The second quotation, on the contrary, lingers on the processing block that novel metaphors can create for readers. While each perspective addresses the issues from an opposite direction, both sound plausible and could fruitfully complement each other.

On a more tangible textual level, there are ways to determine the extent to which metaphors are cognitively taxing to process. An important

dimension is the 'direction of domain mappings' (Shen 2007). Relying on quantitative evidence by corpora, Shen found that similes with an abstract source domain followed by a concrete target domain (e.g. 'education is like a ladder') occur much more frequently than in the reverse order (e.g. 'a ladder is like education'). Tests he conducted showed that the former order was easier to make sense of than the latter. On this basis he concludes that poetic language, for all its inventiveness, is still subject to cognitive constraints (2007: 172). An interesting line of enquiry would thus be to assess the extent to which the corpus of poems here analysed (see 3 and 6.1) does away with those cognitive constraints observed by perhaps more 'mainstream' poetry.

Unfortunately, much research on metaphor overlooks the contribution of syntax on processing. There are a few noteworthy studies that do address the issue: Brooke-Rose (1958), Stockwell (1992) and Goatly (1997). Their arguments will be reviewed diachronically, since each study admittedly builds on the previous ones. Brooke-Rose develops a taxonomy of metaphors based on their grammatical form. She distinguishes between noun metaphors, verb metaphors, and metaphors based on 'auxiliary words and phrases' (1958: 238). She proposes further sub-classifications in the case of noun metaphors, namely, simple replacement (term B replaces A from the outset), pointing formulae (B replaces A after A's first mention), the copula (A is B), the link with 'to make' (C makes A into B) and the genitive link (B is part of C) (1958: 24). However, only once in her whole book does she hint at the difficulty a metaphor type can cause. The type is Eliot's 'phrase-metaphors', that are 'like Simple Replacements but more difficult: we have to know where they come from before we can appreciate what they "symbolize"' (1958: 264).

A complementary, process-oriented perspective is taken by Stockwell (1992), who explores 'how these forms [those identified by Brooke-Rose]

are processed in reading' (1992: 1). Crucially for the present thesis, he proposes a 'cline of processing difficulty' (2). The general idea is that structures cue more or less explicitly the activation of 'underlying metaphorical mappings' (3). Stockwell offers a working example by re-writing the basic metaphor BRAIN IS CITY so that it acquires all the linguistic realisations identified by Brooke-Rose. In the low-processing effort end of the scale Stockwell lists extended metaphor and analogy (e.g. 'just as a city has a communication system, so does the brain') as the most explicit types. At mid-point along the scale he lists more compact constructions, such as simple replacements (e.g. 'I live in the big brain') and unit metaphors (e.g. 'the urban brain'). Finally, at the high-processing effort end of the scale he mentions allegory and fiction, both extended but implicit in their metaphorical substitutions. The scope of Stockwell's paper is ambitious and its aim worth pursuing, but the examples listed vary so much in terms of their content that the contribution of structure on processing cannot be teased out from that of semantics.

Goatly devotes a full chapter to the syntax of metaphors (1997: 198-228). He acknowledges from the outset the strong interrelation between syntax and semantics by showing how different structures specify the relationship between the tenor (which Goatly calls 'topic') and the vehicle. He distinguishes six structures, some of which overlap with previous taxonomies: copula, apposition, genitive, noun premodifier, compounds and blends. Importantly, the content words in Goatly's examples remain unaltered, so that the contribution of the structure is controlled for: 'the eye was a raindrop' (copula), 'the eye, a raindrop' (apposition), 'the raindrop of an eye' (genitive), 'the raindrop eye' (noun premodifier), 'the eye-raindrop' (compound) and 'the reyendrop' (blend) (1997: 202). He argues that apposition 'because of its minimal syntactic bonding, demands more work from the reader than the other means of Topic specification'

(209). This tallies with my previous discussion of apposition in relation to syntax (2.2.3) and further implies that the remaining five structures should be easier to interpret.

2.2.5 Text structure and discourse features

Compared to the local phenomena examined earlier, global discourse features have probably a deeper impact on comprehension. In Kintsch's words, 'local comprehension problems may be a nuisance, but problems at the macro level tend to be a disaster' (Kintsch 1998: 180). Moreover, discourse features can still lead to difficulty whilst not featuring any of its lower level indicators. Poems formed of unrelated clauses (as in the 1970s-80s avant-garde movement known as 'New Sentence': see Lopez 2006: 1-19) may well be perceived as difficult even if each clause is grammatical, lexically and structurally simple, and without unusual collocations. This is where issues of cohesion and coherence come in.

Cohesion and coherence

Wales appropriately emphasises that cohesion and coherence are hard to distinguish (2011 [1990]: 66). According to Carter, cohesion 'concerns the ways in which the components of the surface text are mutually connected within a sequence' whilst coherence concerns 'the configuration of concepts and relations which underlie the surface text' (1998: 103 [1987]). Walker (1995) takes a similar view in addressing the cohesion/coherence debate. Based on reader-response data, she notices that unsophisticated informants 'showed an instinctive appreciation that cohesion and coherence are different and that one does not presume the other' (1995: 116). The distinction is discarded by Halliday and Hasan (1976), who

subsume coherence under cohesion. In their view, cohesion is a primarily semantic phenomenon, in that it refers 'to relations of meaning that exist within the text, *and define it as text*' (1976: 4; emphasis added). Such dismissal of coherence is motivated by theoretical assumptions, since functional linguistics sees no sharp distinction between the lexicogrammar and the semantic strata (Halliday and Matthiessen 1999).

Despite the theoretical interest of this proposal, what matters here is the analytical advantage allowed for by a distinction between the two concepts. The problem with analysing poems solely in terms of cohesion as characterised by Halliday and Hasan is that many of them would be dismissed as non-texts. Indeed, functional linguistics defines a text as 'an instance of language, in any medium, *that makes sense* to someone who knows the language' (Halliday 2004: 3; emphasis added). 'Making sense' is crucial here, and it appears to vociferously exclude difficult poetry. Cohesion in this narrow sense fails to capture less salient, inference-dependent meaning relations that are essential in poetry. This is why a cohesion/coherence distinction is desirable, where coherence can be conceived of as 'the outcome of cognitive processes among texts users' rather than 'a mere feature of texts' (Beaugrande and Dressler 1981: 6).

Theoretical problems aside, this dimension is fundamental for its contribution to difficulty in poetry, as stylisticians have remarked. Jeffries, for instance, observes that the lack of cohesiveness in Eliot's *The Waste Land* 'constantly frustrates the reader's attempts to make textual sense of it' (1993: 122). She singles out the slipping reference of the 'I' as one major source of confusion, thus echoing Nowottny's remark on pronoun shifts as a source of difficulty in Dylan Thomas (Nowottny 1962: 188; see 1.2). Problems of speaker differentiation are acute in modernist and postmodernist poetry (see also Tartakovsky 2009: 234 on the confusion this brings in Cummings), so they will be taken into account during the

analyses. Confronted with John Ashbery's *The Skaters*, McHale seems to endorse the cohesion/coherence distinction as a descriptive tool:

> "Disjunction," in the context of verbal art, involves either (1) the breakdown of textual cohesion (in the sense of Halliday and Hasan 1976) within or between sentences, as in the poems of *The Tennis Court Oath*, or (2) abrupt, unmotivated shifts of frame of reference between sentences or passages, whether or not textual cohesion is preserved. The latter type of disjunction characterizes "The Skaters". (McHale 2000: 563)

Later on, McHale refers to an 'ebb and flow of intelligibility' in the poem (2000: 587), thus again evidencing the link between cohesion/coherence and difficulty.

Specific phenomena that can disrupt coherence are (a) shifts in speaker, time and location, and (b) clash of registers. Zwaan (1996) experimentally shows that narrative time shifts lead to 'a momentary increase in processing load' (1198), and the same holds true for shifts in location (Zwaan 2004: 49). This evidence matches the intuition of a literary critic, Bowie, who singles out Mallarmé's 'rapid oscillations between notions and images, or between past, present and future time levels' (1978: 12). Similarly, the oscillation of tenses in a passage by Ashbery leads Adamson to state the impossibility of constructing 'a coherent narrative sequence for events or a coherent location for their narrator' (1999: 674; see also 6.2). Register clashes are common as well in modernist and postmodernist poetry, and Semino (2002) draws upon Bakhtin's notion of heteroglossia (Bakhtin 1981) in order to explain them. She analyses a poem by Carol-Ann Duffy where capitalised sequences cast

in a headline style can be attributed to a poetic persona other than the narrator. In this poem, however, linguistic variation does not pose particular challenges, as it is clearly marked off by a typographic device. Register clashes are by contrast problematic in Geoffrey Hill's *Mercian Hymns* analysed by McHale (2004). The critic exposes the following paradox: on the one hand, 'markers of style and register ought to allow us to reconstruct a speaker's social identity', but on the other he wonders how 'to make situational sense of a patchwork of registers such as we find in hymn X?' (2004: 125). So, register-mixing can blur the identity of both the poetic persona and the fictional context in which this is embedded. Abrupt variation in register, especially along a formality-informality cline, also leads to the perception of tropes such as irony, humour and sarcasm (Carter 1998 [1987]: 254). Presumably, the indirection presupposed by these tropes has a share in the perception of difficulty.

Absence or misuse of titles is also likely to reduce the overall perception of coherence. Titles have been conceptualised as that part of the paratext (Genette 1980) which functions as a signpost to the topic and provides cues to literary interpretation. In discourse comprehension studies, titles are among 'macro-relevant' text elements that facilitate global understanding (Van Dijk & Kintsch 1983: 54). It is then unsurprising that Wilkinson (2007: 7) places part of the difficulty of Prynne's poems in their renunciation of titles. Indeed, titles can serve as a starting point to restore coherence in the rest of the poem, as revealed by Toolan's 1993 analysis reviewed in 1.2.

Narrativity

There is empirical evidence that 'the superstructure that people are most familiar with and handle most easily is the narrative schema' (Graesser et

al. 1980, cited in van Dijk and Kintsch 1983: 252). *Superstructures*, in van Dijk and Kintsch's terminology, are 'schemata for conventional text forms' (1983: 54). The point by Graesser and colleagues may suggest a difference in genre processing between fiction, which is usually thought of in terms of narrativity, and poetry, which is usually not – despite McHale's contention that poetic works such as Homeric epic and Pushkin's *Onegin* 'have continuously served as touchstones of narrative theory' (2009: 11). In particular, it may be expected that the more familiar narrative dimension in fiction makes it easier to process than poetry – an assumption that is empirically explored in Chapter 5. Indeed, even though much twentieth century poetry does employ narrative modes, with characters other than the poetic persona as the major focus of attention (Testa 1999: 137-8), its narrativity is often of an indirect kind. Even Pound's poetry, which draws inspiration from Homeric epic (Nadel 2007: 24), has been described in terms of 'fractured narrative' (2007: 61) or as displacing 'linear narrative of cause and effect' (Moen 2010: 296). In a similar vein, McHale defines Hill's *Mercian Hymns* and Ashbery's 'The skaters' as 'fragmented' narrative, while Susan Howe's *The Europe of Trusts* he considers as 'antinarrative' (2004: 6). McHale stresses the practical usefulness of approaching postmodernist poetry in the light of the postmodernist novel (2004: 5) and underlines the impact of popular narrative genres whereby postmodernist poetry 'strives to recover, through pastiche and parody, narrative modes flourished before the imperialist expansion of lyric' (2004: 258).

Other scholars attempting to import ideas from narratology into the analysis of poetry are Hühn (2005) and Carney (2008). Both focus on lyric poetry, a challenging subgenre for the application of narratological ideas. Hühn draws upon well-established concepts in narratology, such as plot, voice, and focalisation, but implements them through the cognitive notions

of schemas and scripts. He further argues that poetry, being less explicit in signalling these, requires more inferential activity than is true of narrative (2005: 150). Hühn correctly applies his model to a poem by Philip Larkin, yet its study does not identify what a lyric poem involves in the first place. This is where Carney appears to succeed. He identifies three discursive constants of the lyric genre – the speaker's consciousness, a hostile environment and an object of desire – and charts them in Yeats's 'The Lake Isle of Innisfree'. He then assigns each constant the statuses of dependent variables and independent parameters in order to apply catastrophe theory, a branch of mathematics. Carney's aim is to derive a 'model of lyric semantics' (2008: 36), but arguably a less circuitous route would have sufficed for his main point: 'the semantic structure of the lyric can be seen as an 'atomic' constituent of the 'molecular' organization of narrative' (2008: 52). Despite their divergent approaches, both Hühn and Carney make the divide between lyric and narrative thinner than it is usually thought to be.

For the purposes of the present thesis, there is still the problem of how to anchor narrativity to linguistic features. After all, only a mapping of such features onto a poetic text can be effective in assessing its degree of narrativity against a definition. Toolan provides a clear and workable definition:

> A narrative is a perceived sequence of non-randomly connected events, typically involving, as the experiencing agonist, humans or quasi-humans, or other sentient beings, from whose experience we humans can 'learn'. (Toolan 2001 [1988]: 8)

From his definition, he proceeds to extrapolate three defining aspects: (a) sequenced and interrelated events; (b) foregrounded individuals; (c) crisis

to resolution progression (2001 [1988]: 8). Texts exhibiting only some of these features can be called 'semi-narrative' (2001 [1988]: 8): it would then become possible to verify McHale's judgments on the narrativity of Hill, Ashbery and Howe against this framework. Taking fiction as the most typical narrative genre, one can implement (a), (b) and (c) with Biber and Conrad's list of linguistic features typical of nineteenth and twentieth century fictional novels. The features, identified via quantitative corpus study, are: past tense verbs, third person pronouns, proper nouns, adverbials of time and place, reporting verb, and direct and indirect reported speech (Biber and Conrad 2009: 150). The more a poem displays these features – that can be mapped onto Toolan's higher order elements – the more it can be described as narrative.

The degree of narrativity of a text has also been shown to influence comprehension strategies. Shen and Giora (1994), relying on the framework of van Dijk and Kintsch (1983) set up an empirical test in which participants were given constructed texts which differed in the amount of temporal sequencing, causality and action structure. They have found that texts low in narrativity (i.e. with little or no temporal sequencing, causality and action structure) led respondents to write summary statements. By contrast, highly narrative texts (i.e. showing temporal sequencing, causality and action structure) led respondents to delete some of the clauses while retaining others (1994: 453). They refer to the former procedure as 'generalisation' and to the latter as 'deletion'. I would tentatively propose that to generalise (i.e. to generate a new summary statement) should be cognitively more taxing than to simply retain some of the original input (i.e. to delete less crucial information). Thus the general prediction is that the more narrative a poem is, the more easily it is read and understood by readers.

The temporal sequencing of events is also an important aspect when it comes to narrative comprehension. Claus and Kelter (2006) specifically investigate the effect of temporal sequencing (chronological vs. non-chronological) on readerly comprehension (see also Zwaan 1996 reviewed earlier in this section). Their main finding is that readers construct events in a chronological order even if these are presented non-chronologically (e.g. through flashbacks) in the text (2006: 1041). In the authors' own assessment, the significance of such a finding lies in the mismatch between text structure and the structure of the situation model built by readers (2006: 1041). Since 'people feel they understand a situation as long as it develops corresponding to familiar regularities of the timecourse function' it only makes sense that any disruption of these regularities enhances processing effort, prompting 'a search for special causes' (1042).

Local rhythmic features

Most readers would concede that incoherent or antinarrative poems pose reading challenges. Yet, although less obtrusive, local rhythmic features too should be taken into account as they slow reading down. For instance, Pilkington speculates that stress 'lengthens the time taken to process the word on which it falls' (2000: 132). Interestingly, the phonological foregrounding of contiguous stresses in poetry could support what psycholinguists call *phonological mediation* (Harley 2008: 212). This hypothesis states that, when reading, meanings are not directly accessed from printed words directly, for phonology (actualised as sub-vocalisation) mediates between the two. Following Sanford and Emmott, the heightened attention induced by phonological foregrounding can result in *deep processing*, leading to a richer mental representation than in the *shallow processing* reading mode (2012: 104; see also 2.1.1).

Another rhythmic device by means of which reading can be rendered less fluent is the structural mismatch between lines and syntactic units known as enjambment. In radical enjambments, a line break allows for a parsing ambiguity or is disruptive with regard to the semantic information which we would expect in the same line. As Dillon puts it, 'line-ends probably do affect our perception of phrase groupings (and clause boundaries) – as usual, they are mainly noticeable when they do not work right' (1978: 7). When lineation runs counter to syntactic boundaries, a tension is created whereby 'versification requires discontinuity, whereas syntax demands continuity' (Tsur 2011: 203).

In order to measure the degree of syntactic disruption of enjambments, Levin (1971: 183) offers a linguistic classification from strongest to weakest: the enjambment can be between two morphemes of a word (a), two words of a phrase (b), two phrases of a clause (c) and finally between two clauses of a sentence (d). This classification may be implemented by Tsur's observation that 'the shorter a syntactic unit, the more it resists being stretched over a prosodic boundary' (2011: 206). It is then the length of the syntactic unit before and after the enjambment which counts for salience. Very recently, Jagt et al. (2014) have addressed the phenomenon from a psycholinguistic perspective. Their study will be reviewed in 5.1, since it is of relevance to the test conducted there.

2.2.6 Beyond language

There is a sense in which difficulty transcends the linguistic inventory proposed so far. A linguistically simple poem such as William Carlos Williams' *The Red Wheelbarrow*, for instance, can still emerge 'as a discourse on mutability, paraphrase, redefinition, metaphorical respecification, and of metamorphosis' (Tate 2008 [1994]: 139). A related

example is Wordsworth's simple line 'Three feet long and two feet wide', from the poem 'Thorn'. Sutherland (2010) insists on the bafflement this line caused at the time of its publication, and attempts to defend Prynne's unfamiliar lines on the grounds of a parallel in literary history. As Fowler sums up, 'a text may remain impenetrable even after several readings, though one understands the words and sentences on the page' (Fowler 1986: 169).

Neither linguistics nor empirical tests alone could hope to examine this culturally-determined sense of difficulty; although the first chapter (see esp. 1.4) provides a reasonably wide account of it, this sense of difficulty falls outside the remit of the thesis. There are, however, insights developed in pragmatics, semiotics, and cognitive poetics that can still account for perceived difficulty even when all the linguistic indicators would suggest the contrary. In what follows three proposals will be reviewed which, while in a sense 'beyond' the linguistic surface of texts, can still be used as interpretive principles of difficulty grounded in language, communication and cognition.

The first insight discussed stems from a pragmatic understanding of literary communication developed from a relevance-theoretic perspective. Adopting this stance, Fabb argues that 'for poetry it is more difficult to decide which implications are implicatures; that is, which of the possible interpretations implied by the text are deliberately implied by the author' (2010: 1224). Such pragmatic re-modelling of literary communication is centred on the notion of *authorial intention* (see 3.7.2). As a consequence, it grants the communicative intention of the author the worthiest share of the total significance of a literary text. Appealing on a theoretical level, this proposal appears to downplay the importance of less constrained modes of reading, which are vehemently defended by reception-minded scholars

(see 1.3). The distinction between implication and implicature retains nevertheless some value as an interpretive tool.

The second proposal comes from Riffaterre's semiotic framework (1978). In contrast to pragmatic approaches, semiotics conceptualises communication as a matter of relations across signs at work within specific codes – the invariants of language in use. Riffaterre posits, for any literary text, the existence of a *matrix*, a concept that loosely parallels the core sentences of generative grammar. His handling of the concept is best seen at work in his reading of Mallarmé's 'Le Sonnet En 'yx'': 'The poem results from the transformation of the matrix, a minimal and literal sentence, into a longer, complex and nonliteral periphrasis' (1984 [1978]: 19). Riffaterre further argues that 'the greater the distance between the inherently simple matrix and the inherently complex mimesis, the greater the incompatibility between ungrammaticalities and mimesis' (1984 [1978]: 13). This conjectured correlation has been taken as a measure of difficulty by Yaron (2008: 130). More precisely, this mismatch can be seen as an index of difficulty at interpretive level – the implication being that there is only one correct way of interpreting the text, and this is to posit a matrix that accounts for all its surface features.

The third and most popular notion is that of schema. In a brilliant critique, Allington (2005) argues that schemas are used by stylisticians as discursive tools rather than descriptors of cognitive processes actually taking place. The practice surfaces in Hühn (2005: 150; see 2.2.5) when he proposes that poetry is less explicit than narrative in signalling schemas, and thus a major amount of inferencing is required on the part of the reader. Semino's use of the notions of *schema-reinforcement* and *schema-refreshment* in poetry (1995) illustrates how Seamus Heaney's 'A Pillowed Head' is more conservative than Sylvia Plath's 'The Applicant' in the world it portrays: Plath's poem is a case of schema-refreshment where

the reader is arguably required more work to accommodate the poem's unfamiliar world.

This argument is, in a way, complementary to Fabb's. Taking both of them into account, the amount of inferencing a poem requires is arguably determined by (a) the need to assess which implications are implicatures (*exegetic reading*) as well as by (b) the tendency to retrace schemas even when these are latent or unspecified (*eisegetic reading*). Also Riffaterre's matrix seems to work as a special kind of anti-mimetic schema, since it attempts to subsume a poem under a posited heading. To recapitulate, the implicature/implication, matrix/mimesis, reader/text schema distinctions amount to interpretive tools in the account of difficulty. While they can be useful in this sense, they should still be corroborated by the linguistic indicators introduced throughout earlier sections.

2.2.7 Linguistic indicators of difficulty: an overview

Table 1 below gathers, in 22 categories, the linguistic indicators of difficulty that are worth giving attention in the stylistic analyses carried out in the next chapter. Based on the studies surveyed so far, I have also indicated the processing phases most affected by each indicator and their assumed contribution to either online difficulty (reading effort) or offline difficulty (post-reading understanding), or to both of them (see the next section for a definition of both constructs). Some of boxes in the two right-end columns display a question mark ('?'). This indicates that no empirical evidence has been found for an indicator in terms of either contributing to online or offline difficulty.

Table 1 Linguistic indicators of difficulty

	Linguistic indicator	Processing phase affected	Linguistic level	Online difficulty (+ processing effort)	Offline difficulty (- global comprehension)
1	Non-standard orthography	*Access/activation* (decoding made difficult)	Graphology	√	√
2	Graphological foregrounding	*Integration* (information retention and interpretation of deviance)	Graphology	√	√
3	Abstract nouns	*Access/activation*	Lexis	√	√
4	Unfamiliar words	*Access/activation*	Lexis	√	√
5	Proper names	*Access/activation* (reference assignment)	Lexis	?	√
6	Lexical ambiguities	*Activation* (double parsing)	Lexis	√	√
7	Syntactic ambiguity	*Construal* (double parsing)	Syntax	√	√
8	Asyntactic strings	*Construal* (parsing thwarted)	Syntax	√	√
9	Phrase juxtaposition	*Integration*	Syntax	?	√
10	Lack of connectives	*Integration*	Syntax	?	√

11	Verb phrase delay, deviant word order	*Construal/integration*	Syntax	√	?
12	Parentheticals, subordination, embedding	*Construal/integration*	Syntax	√	√
13	Reference	*Activation/construal*	Semantics	?	√
14	Deixis (identification)	*Activation/construal*	Semantics	√	√
15	Negation	*Construal*	Semantics	√	√
16	Novel metaphors	*Construal*	Semantics	√	√
17	Cohesion/coherence (lack of)	*Integration*	Text structure	√	√
18	Titles (lack of)	*Integration*	Text structure	-	√
19	Register clashes	*Integration*	Text structure	√	√
20	Narrativity (lack of)	*Integration*	Text structure	√	√
21	Contiguous stresses	*Activation/construal*	Graphology/ phonology	√	-
22	Line/syntax interference	*Construal/integration*	Text structure	√	√

The list can be looked at as an improved version of that worked out in a previous paper of mine (Castiglione 2013). Needless to say, the table is intended as an orientating map rather than as a grid to be superimposed on poems.

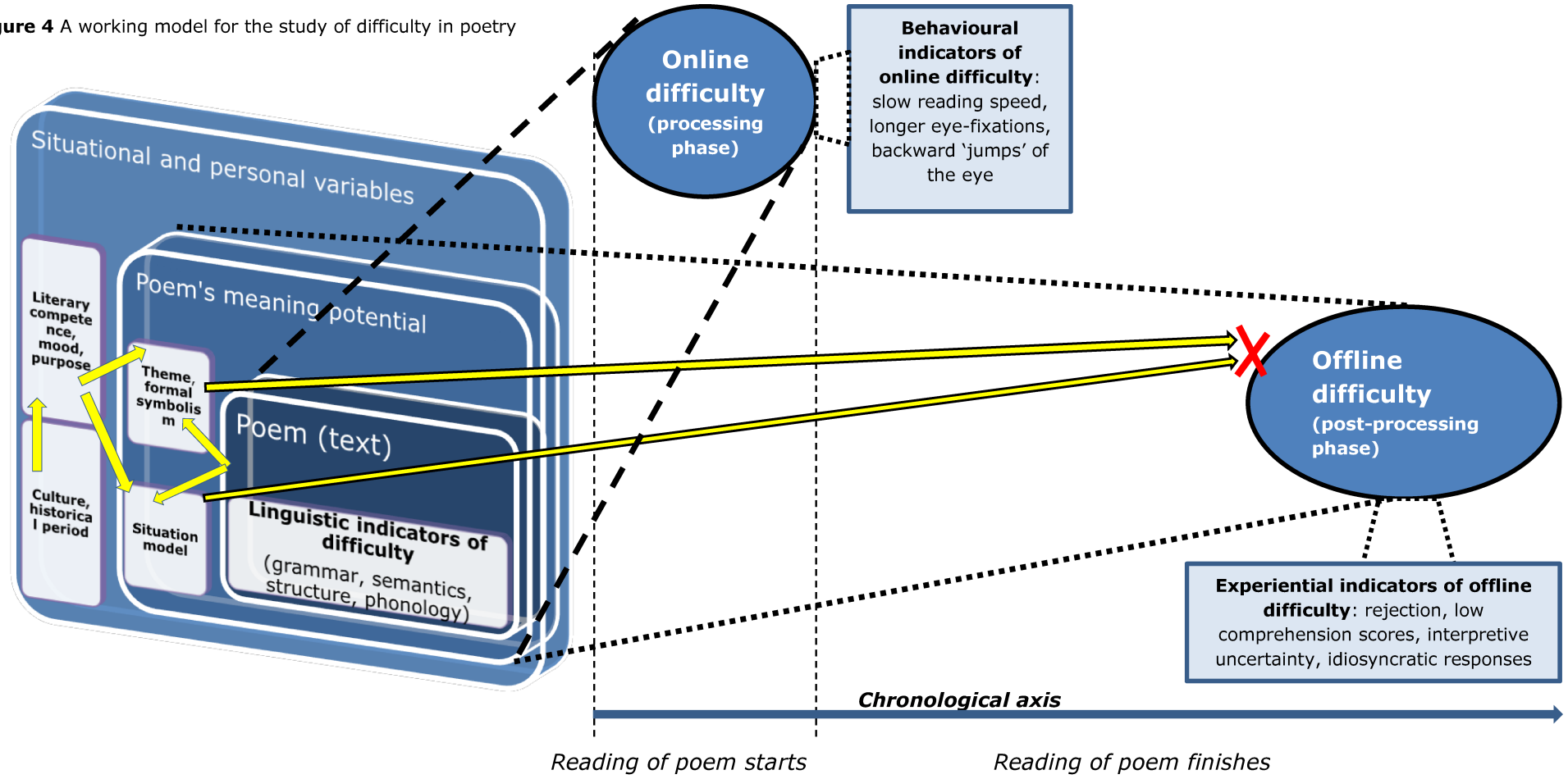
2.3 A working model for the study of poetic difficulty

So far the main components of difficulty at response as well as at textual level have been analytically described. From section 2.1 a lack of fit emerged between the concerns of cognitive psychology, linguistics and literary theory. On the one hand, processing models are not attractive for literary scholars: even when adapted to literature, they fail to account for nuanced effects and treat texts as undifferentiated verbal material. The danger they can create when applied wholesale can be seen in Yaron (2002, 2003, 2008), who tacitly downplays the comprehension of difficult poems to simply the construction of a situation model. In doing so, she disregards further levels of meaning that she is still able to uncover when writing as a literary critic (see Yaron 2010). On the other hand, traditional literary theory appears impervious to modern developments in linguistics and psychology, so its account of effects relies on introspection and is not amenable to systematisation. Theoretical linguistics allows for describing semantic phenomena in great detail, but since the 1970s it has been generally reluctant to include poems in its purview. This oversight has however been recently addressed by Caink's (2016) reappraisal of work in stylistics inspired by generative grammar. As for the interdependence between deviation and difficulty (the main assumption guiding this thesis), Caink usefully argues that 'the processing difficulty, of course, may arise

from the fact that the language being used is outside the reader's linguistic competence and so requires distinct cognitive abilities' (2015: 47).

Taken in isolation, all the sources reviewed so far have something to offer to our understanding of how difficult poems work. Yet a model for the systematic study of poetic difficulty is still missing. The enterprise is undertaken in the present section, which also places the linguistic indicators described in 2.2 within a larger interactional context. The model is sketched in Fig. 4 below, and it is a working one in the twofold sense of being (a) unavoidably still incomplete and (b) geared towards stylistic application and empirical testing. The figure is followed by a description of the model.

Figure 4 A working model for the study of difficulty in poetry



On the left hand side of the figure, the text of the poem (smallest box) is nested in the reading context (largest box). Their interaction results in an intermediate box that represents the *meaning potential* of the poem, that is, all that it could possibly communicate – both in linguistic and in extra-linguistic terms (e.g. including personal memories, affect, non-verbalised responses). The *meaning potential* of a poem resembles Leech's *significance*, that is, 'everything a poem communicates' (1969: 40). However, whilst Leech seems to allude to a specific instantiation through the use of the present tense, *meaning potential* is characterised here as a realm of possibilities.

Within *meaning potential* one can find more formalised meaning components – these are the previously reviewed constructs of situation model and theme. Being heavily text-driven, these constructs will be relatively consistent across different readers. To the situation model and the theme I have decided to add *formal symbolism* (Fabb 2002: 216), that is, any meaningful relation between the structure and formal devices employed (e.g. parallelism, repetition, kind of syntax…) and the theme of the poem. Formal symbolism (or symbolic iconicity, or iconic grammar) can be understood as the outcome of structuralist interpretations: 'it is a poem [Pound's Canto XLV] which linguistically performs its theme, the insidious effect of usura' (Brooke-Rose 1976: 60); 'the syntax moves forward, in linear fashion, with its multiple conjoined clauses, a trajectory that reflects the motions described in the dance performance itself' (Freeman 2005: 47; on syntactic iconicity, see also Jeffries 2010). In Eco's words, 'insofar as the aesthetic text has a self-focusing quality […] its structural arrangement becomes one of the contents that it conveys' (Eco 1979: 271). For formal symbolism to occur, linguistic and structural features are *not* assigned text-external meanings (e.g. they are not related to the author's conjectured psychology) but are rather linked to the theme and/or to the

situation model. This makes the formulation of formal symbolism for a poem verifiable and open to intersubjective agreement.

When readers find it hard to derive or construe a situation model, a theme and/or formal symbolism, the result is offline difficulty, a response phenomenon involving faulty/incomplete understanding and occurring after the text is read in its entirety. This is why in figure 4 the yellow arrows that originate from these meaning components are truncated by a red cross right before the offline difficulty oval. Offline difficulty, explored in Chapter 4, can be conceived of as a more encompassing version of Yaron's 2008 definition of difficulty (see 1.3.1). It can be measured through the *experiential indicators* listed in the box under the oval (some more are discussed by reception theory: see 1.3).

Importantly, the effects of offline difficulty are bound to vary according to whether what is impeded is chiefly the construction of a situation model (e.g. as in abstract, collagist or surrealist poems) or of a theme (e.g. descriptive poems that resist an allegorical reading). This is an economic solution for the representational problem (see 1.4.1) that arguably stems from an overemphasis on visual information typical of psychological accounts and critical analogies with painting (the very notion of situation model involves a mental image or representation of events). I propose that formal symbolism constitutes a 'last resort', most strongly sought if neither a situation model nor a theme can be glimpsed by readers. Offline difficulty then occurs if readers fail to access one or more of these three formalised components (situation model, theme, and formal symbolism). In addition to this, also readers' failure to personally relate to the poem should create difficulty: Chafe's argument that the detachment created by nominalisation is a sign of difficulty (Chafe 1991; see 1.2) goes in this direction.

While offline difficulty concerns the meaning potential, online difficulty, or the real-time effort experienced when reading a poem, is more text-dependent since elaborations and the so-called 'personal' meanings emerge only later, when inferences are made (see Magliano et al. 1996 for evidence that inferences occur offline rather than online). This is why in Figure 4 the dashed lines connect the online difficulty oval to the smaller box of the poem. Online difficulty can be explored through behavioural indicators such as those listed in the box next to the oval. Chapter 5 is entirely devoted to this difficulty component, which it is measured by recording reading times for poems varying in their amount of linguistic indicators of difficulty.

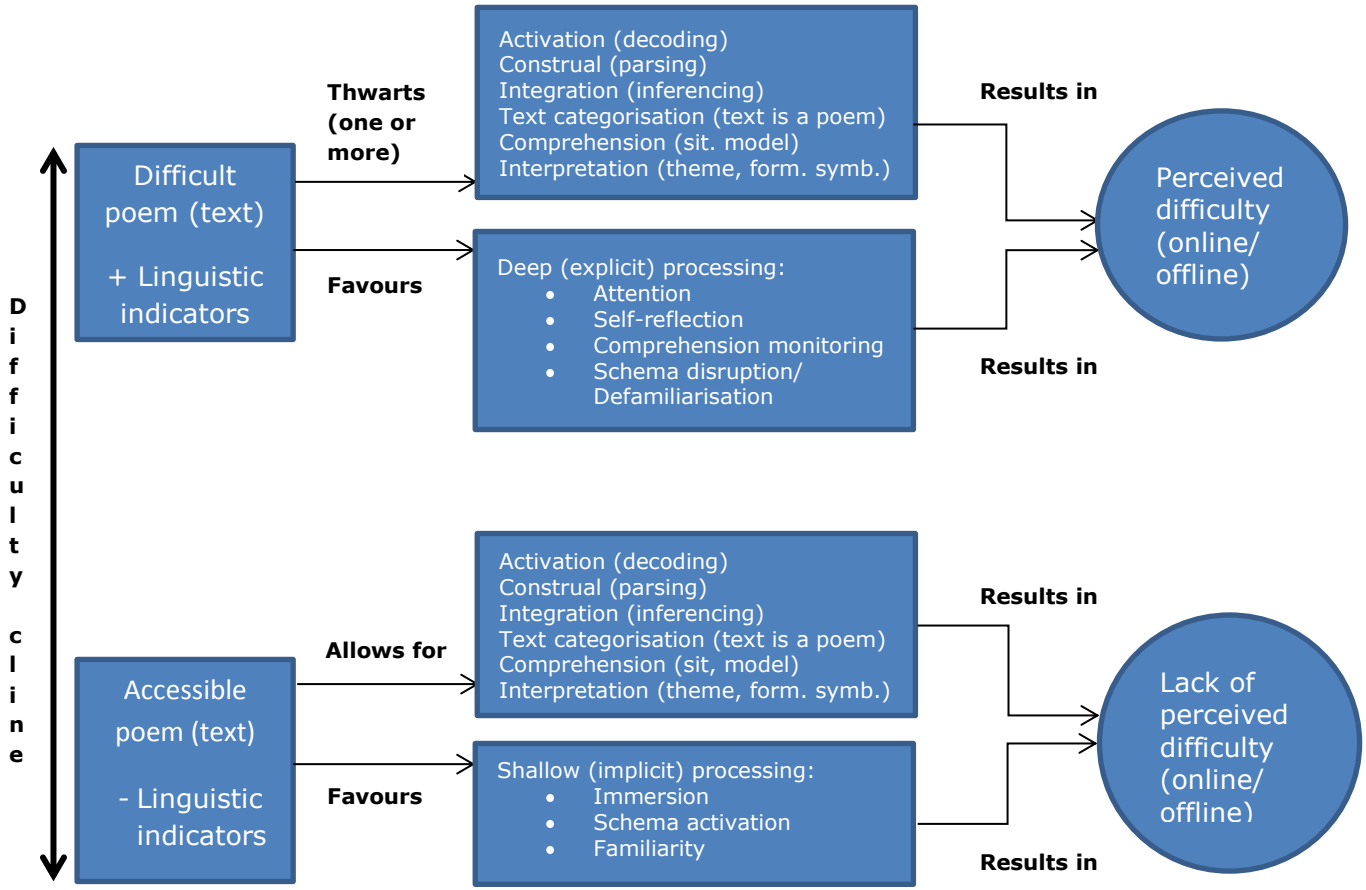
These components – offline and online difficulty – accommodate Fish's contention that 'difficulty is itself a fact – of response' (1980: 23; see 1.3) without discarding the linguistic basis of difficulty, that is, the linguistic indicators reviewed in 2.2 and placed in the 'poem' box in Figure 4. These indicators play a fundamental role in the current thesis, since they are employed in Chapter 3 and 6 as a procedural guide for stylistic analysis, and as an interpretive framework of reader responses in Chapters 4 and 5.

For reasons of space and focus, this thesis grants little emphasis to the largest box (situational and personal variables), as this would have resulted in a sociological work on literary reading. Nonetheless, personal variables (especially *literary competence*) are taken into account in the personal questionnaires presented in Chapters 4 and 5. In terms of situational variables, this thesis is concerned with the reading of twentieth and twenty-first century poetry (written in English) in a Western context (UK) and within an educational setting (the participants are university undergraduates). What is more, in the previous chapter a contextual and historical overview of difficulty would have been provided.

The proposed model is suitable for testing because (a) it is psychologically plausible, although not down to psychological research only; and (b) because its components (that is, the various constructs in it) might to an extent be modelled as variables within an experimental setting. The future challenge will be to control or manipulate selected variables while controlling for the others. I am aware that altering aspects of a poem will probably have some effects on others too. Even so, there is no reason not to attempt a partial manipulation of individual aspects in future studies. The model is empirically tested in Chapters 4 and 5. However, no components are manipulated, since before launching an experimental phase proper there should be general agreement on the variables of difficulty.

Figure 4 overlooks the specific processing operations that regulate the transition from text (linguistic indicators) to response (behavioural and experiential indicators). This is because their inclusion would have created problems of visualisation. This lack is compensated for through the diagram below (Figure 5), which incorporates the processing operations and constructs reviewed in 2.1:

Figure 5 Processing differences between difficult and accessible poems



The difficult/accessible poles are positioned along a cline, so the diagram should not be taken as dichotomous. In order to ensure visual clarity, online difficulty and offline difficulty are merged in the same oval box despite their being distinct phenomena (see Fig. 4 earlier). The large boxes in the middle specify the processing operations that can be thwarted when reading a difficult poem. Because different poems would run counter to different operations, also the resulting sense of difficulty will vary – a prediction in keeping with the synchronic element of 'the pluralism of difficulty' (see 1.4.2).

The terms for processing operations are used in accordance with the previous literature. Specifically, *activation* and *construal* are used as in Zwaan (2004; see 2.1.1); *integration* conflates the senses given by Zwaan (2004) and Evans (2009; see 2.1.2); *interpretation* overlaps with the sense given to it by Dillon (1978) (see 2.1.1) but extends it to the derivation of *theme* and formal symbolism, so it retains the inferential component ascribed to it by Evans (2009). *Comprehension* is used as in Kintsch (1998; see 2.1.1), thus it includes the more restricted sense of the term in Dillon (1978). Dillon's *perception* is articulated into *parsing* and *decoding*, while *text categorisation* is derived from Hanauer (1997; see 2.1.1). The underlying processing of selected poems will be posited in Chapter 3 along with the study of the linguistic indicators of difficulty.

3 The linguistic indicators in six poems: a stylistic study

The analytical toolkit outlined in Chapter 2 – in particular the list of linguistic indicators – makes possible an account of how difficulty can be variously instantiated in poems. The current chapter is devoted to this aim and consists of six in-depth stylistic analyses. Even before selecting the poems, however, the analyst is confronted with a methodological paradox: how is it possible to identify what is a difficult poem if the defining phenomenon, difficulty, is yet to be investigated? One solution would be to draw upon the accounts reviewed in Chapter 1 as guidelines for the selection. However, this would be hardly feasible, for it is not clear what texts may exemplify one account or another, given that the textual side of difficulty has been granted little attention in typological and reader-response-based studies. For instance, strange as it may sound, Yaron's definition of the difficult poem (see 1.3.1) does not allow identifying difficult poems unless empirical tests are carried out in advance. In principle I could have selected only the poems instantiating a certain number of linguistic indicators, but that would mean to force the data into the model, rather than to use the model to explain the data.

Given this premise, the selection necessarily rests on a variety of principles and considerations rather than on clear-cut criteria that could be consistently applied. The first requirement is that one of the poems functions, by virtue of its accessibility, as a baseline against which to assess the difficulty of the other poems. The second requirement is that the authors of the poems to be selected are seen as difficult by literary critics. To treat critics as informed readers rather than as literary theorists is consistent with the emphasis placed on the experiential basis of difficulty (see 1.5). The third requirement is that the poems show marked linguistic

and structural differences in order to allow for a wide range of styles to be represented. The fourth requirement is that authors from both the high modernist (writing from 1910 to 1950) and the postmodernist wave (writing from 1960 to present) are represented. In addition to these conditions, the authors to be selected need to be critically accredited to the point that those from the modernist wave are canonised and those from the postmodernist wave are undergoing the same canonisation process. Finally, I chose not to devote these in-depth case studies to authors who have already been granted considerable attention in stylistics: T.S. Eliot (Sell 1993, Jeffries 1993), E.E. Cummings (Leech 1969, Fowler 1971, Burke 2007, Tartakovsky 2009) and Dylan Thomas (Nowottny 1962, Leech 1969, Päivärinta 2014) have been excluded on these grounds[3]. Poems by these authors, however, will be surveyed together with others in Chapter 6.

The poem fulfilling the first requirement – the accessibility one – is Mark Strand's 'The Late Hour', which was used by Yaron in one of her experiments (2002). This poem will therefore act as a baseline to assess the difficulty of poems from the other authors: Wallace Stevens, Ezra Pound, Geoffrey Hill, Susan Howe and Jeremy H. Prynne. Stevens and Pound represent the first wave of modernism (fourth requirement). My interest in them lies in the fact that these two key modernists embody two opposite trends of modernism – the expressionist and the constructivist, respectively (Perloff 1985: 22). More specifically, 'Stevens's rage for order, his need to make analogies […] is at odds with Pound's deployment of metonymic linkages, his creation of Cubist surfaces or aerial maps where

[3] Wallace Stevens is the exception to this general orientation, having been granted attention in stylistics by Keyser (1980 [1976]), Dillon (1978), and Butt (2010). In this case, Perloff's argument on the polarity between Pound and Stevens (1985), reviewed in this section, persuaded me to include Stevens in my short corpus.

images jostle one another' (Perloff 1985: 17). Therefore, the difference in techniques was expected to have marked stylistic consequences (third requirement). Such a difference is even proudly claimed by Stevens in a dismissive comment on Pound and Eliot: '[I] have purposely held off from reading *highly mannered people* like Eliot and Pound so that I should not absorb anything, even unconsciously' (letter to the poet Richard Eberhart, reported in Altieri 1984: 7; emphasis added).

Despite the different textual strategies each of these poets pursued, critics regard both of them as difficult. Steiner (1978) relied on Pound to illustrate his contingent difficulty type and on Stevens to illustrate his tactical difficulty type (see 1.1). Stevens 'is hard to understand' and 'many find his work intimidating and "too difficult" to understand' according to Serio (2007: 1-2). Leggett (2007: 62) argues that Stevens's late collection *The Auroras of Autumn* (1950) is one of the apices of the poet's difficulty. Following Leggett's assessment, the poem I have selected is from *The Auroras of Autumn* and it is titled 'What we see is what we think', opened by a defamiliarising metaphor and unfolding a meditation on the imagination versus reality dichotomy. Pound is associated with 'difficulty and experimentalism' by Tuma (1998: 47), whilst Mellors describes his *Cantos* as 'obscure' and 'impenetrable' (2005: 8, 33). To represent Pound's notorious difficulty I have chosen an excerpt from *Canto LXXXI* (1948) where the juxtaposition of different voices and the cultural references indexed by proper nouns are potential sources of confusion for readers.

Alternatively, Hill, Howe and Prynne are distinguished representatives of the postmodernist wave (fourth requirement). Two of them (Hill and Howe) feature in McHale's 2004 monograph on postmodernist long poems. The third (Prynne) has been situated in a genealogy that goes from Pound to Olson (Mellors 2005), Olson being the first author that described himself as 'post-modern' (Anderson 1998: 7). In addition to this, these poets

represent both sides of the Atlantic (Hill and Prynne being British, Howe being American), they were all born in the 30s and are still alive at the time of writing. The slight numerical imbalance (two versus three authors) between the two historical periods follows from the need for stylistics to engage more widely with contemporary difficult poets. In what follows I briefly review critics' assessment of difficulty on each poet (second requirement).

Hill's difficulty is such a deeply engrained critical assumption that the *Norton Anthology of English Literature* (2000: 2717) uses the word when prefacing him. Since a reviewer of Hill's *Speech! Speech!* (2000) mentions 'the spectre of Difficulty' (Baker 2002: 34), my chosen text, stanza 31, comes from this relatively recent collection. In contrast to both Stevens's and Pound's texts, the stanza by Hill is characterised by register mixing and a critical reuse of everyday language, whereby the heteroglossia of contemporary society embeds the poetic persona's unstable self (see 3.3). Although I could have re-analysed the earlier 'Of Commerce and Society' analysed by Toolan (1993; see 1.2), I preferred to see whether similar indicators of difficulty also underpin Hill's more recent production, also given Hill's shift 'from conservatism to Modernism' over 'the course of a career' (Adamson 1999: 678).

Howe is the subject of an interpretive essay by Quartermain where the challenge posed by the text confronted is evident (1992: 182-194). McHale (2004: 204-249) examines how Howe's collection *The Europe of Trusts* (1990) misquotes canonical authors such as Shakespeare and Spencer, while problematising the tradition of the long poem. He also stresses Howe's confusing play with textual boundaries and typography. Just like I refrained from re-analysing Hill's 'Commerce and Society', also in the case of Howe I selected a poem that neither McHale nor Quartermain have analysed. This is because both scholars have already

made perceptive comments on Howe's style, so I wanted to explore the evolution of her writing through a poem from a more recent collection, *Bed Hangings* (2001). This untitled poem ('A small swatch bluish-green…') is unlike the remaining five in that it poses exceptional parsing problems due to its blurring of constituency boundaries (see 3.5).

Finally, Prynne has written several puzzling poems, starting from the 'still violently unfamiliar sequence of poems' in the 1979 collection *Down where changed* (Sutherland 2010: 769). His 'uncompromising textuality' enacts a readerly experience typical 'of any difficult literary work' (Mellors 2005: 167). In keeping with Mellors, Lopez (2006: 135) writes that 'much has been made of the difficulty of Prynne's poems'. Due to the high number of difficult poems written by this author, almost any poem from his recent production can be a gold mine for the stylistician interested in difficulty. After reading the voluminous anthology *Poems* (2005), which comprises most of Prynne's collections published until that date, I chose the heavily punctuated and collagist 'Lobster orange, shag in parvo', from the 1999 collection *Pearls that were*. My choice is motivated by the sudden and seemingly unmotivated shifts in grammatical subjects, the presence of syntactic and lexical ambiguities and the surrealist frame of each micro-event.

As the overview has shown, each poem relies on different linguistic and structural mechanisms for creating difficulty, and the twofold aim of this chapter is precisely that of (a) pinpointing such mechanisms and their contribution to each authorial style and (b) identifying the processing operations likely to be challenged or impeded by such mechanisms. Each poem will be analysed on its own. The order of presentation (Strand-Stevens-Hill-Pound-Howe-Prynne) derives from a comprehension ranking task (see Chapter 4) carried out in parallel to the stylistic analyses. Table 3 below lists the titles, collections and year of publication of each poem. The

texts are presented in full at the start of each analysis, where further justification is provided for the choice of each poem. Finally, a comparative synopsis is provided at the end of the chapter (3.7.1).

Table 2 Six poems as case studies for the indicators: an overview

Author	**Title**	**Collection**	**Year**
Mark Strand	The Late Hour	*The Late Hour*	1978
Wallace Stevens	What we see is what we think	*The Auroras of Autumn*	1950
Geoffrey Hill	33	*Speech! Speech!*	2000
Ezra Pound	Extract from *Canto LXXXI*	*Pisan Cantos*	1948
Susan Howe	*A small swatch bluish green…*	*Bed Hangings*	2001
Jeremy H. Prynne	*Lobster-orange, shag in parvo….*	*Pearls that were*	1999

The decision to focus on such a small corpus has been dictated by the qualitative nature of difficulty. Indeed, most of the indicators identified in Chapter 2 do not lend themselves to quantification. For instance, global text structure features such as coherence and narrativity need to be assessed on a case-by-case basis; semantic-pragmatic dimensions such as reference and deixis are too context-sensitive to be reduced to pure countable lexical occurrences; no corpus tool can identify the syntactic indicators in 2.2.3, and although these structures could in principle be counted manually, they are inevitably intertwined with qualitative semantic phenomena. On similar grounds, Adamson (1999: 592) argues that, when it comes to a 'history of literary style', quantitative methods tend to obscure 'the contribution of any individual features' while failing to explain '*motives* or *mechanisms* of the shift [i.e. the stylistic shifts brought by Romanticism and Modernism]' (1999: 592).

In light of these arguments, a qualitative analysis is needed to explore how the interacting components of difficulty create an effect that is unique to each poem while still retaining the possibility of featuring in the

checklist. The analysis is geared towards the following outcomes: firstly, it will result in a richer understanding of the indicators, including their contribution to the overall style of each poem; secondly, it will engage with critical remarks and controversies, showcasing what stylistics can offer to literary criticism with regard to difficulty; finally, it will allow us to understand difficulty as a multi-layered phenomenon constituted by the co-textually driven interaction of several linguistic indicators.

3.1 Mark Strand – The Late Hour

During a recall task, Yaron (2002) found that 'The Late Hour' elicited consistently less fragmentary protocols than Cummings's 'what a proud dreamhorse…'. She takes this result as a symptom of readers' fuller comprehension of Strand's poem (see 1.3.1). However, she makes no attempt at identifying and explaining the text-driven factors that arguably produced the observed effect. By contrast, the current analysis treats complex attribution phenomena such as 'accessibility' or 'easiness' as points of arrival that are dependent on observable textual factors.

The Late Hour

A man walks towards town,
a slack breeze smelling of earth
and the raw green of trees blows at his back.

He drags the weight of his passion as if nothing were over,
as if the woman, now curled in bed beside her lover,
still cared for him.

She is awake and stares at scars of light
trapped in panes of glass.
He stands under her window, calling her name;

he calls all night and it makes no difference.
It will happen again, he will come back wherever she is.
Again he will stand outside and imagine

her eyes opening in the dark

and see her rise to the window and peer down.
15 Again she will lie awake beside her lover

and hear the voice from somewhere in the dark.
Again the late hour, the moon and stars,
18 the wounds of night that heal without sound,

again the luminous wind of morning that comes before the sun.
And, finally, without warning or desire,
21 The lonely and feckless end.

On first reading, the poem appears rather narrative and coherent, thus displaying two major indicators of processing ease (see 2.2.5). A more attentive reading further reveals that it lacks most of the lexical, syntactic and semantic indicators of difficulty. If this is the case, the attribution of easiness will not rest anymore on intuition alone, but also on a verifiable absence of the identified linguistic indicators of difficulty. The discussion that follows is hence devoted to analysing such instantiations in detail, their effects and the potential authorial design behind them.

3.1.1 Narrativity and coherence

'The Late Hour' can be attributed some degree of narrativity: the poem fits Toolan's definition of 'narrative' (2001 [1988]: 8; see 2.2.5), with its interrelated events and foregrounded individuals as the main participants. There is no complicating action proper, yet the state-of-affairs hinted at in 'now curled in bed beside her lover' (l. 5) explains the behaviour of the male protagonist more or less as a complicating action would. The relation of this state-of-affairs to the male protagonist is linguistically enacted by a hypothetical clause ('as if the woman, now curled in bed beside her lover, / still cared for him', ll. 6-7) that hints at his inner emotional state. The temporal deictics *now* and *still* enhance a feeling of readerly proximity to the imagined event, being empathetically aligned with the male

protagonist's temporal viewpoint. Furthermore, the definite article presents the female character as known and familiar (*the woman*), so the viewpoints of the narrator and the male character feel aligned.

One more characteristic that pairs the poem to a narrative is the presence of a resolution, albeit vague (ll. 20-1). Its vagueness is achieved through a nominal style which makes no direct reference to either individual but instead foregrounds abstract nouns (*warning*, *desire, end*; incidentally, the use of *end* at the end of the poem is an obvious case of iconicity). In his definition, Toolan also lingers on the noteworthiness of all narratives by emphasising the gains they bring about ('[…] from whose experience *we humans can 'learn''*, 2001[1988]: 8; emphasis added). Indeed, narratives are expected to have a *point* (Labov 1972) that makes this tellability explicit. 'The Late Hour' leaves however the point implicit, inferable from the vague resolution discussed above. It is possible to trace a parallel here with more literary or experimental narratives, in which resolutions of this sort are not uncommon.

In spite of its structural resemblance with narratives, the features Biber and Conrad (2009: 150) identify as peculiar to fiction apply only minimally to 'The Late Hour'. Here, some of the features are indeed missing – past tense verbs, proper names, reporting verbs and reported speech. One question that arises at this point is whether text processing is more dependent on text structure (see 2.2.5) or on local features (2.2.1 to 2.2.4). In Chapter 5 I will provide some initial answers by comparing the speeds at which 'The Late Hour' and a science fiction extract by J.G. Ballard are read by a group of subjects. Indeed, these two texts share a global text structure (narrativity) and yet are rather different in terms of local linguistic choices.

To continue with the analysis, the two characters are presented from a different perspective: the man is introduced as a generic entity (*a man*, l.

1) by the narrator who then, for most of the poem, shares his viewpoint; the woman is introduced as specific (*the woman*, l. 5) and seen through the viewpoint of the man. Once introduced through a noun phrase, each character is always referred to pronominally (*he* and *she*). From a processing perspective, anaphora resolution does not pose any problems because there is no other human candidate in the poem. The only other individual, *the lover* (l. 5), is simply a circumstantial element, as reflected by his grammatically dependent status (indirect object within a prepositional phrase).

Both characters are thus left as vague as possible: noun phrases followed by no qualifications and then referred to pronominally. Descriptive adjectives premodify natural (*slack breeze*, *raw green*, *luminous wind*) or abstract elements (*lonely and feckless end*), but never the two characters. This subtle stylistic choice makes both characters closer to universal types than to specific individuals. A comparison between Strand's 'a man' and Eliot's 'the person in the Spanish cape' (cited in Adamson 1999: 674; see 2.2.4) is instructive in this respect. In Eliot, the definite article works against the specificity of the referent achieved through post-modification. On the one hand, it adds 'the implication that the reader ought to be able to identify the intended referent' (1999: 674). On the other, as Adamson remarks, the intended referent falls outside the general experience of readers because of its very specificity. Yaron's seemingly paradoxical claim that 'exactness goes hand in hand with difficulty' (2002: 164) can thus be grounded in the observation that the search for mimetic precision, if not properly contextualised, can lead to the 'opacity of deictic reference' (Adamson 1999: 673), one of the stylistic hallmarks of modernism. Writing in the late 1970s, at a time when modernism had long lost its momentum, Strand chooses instead to guide the reader into the situation staged by the poem.

Such omission of qualifying features backgrounds the characters' identity whilst placing emphasis on their actions and feelings. Halliday's *transitivity system*, especially its taxonomy of process and related participant types, seems particularly apt to broach the issue here. Systemic functional grammar (SFG) categorises such processes along a continuum from 'material' (creating, doing) to 'behavioural' (behaving), 'mental' (feeling, thinking), 'verbal' (saying), 'relational' (having identity/attribute), and 'existential' (existing) (Halliday 2004: 170). 'The Late Hour' abounds in processes of doing and saying, frequently associated with the man: *walks* (l. 1), *stands* and *is calling* (l. 9), *calls* (l. 10), *will come back* (l. 11) and *will stand* (l. 12). Although the semantic role he performs is typically that of an Actor, the intransitive nature of these verbs cues a feeling of powerlessness prompted by the absence of a goal. The man is also construed as a Senser and a Behaver: the former role is filled by *will imagine* (l. 12) and *[will] see* (l. 14); the latter by *drags* (l. 4), which is borderline between material and behavioural: on the one hand it provides a detail on the man's gait that was unspecified in *walks*; on the other, the direct object *the weight of his passion* colours it psychologically. The woman is construed as less dynamic: she is *curled* (l. 5), where the material verb is in a participial form; her opening her eyes, her rising and peering down are dependent on the man's perception, which projects a non-factual reality ('he will stand outside and *imagine* / her eyes opening in the dark / and *see* her rise and peer down', ll. 12-14). Most of the processes she enacts, either presented as factual by the narrator or filtered through the man's imagination, are behavioural (*is awake*, l. 7; *stares*, l. 7; *hear*, l. 16; *peer down*, l. 14; *will lie awake*, l. 15).

Although the woman is not characterised in terms of dynamicity, she is still shown as responsive to the man's pining. One key element here is the alternation of the focus on each character throughout much of the

poem (l. 1 to l. 16) in a sort of juxtaposition that at times seems to imply proximity. For instance, the man thinking of the woman in the hypothetical clause (ll. 5-6) is followed by a potentially responsive action on her part: she *is awake* and *stares* at 'scars of light', a genitive metaphor where the vehicle *scars* echoes the inferable suffering of the man ('he drags the weight of his passion', l. 4, where *drags* and *weight* have negative connotations). In a Riffaterrean vein, it is perhaps not coincidental that what the woman looks at is *panes* (l. 7), a realistic detail of course, but also a near homophone of 'pain', a theme of the poem. Although impossible to be proved or disproved, this is an instance where symbolic articulation, 'the system of signs that create the meaning of the highest stratum – theme' (Hasan 1985: 96; see 2.1.2) arguably influences lexical choices. Some of the characters' actions and states appear simultaneous, further inviting a parallel reading of each of them: at the same time that the man 'drags the weight of his passion' (l. 4), the woman is 'curled in bed' (l. 5); at the same time that she *stares* (l. 7), he *stands* while *calling*. Overall, then, the processes they are involved in carry considerable weight in the portrayal of unrequited love and of the existential condition associated with it.

In the second half of the text, there is a move from the present to the future tense (ll. 10-16) and eventually the erasure of all temporal indicators throughout the lines 17-21 (save for the noun phrase *the late hour*, l. 17, the topical importance of which is indexed by the title). This textual portion thus not only does away with the characters, but also with temporal unfolding: the verbless style parallels the timeless and agentless content of the passage, interspersed with natural and cosmic elements (*moon*, *stars*, *night*, *wind*, *sun*). The depersonalisation of the man – metonymically replaced by a voice that is uncertain in provenance because

it is deprived of the possessive pronoun (*the voice*, l. 16) – paves the way for the transition from human agents to non-human entities.

Where the future tense is introduced, we sense something more than a time shift; in fact, since 'future tense in all languages is partly temporal and partly modal' (Lyons 1977: 678), there is a shift in modality too. More specifically, line 11 encodes a modality of epistemic probability which, in the negatively connoted situation of the poem and in the presence of an impersonal verb (*happen*), is likely to be interpreted as a sign of doom rather than of confident human resolution. By contrast, the future tense in line 15 ('she will lie awake') has a more subjective slant, since it can be situationally anchored to the mental projection initiated by the man in the previous sentence (*imagine*, l. 12). The fourfold repetition of *again* at line-initial, main stress-carrying position (ll. 12, 15, 17, 19) is likely to favour an interpretation of modality, less in terms of probability than of certainty.

Repetition works at a rhetorical level too, as present and future events and states are referred to by full or partial reiterations ('curled in bed beside her lover', l. 5; 'awake beside her lover', l. 15; 'she is awake', l. 7 vs. 'she will lie awake', l. 15; 'he stands under her window', l. 9 vs. 'he will stand outside', l. 12; 'calling her name; he calls') and syntactic parallelism (e.g. 'scars of light / trapped in panes of glass', ll. 7-8; 'as if nothing were over, / as if the woman', ll. 4-5; the two clauses and the two phrases starting with *again*). From a reception and processing standpoint, these repetitions should enable the parallel reading of both characters proposed earlier. Their effect is not merely cohesive, but expressive and, ultimately, an example of foregrounding as a thematically and aesthetically motivated choice (Leech 2010: 30). They should also minimise online difficulty, as it requires less effort to parse words and structures already encountered before. This is a point that Fabb makes explicitly: 'because

literary form enables prediction, it thereby eases the processing of the text' (2014: 25).

Other lexical relations across the text secure unity of space: these are the house hyponyms *bed*, *panes*, *window* (ll. 5, 8-9, 14) and the nature hyponyms *breeze*, *earth*, *trees* at the beginning (ll. 2-3). Moreover, some spatial indications appear symbolically motivated by situating the man and the woman according to an up/down asymmetric axis, with the former associated with a lower position ('under her window' vs. 'see her rise and peer down' [at the man]).

What I have been implying is that 'The Late Hour' is referentially transparent, as settings and characters can be unambiguously identified and construed through *world-builders* such as deictic alternations and spatial information (Hidalgo Downing 2000: 87-89). The recognisability and emotional implications of the portrayed situation are likely to engender a feeling of familiarity, an aesthetic effect arising in the early stage of processing according to Fabb (2014). At the same time, since 'what often gives symbolic value is a sense of consistency' (Leech and Short 2007 [1981]: 126), the poem can be granted a symbolic layer of meaning. This conjecture is further grounded in Tsur's distinction between symbol and allegory, which he models in perceptual terms:

> Traditional allegory bestows well-differentiated physical shapes and human actions upon clear-cut ideas, which can be represented in clear, conceptual language as well; by contrast, the symbol manipulates information in such a way that some (or most) of it is perceived as diffuse, undifferentiated, global. (Tsur 2008: 402)

Although Tsur remains vague with regard to the linguistic indices of a 'clear, conceptual language', the 'diffuse, undifferentiated, global' perception of information he associates with symbolism suits the physical under-specificity of the poem.

Another means by which such under-specificity is created is negation, an indicator of difficulty (2.2.4). In line 3 the negative trigger is the indefinite pronoun *nothing*. In the hypothetical co-text where it occurs, *nothing* itself denies the end of the relationship; hence it carries a positive value. 'As if nothing' is also highly formulaic (518 occurrences in the Corpus of Contemporary American English – COCA henceforth) so the extra meaning created by negation (Nahajec 2009) is of a familiar kind here. Negation in lines 18-21, by contrast, demands more inferential work due to the foregrounded nature of this passage. First, in 'the wounds of night that heal *without* sound' (l. 18), the healing process affects an unusual, metaphorical patient ('the wounds of night'). Second, because negation is used when 'nonevents or nonstates are considered to be *more informative* than events or states' (Hidalgo Downing 2000: 126; emphasis added), *without* should prompt a richer mental representation of the circumstances accompanying the event (by contrast, consider the duller effect of the posited variant 'the wounds of night that heal in silence'). From a syntactic perspective, this negation type is called *constituency negation* and is 'preferred in formal, written varieties of English' (Hidalgo Downing 2000: 45).

There is an additional pragmatic consideration to make at this point. Stating that wounds heal 'without sound' may seem redundant, since this specification conforms to general encyclopaedic knowledge. While in everyday discourse this prepositional phrase would be a violation of the maxim of relation (Grice 1975), in 'The Late Hour' it is highly informative, highlighting the 'how' of the event. The dramatic feeling of 'visible absence'

enabled by negation is carried on two lines later ('without warning or desire'), where nouns of emotion are ideationally negated but textually made salient. The resulting 'negative subworld' (Hidalgo Downing 2000: 147) extends until the negatively connoted adjectives *lonely* and *feckless* that conclude the poem.

3.1.2 Syntax and line

The narrative quality of 'The Late Hour' is arguably enhanced by a very unobtrusive handling of the line unit. Lines usually end on major syntactic boundaries, sometimes realising a full or nearly full correspondence between sentence and line (ll. 9, 10, 11), more often smoothly separating clauses of a sentence (ll. 1, 4, 15) or phrases within a clause (ll. 2, 7, 17, 20). It is common for them to end on a full stop (ll. 3, 6, 8, 10, 11, 14, 16, 18), and in roughly the first half of the poem (ll. 1-9) each major syntactic boundary is typographically marked off by a tercet. Division into stanzas can be thought of, from a visual standpoint, as the poetic homologue of prose paragraphs. Recalling that paragraph formatting improves retention of information (Emmott et. al 2006; see 2.2.1), I propose that the regular layout of 'The Late Hour' maximises processing ease by working in synergy with the frequently end-stopped lines. In this context, the enjambment between lines 12 and 13 ('imagine // her eyes') is strongly foregrounded, not only because it divides a verb from its object, but because it does so across tercets. The ensuing visual leap from *imagine* to *her eyes* is remarkable, and iconic of the tense, unsettled desire of the man.

The coherence of the poem, that is, its intrinsic consistency on the ideational level of language, unfolds syntagmatically in the text through a simple syntax where most clauses are conjoined paratactically. Most linkages in the poem rest on the conjunction *and* (polysyndeton) and on

the comma (asyndeton) (e.g. 'A man walks towards town, / a slack breeze', ll. 1-2; 'She is awake and stares', l. 7). Proposing a cline of explicitness for connectives, Leech and Short rank subordinating conjunctions such as 'therefore' as the most explicit, whereas 'and' they gloss as 'the vaguest of connectives – it might be called a 'general purpose link', in that it merely says that two ideas have a positive connection, and leaves the reader to work out what it is' (2007 [1981]: 250).

In the case of 'The Late Hour', however, the vagueness of connectives is *not* a source of tentative interpretation on the part of the reader. This is due to the predictable pattern of alternation between the characters and their interrelation, favoured by the unity of space and the lexical repetitions identified before. Drawing on systemic-functional grammar for a holistic view (Halliday 2004: 377), the kind of relation that coordination enacts on a logico-semantic level is that of *expansion*, relating 'phenomena as being of the same order of experience'; more specifically, the poem develops by a sub-category of expansion, *extension* (A + B; i.e. adding new elements). As the reading unfolds, each *figure* (see 2.1.2), congruently adds to the previous one, guiding us to assign a strong coherence to the poem.

3.1.3 Posited processing and comprehension

So far I have adopted a triangular perspective by focusing on (a) the language of the poem, (b) the posited effects of stylistic choices and (c) some proposals on the production side as far as the authorial design is concerned. I will now expand on (b) by drawing on the models of comprehension surveyed in 2.1.

The processing phase of activation, which involves lexical items in isolation, is eased by the predominant role of core vocabulary, 'neutral

stylistically, neither markedly casual nor formal' and known by all native speakers (Stubbs 2001: 41). In her experiment, Yaron (2002) found that some respondents were uncertain of the meaning of *feckless* (l. 21), possibly the only word falling outside core vocabulary. As such, *feckless* is lexically foregrounded and it occurs in a portion of text that is already foregrounded syntactically (because of the nominal style). Abstract nouns, another lexical indicator, are generally avoided: excluding repetitions, I have counted twenty concrete nouns (*man*, *town*, *earth*, *breeze*, *trees*, *back*, *woman*, *bed*, *lover*, *window*, *panes*, [the] *dark*, *light*, *glass*, *moon*, *stars*, *morning*, *night*, *wind*, *sun*) against only six, equally familiar, abstract nouns (*weight*, *passion*, *hour*, *warning*, *desire*, *end*). The two concrete nouns *scars* and *wounds* are excluded from the above count because they acquire abstractedness from the metaphorical co-text in which they are embedded.

The processing phase of construal should likewise be effortless: the poem is ideationally transparent, as shown in 3.1.1, and even the few instances of novel metaphors (*scars of light*, l. 7; *wounds of night*, l. 18) appear well integrated in their co-text. Both metaphors can be structurally classified as genitive constructions (Brooke-Rose 1958: 19). In *scars of light* the ground of the comparison rests on the association – both via visual analogy and effect-cause relation – between 'scars' and 'blade', a conventional way of describing the light filtering from a narrow source (e.g. the threshold of a door). The metaphor is well integrated in its co-text because 'light' is a plausible object of the verb *stares* immediately before, and 'scars' is loosely related to the pain and suffering that can be ascribed to the man. *Wounds of night* is equally supported by the co-text: *wounds* shares the same semantic field of *scars*, thus increasing coherence whilst extending the scale of the suffering beyond the human participants and their immediate setting. *Night* recalls 'the late hour' in the preceding

line and in the title, building up a link between a part of the day and a range of negative associations (e.g. the end of human life, an impenetrable secret, and so on).

The integration phase of processing should, again, be effortless. The key factors here are the coherence of the poem, stemming from the congruent and interrelated figures it links via extension, and the *narrative superstructure* it partly instantiates. The presence of a title that fits the situation portrayed, and is even repeated in the text, is further help towards integrating all the parts of the poem into a coherent whole.

All this implies that 'The Late Hour' should not pose problems in either online processing (online difficulty) or global understanding (offline difficulty). While the findings of tests presented in Chapters 4 and 5 will add empirical substance to the claim, one can already speculate that global understanding of 'The Late Hour' should be unproblematic. This is because during actual reading the basic comprehension phases (activation, construal and integration) interact with little interference to build a clear situation model. The same holds true for understanding at the interpretive level (the construction of a theme): 'The Late Hour' encourages symbolic reading by turning individuals into types, by securing consistency of textual relations and by pairing the cycle of life with the cycle of the day. Comprehension considered holistically (including appreciation, identification with characters, etc.) should be successfully attained: the subject and theme of the poem, by means of their familiarity and proximity to core human concerns (love, pain, death, nature) are likely to be felt as relevant by readers who can match them with their own personal experiences. This is an empirical question, however, and one to which Chapter 4 will provide some preliminary answers.

3.2 Wallace Stevens – 'What We See Is What We Think'

Editing the *Cambridge Companion to Wallace Stevens*, Serio alludes to 'Stevens' *legendary* difficulty' (2007: 4; emphasis added; see also 2.3). Serio is not alone in his judgment, as Leggett goes as far as to see Stevens's difficulty as a constant, if not the fingerprint, of the author: 'Although difficult from the beginning, Stevens's poetry had become increasingly theoretical and abstract, and thus increasingly obscure, since *Parts of a World* (1942) and *The Auroras of Autumn* represents the culmination of this tendency' (Leggett 2007: 62). My second case study is therefore a poem from *The Auroras of Autumn* (1950), 'What We See Is What We Think'. As the analysis will develop around the linguistic indicators, there will be scope for addressing another intriguing critical issue linked to difficulty, namely, the meaninglessness vs. meaningfulness dichotomy (see 1.4.3). Indeed, Stevens's work has been alternatively attributed 'complex and ambiguous meanings' (Perloff 1985: 21) or dubbed as 'wilful nonsense' (Winters 1972 [1943]: 4).

What we see is what we think

At twelve, the disintegration of afternoon
Began, the return to phantomerei, if not
To phantoms. Till then, it had been the other way:

One imagined the violet trees but the trees stood green,
At twelve, as green as ever they would be.
The sky was blue beyond the vaultiest phrase.

Twelve meant as much as: the end of normal time,
Straight up, an élan without harrowing,
The imprescriptible zenith, free of harangue,

Twelve and the first gray second after, a kind
Of violet gray, a green violet, a thread
To weave a shadow's leg or sleeve, a scrawl

On the pedestal, an ambitious page dog-eared
At the upper right, a pyramid with one side
Like a spectral cut in its perception, a tilt

And its tawny caricature and tawny life,
Another thought, the paramount ado…
Since what we think is never what we see.

The poem opens with a defamiliarised event whose abstract quality is underscored by nominalisations (*disintegration*, *return*). Its ideational unfamiliarity owes much of its force to the coinage *phantomerei* and to a change of circumstantial roles whereby *phantoms* are construed as locative rather than, as it may be expected, as genitive ('the return […] to phantoms', not 'of phantoms'). A past in the past state of affairs is introduced ('Till then, it had been the other way: / one imagined the violet trees but the trees stood green'), followed by a shift to a future in the past ('as green as ever they would be') and by a return to the simple past ('The sky was blue beyond the vaultiest phrase. / Twelve meant as much as:'). At this point, all temporal indications are suspended by an extended series of noun phrases (ll. 7-17) that can be seen as the stylistic fulcrum of the poem (see 3.2.2). Finally, there is a move towards a general truth expressed in a negated relational identifying clause ('Since what we think is never what we see', l.18).

This bird's-eye view suggests that the poem displays a certain unity of form. An interesting but hard-to-solve question is whether it was this perception of order which spurred an early reviewer of Stevens, John Gould Flecther, to write the following comment:

> John Gould Flecther, writing in the Freeman, argued that the poet Wallace Stevens, though he was obscure, as were "internationally

> famous writers" like Eliot, Paul Valery, and the Sithwells, was "head and shoulders above them all" because "*his obscurity comes from a wealth of meaning and allusion which are unavoidable*; *and his intention*, when we finally do fathom it, *is far clearer and more earnestly pursued than theirs*". (Diepeveen 2003: 58, quoting Flecther [1923] 1985: 47; emphasis added)

While the formulation 'wealth of meaning and allusion' echoes Perloff's 'complex and ambiguous meanings', I wish to draw attention to the forcefully stated issue of intentionality. I am aware of the contentiousness of the notion and of its problematic applicability to stylistic analysis, unless manuscript revisions allow a glimpse into authorial agency (e.g. Sotirova 2014). And yet, intentionality and the related concept of trust (e.g. Fletcher's emphasis on an '*earnestly* pursued' intention) often crop up when readers and critics seek to come to grips with difficulty, probably because they pair the writing/reading act to a speaking/listening one that is pragmatic in nature. Levin proposes that 'every poem is a speech act of a particular kind' (1977: 122), requiring trust in the author: 'if we do not believe the poet, then surely the whole enterprise is stultified from the outset' (139). The contentiousness of the topic – especially where links are sought between conjectured intention and linguistic choices – means that I will comment on it only after all the analyses have been carried out (see 3.7.2).

I would count only the following as positive indicators of difficulty actualised in the poem: novel metaphors and unusual word combinations, in turn leading to problems of semantic understanding; and noun phrase juxtaposition. There are negative indicators as well: traces of grammatical cohesion and semantic coherence, including a title signposting it; some

sense of narrative progression; and the foregrounded presence (title and last line) of a generic sentence which should enable to formulate a theme – that is, to endow the poem with a symbolic layer of meaning.

3.2.1 Problems of reference and unusual word combinations

The poem provides a good amount of unusual word combinations, typically in adjective + noun constructions: *violet trees* (l. 4), *vaultiest phrase* (l. 6), *imprescriptible zenith* (l. 9), *ambitious page* (l. 13), and *tawny life* (l. 16). Each will be analysed separately, and then a holistic explanation will be proposed as to why and to what effect these constructions occur. Referentially, *the violet trees* does not violate any norm of verisimilitude, as some species (e.g. the *Jaracanda*) have leaves this colour. The immediate co-text of the poem, however, makes no appeal to empirically verifiable violet trees: the noun phrase is the object of the mental verb *imagined*, so its referent inhabits a projected reality. By contrast, the existential process *stood* predicated of green trees (*the trees stood green*) assign these to a physical reality. The two clauses enact, through the adversative conjunction *but*, the textual-conceptual function of *contrasting* (Jeffries 2014). The contrast between two orders of experience – the physical and the mental – reverses the identification set up by the title between what the senses have access to ('what we see') and what is conjectured or desired ('what we think'). Incidentally, the identification is iconically enacted by lexical repetition and syntactic parallelism ('what we see is what we think') whereas the contrast in line 4 is underscored by a partial chiasmus ('One imagined the violet trees but the trees stood green').

A few more considerations on *the violet trees* are in order. First, the adjective-noun combination is one that readers are not likely to come

across frequently, as a search on the 450-million word COCA corpus yields no result. This testifies to a rift between the plane of wording (textual metafunction) and the plane of reality (ideational metafunction), proof of how poetry can fill the gap left by language without endangering referentiality. Second, the definite article construes the referent as specific and known to both the poet and the reader. This is subtly confusing: more congruent, unmarked alternatives would have been 'one imagined violet trees/some violet trees/a violet tree', with the thought entity presented as generic (i.e. either a type or an unspecified token). Through the definite article, instead, a product of imagination (*the violet trees*) is construed as tangible and open to sensory scrutiny, i.e. as if existing. As Dillon insightfully puts it, 'violation of the principle that the referent of a definite noun phrase has been introduced is a source of difficulty in Wallace Stevens' (1978: 65).

The same argument applies, overall, to *the vaultiest phrase* (l. 6). What happens here is that *phrase* is oddly premodified by *vaultiest*, a noun-derived adjective in the superlative form. *Phrase* can be classified as an abstract noun, as its referent is semiotic rather than material; *vaultiest* evokes especially architectonic (e.g. 'the vault of the church') and astronomic domains (e.g. 'the vault of the sky'), so its collocate *phrase* borrows co-textually built connotations from both domains. The enhanced range of associations should lead to a perception of multiplicity – a linguistically-driven proposal that substantiates Perloff's and Fletcher's remarks on, respectively, Stevens's 'complex and ambiguous meanings' and his 'wealth of meaning and allusion'. In addition to this, the preposition *beyond* can function either literally (i.e. spatially) or metaphorically. The former route, primed by *sky* and *vaultiest* in the same line, would lead to an ideational construal in which *phrase*, an abstract noun in isolation, is made tangible in its co-text, also by virtue of the

definite article. The latter route is supported by the fact that *beyond* is frequently used in figurative contexts, notably in idioms like 'beyond words' and 'beyond belief'. I think both readings are meant to coexist, merging a sense of ineffability (also implied by *free of harangue* a few lines later) and one of concreteness. The anomalous collocation can be explained in terms of a writing practice that shuffles words co-occurring in more 'mundane' discourses:

Table 3 Co-occurrence of 'blue', 'vault' and 'sky' in the COCA

FIC	Sunlight drenched the snow-mantled Alps, and the wide **sky** was a **vault** of sapphire **blue**.
NEWS	squint your eyes, and it could almost be Maui: the **vault** of **blue sky** and cumulus overhead, a few surfers riding glassy swells,
MAG	perfect sunflowers. Their leaves brushed in the still air, dollar bills in a **vault** of **blue sky**.
FIC	Above them towered the majestic clouds, splendidly adorning the **blue vault** of the **sky**.

The words in bold construe a coherent ideational unit in each of the samples in Table 4: *vault* and *blue* are always attributed to *sky*. The variation is at the level of grammatical construct only (relational attributive 'be' or genitive construction), and thus is textual rather than ideational. In Stevens, by contrast, *vaultiest* (coined from 'vault') is *not* attributed to the sky, and yet *sky* is lexically co-selected in the same line. This can be regarded as an instance of *scrambling*, a phenomenon 'where the text contains words, phrases, or sentences also found in a hypogram, but with their order changed' (Riffaterre 1984 [1978]: 139). The strategy of *scrambling* appears apt at fulfilling a resolution Stevens made only a few years before writing the poem: 'we have to fix abstract objectives and then *to conceal the abstract figures in actual appearance*' (private letter; quoted in Bates 2011: 169; emphasis added).

This tension between abstract and concrete may be observed in the next instance, where the restricted collocation *tawny life* (l. 16) is preceded

by the more referentially acceptable *tawny caricature*. The syntactic parallelism in which the repetition is embedded should prompt a connection between *caricature* and *life*, as this is among the pivotal roles ascribed to parallelism (Leech 2010: 114). What is more, both qualify the inanimate *tilt* (l. 15), which should further prime the connection between them. To envisage a co-textually built semantic similarity does not, however, diminish the difficulty of *tawny life* at the construal level – it merely helps its co-textual integration in a further stage. The difference between the two phrases is that in *tawny caricature* we may invoke a weak but plausible inference as an interpretive basis, for instance by imagining an old drawn caricature of this colour (*page* and *scrawl* elsewhere in the poem support this interpretation). *Tawny life* is more clearly metaphorical and inferences would be more tentative. In order to explain why this is so, consider a phrase with the adjective colour changed, such as 'green life'. Corpus data evidence different patterns of behaviour for the two colours, with 'tawny' more restricted than 'green' in the range of co-selected nouns (preferably concrete nouns such as 'eyes', 'skin' or 'leaves'). My posited variant is certainly more immediate to interpretation (e.g. 'a life respectful of nature and eco-sustainability') given that 'green' has a range of conceptual, and more conventionalised, associations.

The restricted collocations left to discuss also retain the potential effect of widening the associative range through a paradigmatic reading. They are less explainable in terms of disrupted reference though, as the use of evaluative rather than descriptive adjectives elicits considerations of a more conceptual nature. *The imprescriptible zenith* (l. 9) combines a noun normally resistant to adjectival premodification with an adjective whose unique collocate is 'rights' (source: COCA). A socio-political undertone is thus transferred onto a noun usually employed denotationally (e.g. 'the earth's zenith') or in conventional metaphorical contexts (e.g. 'at

the zenith of his power'). *Ambitious page* (l. 13) can be interpreted either metonymically (i.e. 'a page from an ambitious work/author') or as a personifying metaphor. While the word combination is slightly odd, its contribution to difficulty appears minimal. More fine-grained criteria would be needed to establish which restricted collocations pose processing hurdles, also bearing in mind that a relatively high degree of novelty is tolerated and even expected in poetry.

Restricted collocations are but one grammatical form of local semantic foregrounding; other forms include *the disintegration of afternoon* (l. 1), *phantomerei* (l. 2) and *a pyramid with one side* (l. 14). The novelty of the first instance has a twofold source: first, *disintegration* would primarily apply to institutional entities such as states and families (source: COCA) rather than to a temporal noun like *afternoon*. Second, the omission of the definite article before *afternoon* turns it into a non-count noun with the effect of abstraction. However, the grammatical and semantic deviance of the phrase is weakened if we interpret it as a scrambling of the lexical bundle 'at the crack of dawn' – that is, a derivation that can be retraced from the source text both semantically and syntactically. Semantically, 'crack' and 'disintegration' are *troponyms* (lexemes in a manner relation: see Fellbaum and Miller 1990) of 'break', whilst 'dawn' and 'afternoon' are *meronyms* of 'day'. Syntactically, the structure is nearly identical, as the lexical bundle renounces the definite article before *dawn* and the preposition *at* is found, slightly delinearised, in Stevens (At twelve, the disintegration of afternoon').

Phantomerei (l. 2) is a coinage likely to activate a range of intra-textual and inter-textual associations. Intra-textually, it links forward to *phantoms* (l. 3) through anagrammatic inclusion and a conditional conjunction (*if not*). Intertextually, it echoes 'Panta Rhei' ('everything flows'), a maxim famously attributed to Heraclitus. From the standpoint of

the linguistic system, *phantomerei* is a nonword and has no meaning (neither sense nor reference). In the co-text of the poem, however, it becomes a rich repository of meanings, as it conflates associations of death or immateriality (*phantoms*) and of the eternal flux or change of life ('Panta Rhei').

Finally, *a pyramid with one side* (l. 14) implies a subtle structural ambiguity the consequences of which are referential and even epistemological. It is actually unclear whether the prepositional phrase following it (*like a spectral cut*) modifies the whole preceding noun phrase or just *with one side*. The prepositional phrase thus behaves as a free modifier, whereby 'the modifier-head relationship is unspecified and often unspecific' (Adamson 1999: 635). The former parsing route contradicts our knowledge of pyramids as comprising four sides, a referential disruption that is among the difficulty indicators. As Zwaan points out when reviewing a 1982 study by Tikhomirov and Klochko: 'although subjects may not be consciously aware of violations of their world knowledge in a text, there are indications that they (unconsciously) experience difficulties during processing' (1993: 129). The latter reading, on the contrary, complies with norms of verisimilitude: because attention is selective, focusing on just one side of the pyramid does not make the others non-existent. This reading would apply much less forcefully if *like a spectral cut* was in the same line – an argument that supports the inclusion of line/clause mismatch among the indicators of difficulty (see 2.2.5). Incidentally, the semantic connection between *phantoms* (l. 3) and *spectral* (l. 15) enhances, alongside the near-repetition of title and last line, the feeling of unity already mentioned before.

The instances discussed so far address *exophoric reference*, that is, reference to extra-textual reality. On one occasion, however, problems emerge endophorically, between referring items in the text. In line 3, *the*

other way supposedly links back to the whole event portrayed before, but evokes an alternative scenario (i.e. either this or the other way) that cannot be accessed nor construed. This is because the metaphorical context in lines 1-3 has no conventional opposite – that is, no opposite entrenched in language use and therefore stored in long-term memory. The logico-semantic relation of elaboration cued by the colon at the end of line 3 implies explanation or clarification. However, Stevens shifts the ideational configuration from a disembodied event to one centred on concrete entities (e.g. 'trees'), which makes the clarification a baffling one.

My piecemeal analysis of restricted collocations, novel metaphors and problematic reference assignment has evidenced a few important constants in terms of literary effects. First of all, abstract and concrete dimensions are merged, either by having an abstract referent preceded by a concrete one within a parallel structure ('tawny caricature and tawny life'), or by deletion/addition of a definite article where the contrary would be customary ('the disintegration of [the] afternoon'; 'one imagined ~~the~~ violet trees'), or by a mismatch between the collocational ranges of adjective and noun (*vaultiest phrase*, *tawny life*). Secondly, the practice of scrambling makes the extraordinary (the reality represented in the text) to resonate with the everyday (the possible source texts). Thirdly, the textual-conceptual function of equating and contrasting is important for the *logogenesis*, or meaning construction (Halliday and Matthiessen 1999: 18) of the poem. The equating function motivates the appositional noun phrase series which I discuss in the next section (3.2.2). The contrasting function, although far from pervasive, occurs in strategic textual locations, namely the title and the list line. These textual-conceptual functions also provide some stylistic substance to Vendler's claim that Stevens often takes 'a stance of formal argument' that the critic links to his work as a lawyer (Vendler 2010: 26). Grammatically, these functions are realised in various

ways: identifying clauses (the title and its negation in the last line), clauses paratactically conjoined by an adversative conjunction (l. 6), presupposition of dichotomies via baffling anaphoric reference (*the other way*) and a collocation contradiction (*paramount ado*) that has no antecedent.

3.2.2 Apposition and analogy. The noun phrase series

In this section, I am going to focus on syntax and cohesion, and in particular on the contrast between a clause-based norm (ll. 1-7, l. 18) and a phrase-based one (ll. 7-17), with line 7 marking the transition: 'Twelve meant as much as: the end of normal time'. Consistency of tense (the simple past) and mood (the declarative) maximises processing fluency; dependency relations between sentences and occasionally between phrases are typically marked by conjunctions (the adversative *but*, the temporal *till then*, the conditional *if not*) and by the comparative construction *as much as*. Ideationally, the material process in line 2 (*began*), foregrounded by being at line-initial position after a strong enjambment, conveys a feeling of dynamicity. This is soon deadened by the cluster of relational attributive processes (*stood*, *would be*, *was*, *meant*) that cues an emphasis on description and the 'setting' function of the passage, despite the ideational unfamiliarity analysed earlier. The setting function itself is interrupted in line 7, in parallel with the beginning of the noun phrase series.

This extended series (ll. 7-17) is dependent on the main clause 'Twelve meant as much as'. The logico-semantic relation between them is one of elaboration (A equals/amounts to B), whereby the series illustrates or expands the point made by the main clause. Here is the series, reported again for ease of reference:

Twelve meant as much as: the end of normal time,
Straight up, an élan without harrowing,
The imprescriptible zenith, free of harangue,

Twelve and the first gray second after, a kind
Of violet gray, a green violet, a thread
To weave a shadow's leg or sleeve, a scrawl

On the pedestal, an ambitious page dog-eared
At the upper right, a pyramid with one side
Like a spectral cut in its perception, a tilt

And its tawny caricature and tawny life,
Another thought, the paramount ado…

The passage provides a striking instance of noun phrase juxtaposition, a well-investigated feature of twentieth century poetry (see 2.2.3). My interest in it lies in its potential for structural ambiguity: is each noun phrase to be read as standalone, that is, as in a list? Or is it perhaps appositional? Tate (2008 [1994]: 140) points out the double possibility, whilst Adamson (1999: 641) provides the discriminating criterion of semantic relatedness (apposition) versus contingent relatedness (list). There is also the possibility that the semantic unrelatedness of each unit stems from the leeway allowed by apposition as a method of definition which, as argued by Adamson, 'defines by accumulation rather than by abstraction or reduction and it permits – indeed promotes – the inclusion of *alternative and potentially contradictory perspectives*' (1998: 569; emphasis added).

So, the series explicitly works as a redefinition of *twelve* due to the verb *meant* and the comparative construction *as much as*. Some of the noun phrases can thus be construed as loose reformulations of each other: *the end of normal time* coheres with *twelve* immediately before; the 'height' semantic feature of *straight up*, recurs in *zenith*, *dog-eared*, *pyramid* and *upper right*, all of which are either the head or the modifier of

a noun phrase; there is a fabric-writing transition from *thread* to *scrawl*, warranted by the etymology of the latin word 'textus' which conflates both the senses of text and fabric; and the colours spread across three adjacent noun phrases ('Twelve and the first gray second after, a kind Of violet gray, a green violet) create a backward link to those in lines 4-6 (*violet*, *green*, *blue*).

Bates has argued that meaning in Stevens resides in 'metaphoric transformation' achieved 'through a series of linked metonyms' (2011: 165). My analysis of the noun phrase series shows the linguistic and inferential mechanisms that support his remark by accommodating the linguistic evidence into a more interpretive reading act. If analogy is defined, after Mutter, as 'the discovery of similitude in dissimilitude' (Mutter 2011: 751), then there is analogical motivation behind the selection of referents in the passage. In addition to this, the conjunction *since* (l. 18) signals a causal relation between the generic sentence and the series (ll. 7-17); the reader is hence prompted to make a connection between the two parts. However, no pre-stored knowledge can offer an explanation as to why re-defining 'twelve' in terms of élan, zenith, thread, etc. depends on a permanent mismatch between what is seen and what is thought.

Despite their consistency, certain structural and semantic options – especially the function of equating and the merging of abstractedness and concreteness – resist being mapped onto a voice or speaker. Indeed, the poetic persona is 'hidden' in the impersonal pronoun *one* (l. 4) or subsumed in the first person plural pronoun *we* having a generic meaning (l. 18). Vendler has argued that Stevens often employs this impersonal pronoun as a substitute for the lyric I, thus enabling 'the disclosure of suffering' (2007: 134). Is this really the case for 'What We See Is What We Think'? The textual evidence points to the contrary, as markers of

subjectivity are renounced: we do not find any evaluative adjective (e.g. 'tremendous') nor stance adverb (e.g. 'frankly'), nor any instance of subjective use of verbal aspect such as the progressive and the perfect (Adamson 1999: 664). These stylistic choices arguably stem from the modernist ideal of impersonality, as they appear compatible with Rives's characterisation of this notion. In her words, 'in an impersonally oriented world that *rejects the singularized person as its center*, the individual is without content, protected from the gaze of those who would, to borrow from Eliot's Prufrock, "fix", "pin", and "formulate[e]" ("Prufrock" 15)' (Rives 2012: 9; emphasis added).

The search for meaningfulness should become particularly compelling when readers face the noun phrase series. Here the referents obey principles of analogy, analogy being a means through which poetry naturally gestures towards a symbolic and religious-like order (Mutter 2011: 751). Conversely, meaning-making approaches dependent on scenarios as pre-stored in knowledge structures (e.g. schema theory: see e.g. Semino 1995) are frustrated by the associative possibilities opened by restricted collocations and the other semantic deviances analysed earlier. Poised between syntax and semantics, my analysis agrees with Dillon's claim that 'Stevens demands attention to sentence structure and logical form while at the same time pressing them, and the readers, beyond their limits' (1978: 137). I propose that this linguistically-based tension helps explain the connection between obscurity and earnestness of intention in Fletcher's argument as well as the nonsense versus meaningfulness dichotomy in, respectively, Winters's and Perloff's claims.

3.2.3 Posited processing strategies

Reading Stevens is an experience where 'we hover above one analysis of the meaning of segments, to descend to a thematic integration of the whole, then hover again over the same or a new analysis of part', as Sinding aptly puts it (2008: 108-109). The critic's account is compatible with the processing model I am using (2.3), therefore I will specify further the relationship between the texture of the poem and the processing it is likely to elicit. Save for a few instances of unfamiliar vocabulary (*phantomerei*, perhaps also *élan* and *imprescriptible*), the activation phase should be effortless.

The construal phase, instead, confronts readers with several semantic deviations that resist a referential interpretation and invite them to consider how novelty is created by manipulating, rather than renouncing, patterns of language attested in non-poetic discourse. The unusual word combinations do not simply create surprise in readers (Jeffries 1993: 70); they also have the critical potential to de-automatise perception, as Shklovsky puts it (1917). In all likelihood, this is why Sinding alludes to a prolonged attention ('we hover') on '*segments* of meaning': a vague expression to be sure, but one in keeping with the phrasal instantiations of semantic foregrounding.

The integration phase should be eased by the use of conjunctions (*if not*, *till then*, *but*, *since*), nominal substitution (*the other way*), the guiding function of the title and its negation in the last line, and the presence of certain thematic threads (time, colours, perception, perhaps the act of writing itself). These features signpost the 'centripetal', highly intra-connected texture of the poem. The ease of integration, in terms of processing, of 'What We See Is What We Think' needs, however, to be distinguished from that of 'The Late Hour'. In Strand's poem, integration is

likely to be enabled top-down by the elements of similarity with narratives as well as by the familiar theme of the suffering lover (see 3.1.3). In Stevens's poem, by contrast, integration is mainly bottom-up, the perceivable unity being text-driven rather than guided by situational schemata.

3.3 Geoffrey Hill – Stanza '33'

My third case study is '33', the thirty-third of the 120 twelve-line stanzas of the long poem *Speech! Speech!* (2000). When reading the collection, this stanza presented itself as a viable candidate for a stylistic analysis of difficulty. Reviewing *Speech! Speech!*, Bromwich reveals its structural tension between unity and fragmentation by proposing that '"'Speech! Speech!" aims to be read as *a single continuous gesture*, though the idiom of the poem tends toward *fragmentation*' (Bromwich 2001; emphasis added). At the macro-end of the scale, *Speech! Speech!* displays an iconically motivated structure where, as Bromwich reminds us, each stanza corresponds to one of the 120 days of Sodom. At the micro-end of the scale, the formal unity of each stanza is undermined by an array of stylistic devices explored throughout the next sections, with stanza '33' as the illustrative example. More generally, this tension is a key aspect of long poems influenced by deconstructivist principles:

> The same question that troubled Derrida about the notion of a deconstructivist architecture – how can one deconstruct and still have architecture? – troubles long poems modelled on deconstructivist architecture: how can one build a large-scale poetic structure and deconstruct it at the same time? (McHale 2004: 14-5)

Among the long poems McHale alludes to, one is by Geoffrey Hill himself – his *Mercian Hymns* (1971) reviving the high modernist poetics of Thomas S. Eliot and David Jones (2004: 118). Through the stylistic analysis that follows, McHale's points will be explored further, especially with regard to a postmodernist stance that can be perceived in the stanza. I will do so, however, by examining the linguistic indicators of difficulty, my primary area of enquiry.

3.3.1 Coherence and degree of textual dependence

To classify *Speech! Speech!* as a long poem presupposes that all its stanzas are subjected to a stricter mutual interdependence than would occur in standalone poems with regard to their host collections. And yet, unlike the stanzas of a short poem, each stanza in *Speech! Speech!* is numbered and presented on the page as self-sufficient: it stands somewhere in between partial dependence and partial independence. Here the notion of *macrotext* (Testa 1983) offers a way to broach the issue. By this term, Testa designates the text of poetry collections that develop a unitary theme or narration, to the point that each poem acquires full significance only within its macrotext – although it can usually be read and appreciated in its own right too.

The kind of qualitative analysis performed here imposes a narrow focus on one stanza only. Given the text-macrotext relationship in the collection, this limitation exposes the stylistician to a risk of 'analytic myopia' whereby meaningful intertextual connections may be overlooked. I am aware of no easy solution to the problem, except that I will try to address such interdependence issues when appropriate.

33

YES, I know: fantasies see us out
Like a general amnesty, with son
Et lumière and civic freedoms.
Something mùst give, make common cause,
In frank exchange with defamation.
So talk telegraphese, say: FORTITUDE
NEVER MY FORTE. BLOOD-IN-URINE SAMPLES
RUIN EURO-CULTURE. Try NO to eách
Succession of expenses; nominal
Acceptance, each makeshift honour botched
As though by royal appointment. And PASS to all
Duties, rights, privileges, of despair.

The opening 'YES, I know' (l. 1) is a formulaic sequence normally occurring in conversation as part of an adjacency pair – a response token presupposing a previous utterance, as shown in Table 5:

Table 4 Some occurrences of 'Yes I know' in the COCA

SPOK	You know, freedom of choice, Bill and freedom of -- (CROSSTALK) O'REILLY: **Yes I know** that but you
SPOK	Are you going to take him down or what? MARTIN: **Yes I know** but -- but you know what
FIC	And did you know, she is a scientist too? " " **Yes I know**, Achi! " the child squealed and ran off to interrupt her
FIC	Look at me Laura. No, forgive me, I know it. God **yes I know** it. Just for a minute, what you said, or something

The occurrences in the table come from recorded spoken conversation (SPOK) or from fiction (FIC), where simulated speech is essential for realistic effects (Leech and Short 2007 [1981]: 160-6). Arguably, nobody would be surprised not to find 'Yes I know' in a hypothetical sub-entry for poetry in the COCA: poetry, as a genre, is remarkably less conversational than fiction. This claim should be refined, though, since poets' newly established ideal of representing 'common speech' is the lense through which Adamson examines a variety of stylistic markers of modernist poetry

(1999; see 1.2 and 2.2). Interestingly, one of her examples, dating back to 1852 (*To Marguerite*, by Arnold) also begins with the interjection 'Yes!' (1999: 667).

Therefore, by presupposing a preceding discourse, 'YES, I know' indexes the lack of autonomy of the stanza. The previous stanza, '32', frustrates a backward search for the first part of the adjacency pair. It nevertheless creates a conceptual bridge with '33' through the formulaic 'make answer' and the idiomatic expression 'confessional to the bone' (stanza 32; ll. 7, 12), in that both can be read as meta-comments on 'YES, I know'[4]:

> 'MAKE ANSWER here
> submits a bulk recognizance: e.g.,
> as in heart's blood I slammers against appeal;
> if instress I then with unselfknowing temper
> confessional to the bone.
>
> (Stanza 32; ll. 7-12)

The conclusion of '33' appears as abrupt as its beginning, featuring a command (in the technical sense of speech functions) added to a preceding series of paratactically conjoined commands. There is a sense in which the ending is iconically motivated, since 'pass to' literally means to move forward or even 'to go to one's spiritual destination' (*Oxford English Dictionary*), thus marking either a provisional or a definitive break. The double reading stems from Hill's deployment of a pun, a stylistic habit of the poet noted by other commentators (Toolan 1993: 38; Adamson 1999: 658; McHale 2004: 108) and leading to lexical ambiguity (see 2.2.2). PASS (l. 11) also instantiates yet another indicator, syntactic ambiguity

[4] A similar meta-comment is provided, in '33', by the adjective *nominal*, occurring in the lines whose style is indeed nominal (ll. 9-11).

(see 2.2.3), since it can either be read as a verb, as I have just done, or as a noun: the former option is primed by the previous verbs in the imperative mood *talk* (l. 6), *say* (l. 6) and *try* (l. 7), the latter by positing a structural ellipsis of the verb in the last clause ('Try NO' (l. 8) → 'And [try] PASS' (l. 11)).

A comparison of how the poems analysed so far begin and end is instructive at this point: 'The Late Hour' begins with the conventions of realist narrative and its ending is marked off by a move away from human participants and from a clause-based syntax; 'What We See Is What We Think' begins *in medias res* with a temporal indicator but then ends on a generic sentence that links back to the title; '33' similarly begins abruptly with part of an adjacency pair, but its ending feels less marked than Stevens's since it stylistically coheres with the preceding co-text (i.e. a command in a series of conjoined commands, or a complex noun phrase in a series of noun phrases).

The perceived fragment-like quality of '33' is also a consequence of graphological foregrounding, instantiated by the capitalisation in ll. 1, 6-8 and 11, by the graphic accent on *mùst* (l. 4) and *eách* (l. 8), and by the varying size of the lines. As shown in 2.2.1, graphological foregrounding serves purposes of emphasis and, from a processing perspective, prompts a heightened attention and a slowed-down, arguably deeper processing (Emmott et al., 2006). From a production viewpoint, the typical function of capitalisation is either that of singling out important information or conveying the intonation of loud-voiced (e.g. angry, passionate, bombastic) utterances. The latter is the dominant function they adhere to in '33', and appropriately so given the communicative character of the stanza, cued by 'YES, I know', by the prompt for an utterance ('say: FORTITUDE / NEVER MY FORTE', ll. 6-7), by discourse markers (clause-initial *so* and *and*, l. 6, and l. 11), and by the imperative mood necessarily

presupposing an addressee (*talk*, *say*, l. 6). The title of the macrotext, *Speech! Speech!*, could hardly have been more appropriate in signalling the presence of a communicative event unfolding stanza after stanza.

As an instance of graphological (and semantic) foregrounding, the capitalised sequence in ll. 6-8 ('FORTITUDE / NEVER MY FORTE. BLOOD-IN-URIN SAMPLES / RUIN EURO-CULTURE') deserves particular attention. Graphologically, the capitalisation works in synergy with a nominal syntax to mimic newspaper headlines (a convention at work also in a Carol-Ann Duffy poem analysed by Semino 2002). The stretch from 'FORTITUDE' to 'EURO-CULTURE' is introduced by *say* (l. 6) that functions both as a command and a discourse marker that does not implicate an addressee to the same extent. It is, however, incoherent both extrinsically (looked at in its co-text) and intrinsically (taken in isolation). Extrinsically, there is no clear semantic connection from the preceding text to the headline-like stretch, apart from the inference that its formal properties are an illustration of what *telegraphese* (l. 6) looks like. Here the poem comments on itself, just as it does in the already examined transition from stanza 32 to 33 ('MAKE ANSWER', 'confessional to the bone' → 'YES, I know'). Intrinsically, the two capitalised clauses (the former with deleted 'to be') are semantically unrelated, one focusing on virtues and the other on medical and economic references. The latter ('BLOOD-IN-URINE SAMPLES / RUIN EURO-CULTURE', ll. 7-8) alludes to an interrelation between *samples* and *euro-culture* that finds no support anywhere, be it in the co-text or in general world knowledge. The resulting effect is similar to that of a logical fallacy. It may well be that orthographic affinity dictates word choice (i.e. the anagrammatic inclusions of *forte* in *fortitude* and of *ruin* in *urine*); this however does not lessen the challenge that these lines pose to anyone trying to make ideational sense out of them.

The emphasis on virtues (*fortitude*) and society (*euro-culture*) is constant throughout the stanza (e.g. *amnesty*, *freedoms*, *defamation*, *honour*, *privileges*); yet, its *logogenesis* appears idiosyncratic, text-specific. On the one hand, '33' features the stylistic symptoms of interior monologue as listed by Wales (2011 [1990]: 231-2): first person pronoun, present tense, foregrounded deixis[5]. Understanding the interior monologue as a technique that attempts 'to suggest inchoate thought processes, or *the rapid succession of thoughts or topic shifts*' (Wales 2011 [1990]: 232; emphasis added) should then allow us to account for the stanza's topic shifts. The sequencing of these shifts requires a certain amount of inferential activity without being totally unpredictable: *common cause*, l. 4, harks back to *us*, l. 1; *telegraphese*, l. 6, indexes the style of the capitalised stretch and shares, with *frank exchange*, the semantic field 'modes of communication'.

On the other hand, however, '33' hardly provides access to an individual consciousness that would be expected from an interior monologue. Whilst interior monologue is devoted to the representation of thought processes, some of the utterances in the stanza appear borrowed by the speaker, and hence have an exogenous provenance: the newspaper of the 'mock', headline-like clauses in ll. 6-8; and the formulaic l. 5 ('Something mùst give, make common cause'). In this line spoken language is mimicked via the pairing of an idiom plus a lexical bundle; similarly, because of its generalised reference, the indefinite pronoun *something* courts the vagueness of conversational language (Biber et al. 2002: 431). One would expect a statement like this to be uttered by opinion-makers or by members of the general public anxious to voice out their views. A possible interpretation is that the poetic persona is uttering

[5] Although time and space deixis in the stanza is underspecified, the present tense and the imperative mood have a strong indexical function.

others' words alongside his own, arguably present in ll. 1-3 ('fantasies see us out / Like a general amnesty, with son / Et lumière and civic freedoms') and ll. 11-12 ('And PASS to all / Duties, rights, privileges, of despair'). Undermining the monologism typically associated with poetic genres, Hill's stanza embodies Bakhtin's claim that 'every utterance participates in the "unitary language" (in its centripetal forces and tendencies) and at the same time partakes of social and historical heteroglossia (the centrifugal, stratifying forces)' (Bakhtin 1981: 272).

A postmodernist outlook seems at work in the stanza, given that postmodernism treats 'the 'self' as a construct, not as an organic unity' (Mellors 2005: 23). Likewise, the newspaper lexis and structures instantiate the postmodernist assumption according to which 'art is always already enmeshed in ideology' (2005: 41). Thus, Hill's mimicry of alien discourses problematises the identity of the poetic persona and, on the reception side, undermines the coherence of the text (see 2.2.5). McHale also comments on this:

> Markers of style and register ought to allow us to reconstruct a speaker's social identity and the social situation of utterance. But how are we to make situational sense of a patchwork of registers such as we find in hymn X? (2004: 125)

Because the *Mercian Hymns* McHale is discussing were published in 1971, one can speculate that register mixing is a long-standing stylistic habit of the poet. A systematic scrutiny of Hill's oeuvre in the future may shed light on the issue.

3.3.2 The ambiguous status of the addressee

The elusive status of the poetic persona just described can be extended to his implied addressee(s). Indeed, the imperatives interspersed in the stanza are one of the pivotal features that, according to Adamson, 'prompt us to infer an I-You dialogue, even when the presence of an I or a You has not been explicitly stated' (2006: 21). To identify the referent behind the second person is, however, far from straightforward: is she the reader and/or an unidentified addressee within the situation staged by the poem? Uncertainty of attribution stems from the inherent difficulty of positioning You 'on the proximal-distal axis' (Adamson 2006: 20). The leeway allowed by this pronoun is fully exploited in literary writing, where 'narrative you produces an ontological hesitation between the virtual and the actual' (Herman 1994: 378).

Although stanza 33 is not narrative (the stanza has no setting; the events are purely verbal; they are not causally or temporally connected), Hill's use of You seems to prompt the sort of ontological hesitation Herman points out. Herman's typology of functions associated with You (reported below) is the backdrop against which my argument will develop. Herman distinguishes between (1) generalised you, (2) fictional reference, (3) fictionalised address, and (4) apostrophic address. The poetic persona's exhortation to 'talk telegraphese' (l. 6), as well as the following commands (*say*, *try*, *PASS*), seem to (a) imply a fictional reference, or (b) to work as an apostrophic address to the reader. In the former option, the addressee can either (a1) coincide with the poetic persona himself in a self-addressing act, as if the poet were engaged in a dialogue with himself; or (a2) refer to an imagined audience within the poem[6]. This second

[6] From a multimodal perspective, it is not without interest that the book cover of the Penguin Edition features a painting by Honoré Daumier where an applauding public makes eye contact

possibility is reinforced macro-textually by the title cueing collective relevance (*Speech! Speech!*). Additional evidence comes from nouns referring to the public domain (*amnesty*, *freedoms*, *cause*, *defamation*, *honour*, *duties*, *rights*), as well as the pronoun *us*. As for option (b), it can be argued that the apostrophic address is sensed more strongly by those readers who feel aligned with the poetic persona's assumptions and concerns. All these possibilities need to be regarded as coexistent rather than exclusive, so to diagram the routes outlined above would be misleading. In summary, the attribution range underlying the inferred 'you' of stanza 33 poses an inferential hurdle that was absent in either 'The Late Hour' or 'What We See Is What We Think', both of which lack overt indices of address. This inferential hurdle is in turn bound to affect offline difficulty, especially on re-reading.

3.3.3 Lexical density and Latinate vocabulary

Commands, I-you deixis, discourse markers and topic skipping are spoken language techniques. However, these clash with the written register of the stanza. Its lexical density, or 'the proportion of lexical words expressed as a percentage' (Stubbs 2001: 41) is remarkable (82.36%), as is its type/token ratio calculated by the Wordsmith Tool software: 91.55, against a mere 61.90 and 65.36 for the Strand and Stevens poems, respectively. Average word length, again calculated by Wordsmith Tool, is 5.11, more than all the other poems analysed in this chapter. Polysyllabic words, often of a Latinate or French origin, are deployed frequently (*defamation*,

---

with the spectator. While the choice of a book cover is partly an issue of marketing, for small-circulation books such as poetry collections it is reasonable to assume that Hill himself had a say in the final decision.

telegraphese, *fortitude*, *succession*, *acceptance*, *appointment*, *privileges*), being among the poet's foremost stylistic hallmarks (McHale 2004: 108).

In the Renaissance period, Latinate vocabulary was associated with the 'grand style', whose rhetorical purpose was that of persuading (Adamson 1998: 571). Writing at length on the stylistic effects of Latinate words, Adamson further argues that:

> They are therefore associated not only with a formal, public style but also with a range of meaning that is primarily abstract and ideational, whereas Saxon words are associated with private and intimate discourse and their semantic range is characteristically experiential: they encode perceptions, emotions, evaluations. (1998: 573)

On Adamson's account, Latinate words largely account for two salient characteristics of the stanza – its abstractedness and its public slant. All the nouns used in the poem are abstract, save for *samples*. Furthermore, the noun *lumière*, part of the core vocabulary of all French speakers, is most likely unknown to English speakers: the linguistic borrowing becomes, from a reception viewpoint, an instance of an unfamiliar word that should impede activation in the comprehension process.

This lexical survey reveals that the indices of spoken language analysed in the previous sections are contradicted by a use of formal register that is at odds with any knowledge of what 'real', live communication looks like. Indeed, there little attempt at a full mimetic rendering of everyday speech on the part of Hill. However, if the 'speech' repeated twice in the title is interpreted in the more restricted sense of pre-planned discourse, then the presence of a written register appears appropriate: as discourse analysts tell us, speeches tend to be high in

formality and to rely on elaborate rhetorical patterning (Woods 2006). Overall, the stanza is lexically difficult in that it displays many abstract nouns and also includes a few low-frequency words such as *fortitude* and *telegraphese*. The same holds true for the lexical and syntactic ambiguities (see 2.2.2 and 2.2.3, respectively) noticed at various points during the analysis.

Syntactic complexity is moderate overall, but the first projected clause ('fantasies see us out / Like a general amnesty, with son / Et lumière and civic freedoms', ll. 1-3) is heavily post-modified by two prepositional phrases, the second of which ('with son / et lumière and civic freedoms', ll. 3-4) hosts weakly implicated nouns in an additive relation (A + B + C). The ensuing list-construction fosters our expectation that the elements it contains are situationally related (Adamson 1999: 641), and local coherence can indeed be restored once the intertext lingering behind is identified. This is the motto of the French Revolution 'Liberté, Égalité, Fraternité' (Liberty, Equality, Brotherhood): *son* alludes to 'brotherhood' through the 'family' hypernym, *civic freedoms* to 'liberty' via literal translation, and *lumière*, via light, to the Enlightment, a cultural precondition for the revolution to break. This intertext is motivated within the entire work, given that *Speech! Speech!* revisits de Sade's *The 120 Days of Sodom* (Bromwich 2001) written in 1785, a few years before the revolution. A further connection between the stanza and the macrotext has thus been pointed out.

The commodified quality of *freedoms* (if compared to 'Liberté' in the intertext) stems from turning the non-count abstract noun 'freedom' into a count one by putting it in the plural, with implications of definiteness and concreteness. This operation turns upside down an established practice in advertising discourse, whereby count nouns are usually treated as mass nouns to make them appear more dignified (Woods 2006: 31). The same

applies to the non-count nouns *succession* (l. 9) and *honour* (l. 10) where the determiner *each* points to a commodification of the values referred to by the nouns. This analysis, in turn, corroborates the parsing option that reads *pass* (l. 11) as a noun (see 3.3.1): its meaning, under this reading, is related to *general amnesty* in l. 2 (a pass is a document allowing free circulation) and it builds upon the *amnesty-civic-cause-duties-rights-privileges* lexical chain, indexing a relaxation from moral values. In section 3.3.1 I have examined the way the poetic persona performs a mimicry of alien discourses; in 3.3.2 I have discussed the ambiguous status of the addressee; my argument here, based on the treatment of mass vs. count nouns and the use of determiners, unveils its ironic and critical tone. So, indicators that are not in the list proposed in 2.2 but that reasonably contribute to difficulty (i.e. odd use of determiners, the presence of a cultural intertext) allowed me to attribute a moral stance to the speaking I. This culminates in the attitudinal qualifier 'of despair' (l. 12), oddly preceded by a comma that prosodically foregrounds it.

In relation to the odd use of determiners, what also strikes me is Hill's avoidance of the definite article. Of course, this is partly due to the mimicking of newspaper headline style, where articles are omitted to save space. Even so, to altogether eschew the most frequent word in English (source: COCA) must be the result of a conscious decision rather than chance or determiner-noun colligational habits. Arguably, its absence lies below the threshold of perceptibility; and yet, it should contribute to an enhanced feeling of non-situatedness or daunting omnipresence where nothing is clear-cut – in fact, *fantasies* themselves (l.1) are fleeting and disembodied.

Throughout the analysis, the motivations and effects of the stanza's low degree of coherence have been examined, charting the dialectics between the stanza and its macrotext. It should then come as no surprise

that the way Bromwich sums up the theme of the long poem fits well one of its tesserae, '33': 'Hill's subject is disintegration – of the bonds that cement people in a community of speech' (Bromwich 2001). Such disintegration is stylistically achieved by the co-existence of media discourses, a cultural intertext and of spoken techniques foregrounding syntagmatic disjointedness. Moreover, the list of indicators has been expanded through a more interpretive and yet style-based level: the ambiguous status of the addressee, the misuse of determiners and the presence of a cultural intertext. Finally, it has been shown once more how an analysis centred on the linguistic indicators goes beyond showing in which way a poem may be difficult – it also explains its stylistic *raison d'être*.

3.3.4 Posited processes and reading strategies

From a comprehension perspective, the often abstract, polysyllabic and sometimes low-frequency lexis employed by Hill is bound to pose some problems during the activation phase. As a consequence, it should take longer to process than the core vocabulary of 'The Late Hour' and lead to a less complete overall understanding: since words like these (e.g. *fortitude*, *telegraphese*) are 'barely domesticated as English' (McHale 2004: 108), their activation is arguably incomplete for common readers. In addition to this, reference is vague throughout the stanza because abstract nouns, by definition, have non-material reference (Wales 2011 [1990]: 1). This implies that, unless carefully pre- or postmodified, the consensus over their meaning is more open to debate: non-material reference cannot be grounded in empirical observation but is instead constructed through processes of semiosis. For instance, the notion of 'amnesty' is minutely defined by the law, but the knowledge of the term among the general

public is influenced by how politicians, lawyers, beneficiaries, and journalists comment on it. And while *freedoms*, *succession* and *honour* are made concrete via the plural form or the determiner *each*, sometimes the concepts realised by abstract nouns have, at best, a tenuous link with their co-text: this is the case, for instance, with *nominal acceptance* (ll. 9-10), a noun phrase simply juxtaposed to the previous command; or with PASS (l. 11) in the noun parsing option, linked through the coordinating conjunction *and*, whose structural ambiguity has already been discussed (3.3.2). This last remark adds another one of the indicators, phrase juxtaposition (2.2.3), to those already instantiated in this linguistically dense stanza. From a reception perspective, the web the stanza spins both internally (across its content words) and externally (with spoken and media linguistic domains) should alert readers to the multiplicity of sources and echoes analysed earlier. To recapitulate, the activation of lexical meanings is made tentative by the low-frequency or complexity of some of the words; and, on re-reading, their associative range in terms of register and provenance should become salient.

The construal processing phase should be challenging in ll. 1-3, due to the heavy post-modifications that elaborate on the clause 'fantasies see us out' in an indirect way, by merging the private (*fantasies*) and the political (*general amnesty*, *civic freedoms*) through a simile. The constant mismatch between line-end and syntactic boundary, which is a rhythmic dominant of the poem, should de-automatise processing. For instance, during online reading *all* (l. 11) is temporarily an indefinite pronoun until the next line restores the correct parsing – *all* as an adjective modifying *duties*. The line break makes the temporary syntactic ambiguity possible, and I would like to propose that strong enjambments (e.g. those splitting phrases) can be looked at as emphatic cues to the intended processing of a poem. If this is the case, then the principle of *end focus*, stating that most

salient information is typically reserved for the end of a clause (Leech and Short 2007 [1981]: 212) could be valid also for the formal unit of the line, marked by stresses, caesurae and the blank space at the right.

The integration phase of processing is likewise rendered problematic by the low degree of coherence and by the register clashes analysed so far: incoming information is of low predictability due to the topic shifts between the persona's self-disclosure and his mimicry of alien discourses. This three-level syntagmatic difficulty (activation of elements realised by words, construal of figures realised by clauses, and integration of sequences realised by clause complexes) is complemented, on the paradigmatic axis, by lexical and syntactic ambiguities, the presence of a cultural intertext and of formulaic sequences imported from non-literary domains.

Online difficulty should be enhanced by all these factors, plus the abundant use of punctuation and the number of stresses per line (see Chapter 5 for empirical results). Offline difficulty should be sensitive to the vagueness permeating the stanza and realised by abstract nouns, indefinite pronouns, lack of definite articles, let alone – at a higher level – the ambiguous status of the addressee. Finally, it is plausible that readers construct a very general situation model for the poem, for instance capturing its interpersonal stance and its culturally relevant topics. Nonetheless, responses that perceive subtler implications, such as the speaker's stance or the dialogue with non-literary linguistic domains, may require repeated readings or else remain out of reach.

3.4 Ezra Pound – an extract from Canto LXXXI

Pound's *Cantos* are perhaps the epitome of modernist difficulty. Steiner (1978: 22-27) uses an extract from *Canto XXXVIII* to illustrate his

'contingent' difficulty type (see 1.1); Nadel defines the work as 'erratic, difficult, and certainly complex', since 'the documentary nature of the poem […] made allusions, imagery and even structure difficult to follow' (2007: 63). Her comment implies that virtually all levels of sense-making are impaired or delayed; re-mapping them onto the processing phases, it seems to me that allusions involve the activation phase, imagery the construal phase and structure the integration phase (see 3.4.4). The critical picture for Pound gets more complicated if the following argument by Carne-Ross is also taken into account:

> What is difficult about Pound's poetry is its "simplicity"... the whole reverberating dimension of inwardness is missing. There is no murmurous echo chamber where deeps supposedly answer to deeps. […] Pound's whole effort is *not* to be polysemous but to give back to the literal first level its full significance, its old significance. (Carne-Ross 1979, reported in Perloff 1985: 9-10; emphasis is the author's)

The statement seems to contradict Nadel's remark, turning Pound's supposed difficulty upside down. It also has the merit of being amenable to stylistic scrutiny, as some of the concepts mentioned ('simplicity', 'inwardness', 'polysemous', 'significance') can be grounded in language. This controversy on Pound's difficulty will be addressed by testing an extract from his famous *LXXXI Canto* (1948) against the linguistic indicators. This Canto displays 'elusive connections' (Perloff 1985: 9), and the extract reported below has been chosen due to its congeries of personae, arranged in sudden and seemingly unwarranted shifts. This is an aspect to which I first attributed, on a subjective basis, a sense of enhanced difficulty. To counterbalance this narrow focus on a few lines, the

backdrop of the whole *Canto* – especially the co-text not reported here – will be taken into account whenever necessary.

Possum observed that the local portagoose folk dance
was danced by the same dancers in divers localities
in political welcome . . .
the technique of demonstration
Cole studied that (not G.D.H., Horace)
'You will find' said old André Spire,
'that every man on that board (Crédit Agricole)
has a brother-in-law.'
'You the one, I the few'
said John Adams
speaking of fears in the abstract
to his volatile friend Mr. Jefferson,
(to break the pentameter, that was the first heave)
or as Jo Bard says: 'They never speak to each other,
if it is baker and concierge visibly
it is La Rochefoucauld and de Maintenon audibly.'

Graphology in the extract is foregrounded – especially at the level of layout, with lines of uneven size, no stanza division and frequent indentation (one third of the lines), that only in one instance can be explained through reference to direct speech. Because graphology may affect processing (2.2.1), I will integrate these cursory remarks as soon as the stylistic analysis is able to explain them functionally. Beyond graphology, proper nouns and the presence of direct speech are the most noticeable stylistic features of the extract. The former is also a potential indicator of difficulty (2.2.2) so I begin with it.

3.4.1 Proper nouns and encyclopaedic knowledge

A heavy reliance on proper nouns is a stylistic constant of the *Cantos*: they are frequent in the extract from *Canto XXXVIII* (1934) analysed by Steiner (1978: 22-27) and are equally pervasive in the extract above, published

fourteen years later. I have counted as many as eleven instances, ten of which apply to individuals and one to an institution (*Crédit Agricole*). Save for *Possum*, all of them feature a surname – even when the first name appears on its own (*Cole*), a note of clarification follows (*not G.D.H., Horace*). The reliance on surnames of well-known individuals from economic, literary and political domains indexes the anti-lyric, documentary nature of the *Cantos* that Nadel has pointed out (2007: 63). Readers may be familiar to different degrees with each of them, however: while many are likely to have some knowledge of who *Mr Jefferson* stands for, *La Rouchefoucauld* and *de Maintenon* require specialist knowledge to be fully activated. An interesting example is *Possum*, Eliot's self-attributed nickname in his light verse collection *Old Possum's book of practical cats* (1939). Without this anecdotic knowledge, the odd first name (not to be confused with the count noun *possum* from zoological taxonomy) is likely to be construed as an indeterminate and ancient-sounding persona. Such knowledge is encyclopedic rather than situational, so the proper nouns in the extract fundamentally differ from the proper names discussed in 2.2.2, such as *Anne-Marie* in a poem by Oppen (Perloff 1991: 83). *Anne-Marie* stylistically evoked intimacy and a mixed feeling of situatedness and estrangement – its referent could have been identified only if the addressing act itself had been contextualised. This evidence supports Steiner's and Nadel's arguments, since Pound's appeal to extra-textual knowledge hinders readers' sense-making when it comes to building a detailed situation model of the poem.

3.4.2 Narrativity and problematic speaker identification

Proper nouns are not just foregrounded by their pervasiveness; many of them are also grammatical subjects, typically of reporting verbs (*observed*, l.1; *said*, l. 6, 10; *says* l.14) that introduce indirect (ll. 1-3) and direct speech (ll. 6-9, 14-16). According to the model of resonant space proposed by Stockwell (2009), they are excellent candidates for the role of *attractors*, that is, 'elements that take the viewer's attention' (2009: 20). Indeed, Pound's proper names display some of 'the typical features of good textual attractors' (2009: 25), among which definiteness (*his volatile friend Mr. Jefferson*, l. 12), topicality (*it is La Rochefoucauld and de Maintenon*, l. 16), and agency, as argued at the beginning of this paragraph. Their semantic role of Sayers is emphasised too, and this applies to *Possum* as well – *observed* here is a verb of saying.

The extract also includes most of the grammatical features of narrative fiction identified by Biber and Conrad (2009: 150): proper nouns, past tense verb, direct and indirect reported speech, even an adverbial of space (*in divers localities*, l. 2). Testing the entire *Canto LXXXI* against Toolan's definition of narrative (2001 [1988]: 8), it turns out that it positively responds to two of the three pivotal parameters: foregrounded individuals, plus a point realised by a resumptive statement in the last two lines ('Here error is all in the not done, / all in the diffidence that faltered…'). This combined evidence accounts well for the narrative status of the Canto and the extract here analysed.

If the entire *Canto* can be conceived of as narrative both linguistically and structurally, part of the extract examined here features an apparently dialogic moment (ll. 6-12) marked by reporting verbs, direct reported speech and I-you deixis. Functionally, however, the passage is hardly a conversation: André Spire's utterance (ll. 6-8) is contiguous to John

Adams's (l. 9), but the two constitute no adjacency pair. The false impression of a dialogic exchange, bolstered by the first and second person pronouns in the two utterances, encourages attributing the second *you* (l. 9) back to André Spire. However, as the text unfolds, we apprehend that the latter instance of the second person pronoun is coreferential with *Mr. Jefferson*. Pound enacts a temporary ambiguity whereby *you* in line 9 is read anaphorically at first, but then it turns out to be cataphoric. Reference resolution is de-automatised as a result, and what formally appeared as a dialogic exchange is just a series of juxtaposed utterances. A similar, but non-retentional, full ambiguity occurs in l. 6, where *you* could be either anaphoric, referring back to the previous human antecedent (*Cole*) or cataphoric, referring forward to John Adams. The expectation of a conversation taking place is also undermined by the incongruous content of the two utterances. In terms of conversational maxims (Grice 1975), 'I the one, you the few' violates the maxim of relation, since it is not consistent with Spire's utterance.

At this point, the last utterance of the extract in a direct speech form (ll. 14-16) veers away from any dialogue/juxtaposition *trompe l'oeil*. It does so through a tense shift from past to present (*said* → *says*) and the conjunction cluster *or as* (l. 14). This indexes either exemplification or alternation ('or') and comparison ('as'), leading to a fleeting didactic note that, I believe, cues a narratorial stance. Such a stance is maximally indexed by the parenthetical in l. 13. On the one hand, parentheticals are associated with conversational speech (Adamson 1999: 594), so they fit the conversational mould of the extract; on the other, they can indicate 'an interpolated thought or an utterance in a different tone of voice or *by a different speaker*' (Perkins 1987:45; cited in Tartakovsky 2009: 233; emphasis added). The last claim supports the view that the statement in l. 9 should be attributed to the narrator *and* to an implied author akin to

Pound, given that one of the poet's proclaimed aesthetic commitments was that of banishing the pentameter (Adamson 1999: 613). The subject (*to break the pentameter*) is topicalised and reinstated by the redundant demonstrative pronoun *that*. Biber et al. provide a comparable example of such 'prefacing' strategy, which they discuss as typical of conversation alongside tag questions: 'North and South London – they're two different worlds, aren't they?' (2002: 439). This construction gives line 9 a hint of spoken prosody, which should allow perceiving a speaker's voice more distinctly than in the unmarked counterpart 'the first heave was to break the pentameter'.

Overall, the stylistic evidence examined so far firmly grounds my impression that the difficulty of the extract is also indebted to the sudden shifts and lack of conversation between personae. This is an indicator overlooked by the commentators mentioned at the beginning. It is also complementary to the 'speaker differentiation' indicator (2.2.5): in this extract, speakers are distinct and recognisable insofar as they are named; they also appear interchangeable, though, given that the rationale for their sequencing in the text is, at best, an elusive one.

3.4.3 Presence and lack of coherence

In the previous section it has been shown how Pound draws upon structural and linguistic features typical of familiar text types (i.e. narrative fiction, and in particular dialogic exchanges) whilst emptying them of their realistic function. This he achieves by juxtaposing utterances which violate the maxim of relation and by de-automatising addressee identification. In fact, structural ambiguities in anaphora and cataphora resolution have emerged as a covert but pervasive compositional principle. The reading

interferences thus created can be related to Nadel's claim concerning the difficulty of following the structure of the *Cantos* (2007: 63; see 4.4). The clashing polyphony of speakers, including the narrator, seems to be what ultimately motivates and enacts the lack of coherence of the extract. Here I explore further how such a lack of coherence is stylistically realised, this time placing more emphasis on its ideational rather than interpersonal aspect.

Intra-clausal coherence is blatantly violated in 'if it is baker and concierge visibly / it is La Rochefoucauld and de Maintenon audibly' (ll. 15-16). The conditional sentence structure ('if X [then] Y') encodes an implication that fails, however, to show on the content level: no connection, either contextually or in long-term memory, is likely to be activated between *concierge and baker* on the one hand and *La Rochefoucauld* and *de Maintenon* on the other. The semantically related adverbs *audibly* and *visibly* enhance the illusion of logical stringency, which is counteracted by the semantic incongruence between the adverb and its host clause. Overall, the odd conditional sentence should be processed as a non-sequitur or logical fallacy, a subtype of semantic deviance and an indicator of difficulty (see 2.2.4). Except for this stretch, the extract does not feature any other such anomaly. For instance, the projected that-clause spanning lines 1 to 3 ('that the local portagoose folk dance / was danced by the same dancers in divers localities / in political welcome') depicts a coherent situation and its semantic simplicity is underscored by the partial lexical repetitions via polyptoton ('local-localities'; 'dance-danced-dancers'). The repeated use of the definite article (ll. 1, 2) should align the reader to Possum's viewpoint, engendering a feeling of situatedness further enhanced by the documentary-like precision of the figure. This exactness is in turn achieved through incremental post-modifications ('by the same dancers', 'in divers localities', 'in political

welcome'). Inter-clausal coherence here rests on the preceding co-text, where a 'simple village fiesta' and the 'Canaries' are mentioned: 'Basil says / they beat drums for three days / till all the drumheads were busted / (simple village fiesta) / and as for his life in the Canaries…'. This instance exemplifies how coherent, on a clausal level, the extract is; and the reader of this thesis can verify by herself the comparably high intra-clausal coherence of ll. 6-8 and ll. 9-12.

Lack of coherence in the extract is chiefly of an inter-clausal nature. As a matter of fact, l. 4 presents readers with a rather sudden shift. This is not ideational (*technique* and *demonstration* can be connected, via weak implicatures, to *dance* and *political*, respectively) but rather textual: the noun phrase *the technique of demonstration* functions as a pre-posed object reinstated by the demonstrative pronoun *that*, therefore it appears juxtaposed to the preceding co-text; and yet the ellipsis ('…') in the previous line signals that a topic-shift is going to occur. Line 6 starts a new shift as it juxtaposes André Spire's direct speech to the narrator's statement in ll. 4-5. The remaining shifts in ll. 9, 13 and 14 have already been explained with reference to 'mock' dialogicity in 3.4.2. Each of them is enacted by a different speaker and never occurs in the middle of a line: lineation and information distribution go hand in hand so that the shifts are perceptually clear-cut.

In loose analogy with the finding that mini-paragraphs improve retention of information in prose (Emmott et. al 2006; see 2.2.1), this choice implies that the extract should maximise readerly recall, a behavioural indicator of difficulty (Yaron 2002, 2003; see 1.3.1). The remark may be proven empirically, for instance by manipulating line-ends in order to make them incongruous with information distribution, and then having two groups of respondents to perform a recall task – one on the original and one on the manipulated version. The indentation and size of

the lines, by contrast, behave independently from considerations of content: all that can be said is that Pound avoids, in the whole Canto, to group more than five non-indented lines at a time and that he constantly varies their size. Visually, the result is a 'jagged' layout; from a processing perspective, it should lead to a perceived fragment-like quality similar to that already evidenced in Hill's stanza (3.3.1).

So far I have discussed the extent to which coherence applies intra- and inter-clausally. There is also a third level, that pervades the entire text irrespective of its sequencing. I will call this level *delinearised coherence*, requiring the establishment of weak implications. My first instance is the co-presence of the 'dance' polyptoton (ll. 1-2) and a reference to the pentameter (l. 13). Semantically, these appear completely unrelated; culturally, however, they are the vehicle and the tenor of a literary trope which associates 'meter' to 'dance'. In analysing a poem by Emily Dickinson where the trope is exploited, Freeman complains that critics have hastily mapped 'the footwork of the dance onto the metrical feet of poetry' (2005: 45). To my knowledge, the most explicit and oldest appearance of the trope is in Pope: 'True ease in writing comes from art, not chance, / As those move easiest who have learn'd to dance' (from *Essay on Criticism*, 1711, ll. 362-3; emphasis added). Those who are familiar with the trope should therefore assign some more coherence to the Pound extract.

The second instance is Jo Bard's statement 'they never speak to each other' (l. 14), an appropriate intra-textual gloss on the 'mock' conversation uncovered in the previous section. Similar intra-textual glosses have been found in the Hill stanza (3.3.3), cueing the self-focussed, auto-telic nature of poetic discourse (Jakobson 1960; Leech 2010: 5). It is hard to tell whether this is an interpretive leap or a truly logogenetic device regulating text production, but in this respect I am comforted by Brooke-Rose's

analysis of another Poundian Canto, the 'Usura' Canto (see 1.2). She ventures to propose that 'the essential function of literary discourse is to perform what it says rather than to prove it' (1976: 67). Whether it is her method that produces the results (Fish 1980: 68) is an important but hard-to-solve question, and one that eludes the purposes of my analysis here.

Finally, the conspicuous presence of famous named characters, notably the Founding Fathers of America (John Adams, Mr Jefferson) and some French literati (Cole Horace, La Rochefoucauld), contributes to ideational coherence, besides indexing the topics of politics and poetry. Arguably, the ensuing documentary flavour foregrounds the literalness which, according to Carne-Ross, is what paradoxically makes Pound's poetry difficult. What to make then of Steiner's and Nadel's more commonsense remarks on Pound's difficulty of vocabulary and structure? Who is right on the two sides of the controversy? The last section sets out to explore the issue.

3.4.4 Solving the controversy through posited processing

The conflicting critical views on Pound's difficulty outlined at the beginning can be now re-contextualised by mapping the stylistic observations onto the model of discourse comprehension adopted (see 2.3). Steiner's 'contingent' difficulty type (1978: 22-27) and Nadel's emphasis on allusions as a source of difficulty (2007: 63) are linguistically cued by the profusion of proper nouns with homophoric, real historic referents (3.4.1) imposing themselves as hurdles during the access/activation phase of reading comprehension, just after word decoding. The latter operation is partly impaired in one textual locus only, *portagoose* (l. 1). This is, in all likelihood, a misspelt version of 'Portuguese', considering the poet's penchant for misspellings and other markers of speech/writing interaction

(Perloff 1985: 76; see also *mebbe* as a misspelling for 'maybe' towards the end of the Canto). Here is one of those instances in which the manipulation of orthography becomes an indicator *of* difficulty.

While Steiner's (1978) purpose is to exemplify difficulty types, he overlooks the 'structural' component of Pound's difficulty, acknowledged by Nadel instead (2007: 63). My analysis on utterance juxtaposition and lack of inter-clausal coherence (3.4.2 and 3.4.3) has delved into the issue in detail. Ultimately, it is possible to explain this stylistic configuration as a prioritisation of a method over communicative/representational concerns. Because juxtaposition makes us ponder the rationale behind the syntagmatic arrangement of the units more than the units per se, Pound may have converted into a stylistic procedure Fellonosa's credo (cited in Nadel 2007: 21) that 'relations are more real and more important than the things which they relate'. In systemic-functional terms, the textual metafunction is foregrounded over the ideational and interpersonal ones. These are still at work, as the extract portrays reality (ll. 1-3 in particular) and bears stylistic traces of communication (direct speech, I-you deixis, and so on: see 3.4.2). And yet, their syntagmatic arrangement is subjected to a collagist, 'editing' technique that highlights the formal affinities between the parts (typically, the co-presence of a projected clause and a named Sayer), irrespectively of their functional and contextual appropriateness.

The form and function of spoken language are preserved only intra-clausally, where they also lead to word order disruption, a syntactic indicator of difficulty (2.2.3). So, in ll. 4-5 the object is topicalised and the subject delayed, resulting in a word order incongruent with our default processing habits, assigning a noun phrase in clause-initial position a subject status. The parenthetical '(not G.D.H., Horace)' retains some of the conversational value Adamson attributes to the device before it underwent

stylisation (1999: 596). This is due to the fact that the information within parentheses functions as a narratorial self-correction occurring in real time; in other words, it is iconic of the improvised nature of everyday speech. The same holds true of the parenthetical in l. 7, '(Crédit Agricole)', that specifies a referent (*that board*) construed as context-dependent by the demonstrative. A further instance is l. 9 ('You the one, I the few') where 'to be' is omitted twice. This choice again echoes the time-constrained and context-dependent nature of speech production.

According to the difficulty model proposed in this thesis, the Canto extract has a strong offline difficulty component, due to the access/activation and the integration problems cued by, respectively, proper nouns and lack of coherence. The framework thus seems, at first, to support Steiner and Nadel, as they lay emphasis on Pound's cultural allusions and on the hard-to-follow structure of his Cantos. However, Carne-Ross's argument is also compatible with the framework. This critic provocatively locates Pound's difficulty at the level of reversed expectations for poetry – lack of polysemy, lack of inwardness, and primacy of literalness. Her claim seems textually supported: the extract displays simple, concrete lexis that resists polysemy; literalness is achieved by the avoidance of metaphors; and no linguistic cues of inwardness (e.g. monologic mode, evaluative language, mental verbs) can be identified, except for the parentheticals that can be interpreted as narratorial interventions.

My conclusion is that there is no real critical controversy. Steiner and Nadel probably have in mind the way Pound's poetry undermines the construction of basic meaning components of offline difficulty (i.e. situation model). In contrast, Carne-Ross is interested in how Pound's linguistic simplicity – achieved through renouncing poetic tropes associated to semantic deviance (e.g. metaphors, oxymora…) – frustrates the

construction of a higher meaning component (i.e. theme), which in turn presupposes a reading orientated towards symbolic meaning. Incidentally, this simplicity should imply a low online difficulty of Pound's extract – an assumption that is empirically explored in Chapter 5. The model thus allows a re-mapping of critical claims onto a wider picture for difficulty, so that discrepancies can be seen as stemming from different, albeit not mutually exclusive, assumptions on difficulty itself.

3.5 Susan Howe – *A small swatch bluish-green…*

As shown in the section on syntax as an indicator of difficulty (2.2.3), the syntax of experimental poetry is either analysed with reference to linguistic theory (Bateson and Fowler 1971, Thoms 2008) or is subjected to only cursory remarks on the part of literary critics (Perloff 1991, Quartermain 1992). In the former case, syntactic deviations are treated as specimens, divorced from their host text; in the latter, they are ancillary elements of broader contextual concerns. Neither extreme is interested in looking at poetic texts in their own right and in offering an explanation of the effects holistically achieved by syntactic deviation. It is the business of stylistics to remedy this lacuna; yet, with the exception of E.E. Cummings's poetry, to my knowledge there is a lack of stylistic analysis on asyntactic or syntactically ill-formed literary language. The poetry of Susan Howe is a crucial case study in this respect: in analysing one of her poems, the critic Middleton draws attention to Howe's 'incomplete statements' (2010: 637), although he too refrains from showing how the incompleteness is linguistically realised. These are the main reasons why I anticipated (in 2.2.3) the benefits of closely analysing one of her poems. After a careful reading of Howe's collections, I have been particularly impressed by this short untitled poem from *Bed Hangings* (2001):

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

The poem appears partly as a standalone text and partly a fragment of a longer, homogeneous sequence. Analysing another collection by Howe, *The Europe of Trusts* (1990), McHale (2004: 209) makes the same point when he asks himself whether Howe's poems are best read as fragments of a whole or as standalone pieces. To illustrate this problematic relation between text and macrotext, I will refer to Perloff's review of *Bed Hangings* in order to trace – not to superimpose – links between her informed but necessarily cursory reading of the collection and my piecemeal analysis of the above poem. Perloff first reveals the provenance of the collection's unusual title by referring to a biographic anecdote: 'Susan Howe takes her title from a drab little book she found in a gift shop called *A Treatise on Fabrics and Styles in the Curtaining of Beds, 1650-1850*' (2003: 341). The critic sympathetically adds that, although Howe's 'hardly sounds like a promising subject' (341), it becomes 'emblematic' for the poet.

Two issues arise at this point: firstly, if the text-macrotext relation is tight, one should expect the subject of the collection to be refracted in that of the poem, as it was found in Hill's stanza; secondly, 'emblematic', although apparently a replaceable descriptive term, aptly sums up the manner in which the subject is treated stylistically in the poem – a point explored later (3.5.5). Incidentally, by referring to an extra-poetic source

in her review, Perloff puts in relief Howe's poetics of citation and collage, also examined by McHale (2004: 213-4) and Quartermain (1992). The latter notably links this practice to the poet's attitude of 'debunking or *deconstructing* the assumptions underlying and/or the circumstances giving rise to the words quoted' (1992: 182; emphasis added). The word 'deconstructing' is key here, as it states a link between deconstruction and poetic technique that calls for stylistic enquiry. In the next section I will attempt to trace such a link with regard to the structural ambiguities that can be identified in the poem.

3.5.1 Blurred constituency and structural ambiguities

Although short, the poem is densely packed with linguistic indicators of difficulty: syntactic ill-formedness and ambiguity, lack of coherence indexed by ideational shifts, anomalous collocations and heavy alliterations are the most prominent. In what follows, I will proceed from what is arguably the most noticeable element – the undermining of syntax – to phenomena of unusual collocation and ideational shifts. I will then move on to broader thematic and poetic concerns, to conclude with the posited reading strategies and processing of the poem.

Perhaps the most inescapable feature is that the poem totally dispenses with punctuation, a technique Burke noticed in Cumming's 'Progress is a Comfortable Disease' (2007: 149) and Thoms in Beckett's *How It Is* (2008: 65; see 3.4.2). Both scholars converge in arguing that the meaning-making process is made harder by such a technique. On the one hand, it can blur the boundaries of clause constituents, given that punctuation helps clarify syntactic relations (Tartakovsky 2009: 215). On the other, it deprives readers of cues to perform the poem orally, since punctuation assists 'the reader to re-create an original oral rendition of the

text' (Tartakovsky 2009: 215). It is instructive to consider this choice alongside Hill's opposite one (3.3). Hill's heavy punctuation, combined with the interpersonal mode of the poem, encourages in the reader a re-enactment of the speaking I's voice.

Syntactically, the poem opens with a string of nouns and adjectives that refuses to be parsed in a unique or even preferential way:

A small swatch bluish-green
Woollen slight grain in the
3 Weft watered and figured
Right fustian

The first line consists of a noun phrase where adjectives both premodify (via *small*) and postmodify (via *bluish-green*) the Head noun *swatch* – a parsing enabled by old poetic diction where adjectives can postmodify nouns[7]. In the second line, there is a new noun phrase (*woollen slight grain*) that may also include *bluish-green* in l. 1, since in English a noun can be preceded by two adjectives. The fact that *bluish-green* can apply to two Head nouns creates a garden path effect. The two juxtaposed noun phrases are in turn followed by a prepositional phrase (*in the / weft*) without any verb in between. A new structural ambiguity is introduced in l. 3 by *watered* and *figured*, which function either as past participle of *weft* or as premodifying adjectives of *fustian*, the Head noun of a third potential noun phrase. The lack of punctuation invites us to read each line holistically, merging all these potential phrases into an undifferentiated, parsing-proof whole.

[7] Conjecturing an influence or even a conscious revival of old poetic diction is plausible here, since in *Bed Hangings* Howe also cites 'specific sermons' and 'Pragmatist documents or New England spells and charms rendered in *Old Spelling*' (Perloff 2003: 341; emphasis added).

It is worth remarking that the difficulty here is structural and syntagmatic rather than semantic, as the 'fabric' domain is activated by *woollen*, *weft*, and *fustian*. Lexically then, the poem bears strong thematic traces of the drab book on fabric that Perloff mentions in her review (3.5), cueing a clear relation between text and macrotext. The lexical choice of *fustian*, in particular, may have been motivated by a metalinguistic sense of the word harking back to the end of the sixteenth century – more or less the time of the sermons quoted in the book by Perloff's account. A scholar with strong historical interests, Howe is probably aware of such a sense, which Adamson discusses as follows:

> Though terminological distinctions are never consistently applied, *bombast* refers to the excessive or unwarranted use of Latinisms, *fustian* to their playful or anarchic use. Both words gained their metalinguistic senses in the last decades of the sixteenth century, developing, in line with the STYLE = CLOTHING metaphor of the time, from terms for material: bombast, the cotton wool padding used for false enlargement (*OED* 2), fustian, the cotton velvet which imitates the finery of the real thing (*OED* 1a/c). (Adamson 1998: 576)

Although obviously not engaging with the issue of Latinate vs. native styles, the presence of textile materials in the poem reflects the poet's attempt to imitate 'the finery of the real thing' through an appropriately convoluted handling of the syntax-line interface. Just like it is impossible to tease out the threads in a piece of fabric, it is also impossible to find a unique path in the dense texture of the poem.

An additional semantic domain (i.e. 'irrigation' or 'agriculture') connects *grain*, *watered* and *swatch* – in fact, the last word has the obsolete sense of 'row (of cut or grass) cut' (*OED*). Nouns are made salient in isolation, yet the presence of adjectives and of a preposition hints at the possibility that syntactic relations may be restored. The linguistic notion of constituency, a 'form of order' inherent in language (Halliday 2004: 5) is therefore challenged, as are default, linear modes of reading. The sort of self-questioning reading encouraged by these lines can be understood as an instantiation of deconstructionist practices:

> Deconstruction may be nothing more or less than the response necessitated by the text; it may be nothing, more or less, than *taking responsibility for the act of reading*, rather than seeking to avoid that responsibility in the name of some institutionally approved method of interpretation. (Wolfreys 1998: 15; emphasis added)

The various reading paths allowed by lines 1-4 imply that it is the reader who must take responsibility for her parsing and subsequent understanding of the poem. Quartermain's mention of deconstruction, confined to the collagist reuse of literary and historical sources, can now be integrated by evidence at the stylistic micro-end of the scale. What is more, although the stylistic role of noun phrases in twentieth century poetry has been extensively commented (see 2.2.3), to my knowledge the present analysis is the only one showing how even such a minimal syntactic unit is undermined by stylistic choices turning structural ambiguities into a compositional principle. This stylistic phenomenon is then a genuine addition to the list of syntactic indicators in 2.2.3.

The only syntactic certainty at this point is that this string of potential phrases is indisputably the subject of the main verb (*should hold*), delayed until line 4. Stylisticians have pointed out the climax of expectation this structure builds in the reader (Jeffries 1993), as well as the processing effort it requires (San 2005; see 2.2.3). This tension between effort and expectation is perhaps exemplary of the cost-benefit dialectic (to adapt a key notion from Sperber and Wilson's Relevance Theory) involved in reading difficult poetry: the effort is a sort of precondition for the effect to be achieved.

The question here is whether this remark applies to the poem under scrutiny as well, and if so with what nuances. Having analysed the string preceding the main verb, I argue that verb delay does not enhance expectation as it would do in more traditional poems. This is because the most pressing hurdle for readers is to make sense of (or to surrender to) the string of words preceding the main verb. Such is the parsing overload that the sudden appearance of a verb should come to readers as an unexpected relief rather than as an anticipated fact. What is more, by locating *hold* in end-line position, Howe conflates its transitive and intransitive uses (both salient for this verb), pushing the reader towards two opposite directions: backward, if the verb is read intransitively; forward, if the verb is read as a transitive one. In the former case, lines 1-4 constitute a complete (S+V) if awkward clause and line 5 would be syntactically parsed together with line 6 as an identifying clause with the interpersonal value of a statement (*Altogether warp and woof / Is the cloven rock misled*). In the latter case, which seems more natural, *warp and woof* becomes the object of *hold* and line 6 (*Is the cloven rock misled*) is parsed as a question not graphically marked by a question mark. The unmistakably interrogative structure of line 7 (*Does morning lie what prize*) should retroactively make this parsing route more salient than the

former. The poem thus becomes a game of possible reading paths, maximising the potential for structural ambiguities and refusing to guide the reader in a unique, predetermined direction.

3.5.2 Ideational shifts and unusual collocations

The referent construed by lines 1-4, blurred but rich in sensorial information, combines with the main process (*should hold*, l. 4) and its object in the preferred parsing option (*altogether warp and woof*, l. 5) to form a *figure* (Halliday and Matthiessen 1999; see 2.1.2). This figure heavily revolves around fabric-related words, including, in l. 5, the idiom *warp and woof*, which refers to the threads in a woven fabric and thus adds substance to the already seen text-macrotext thematic refraction. Being 'ready-made', idioms like this are processed more quickly than novel word combinations, making them comparable, from a psycholinguistic perspective, to single lexical items (Conklin and Schmitt 2012). Semantically, then, lines 1-5 can be tentatively isolated as a self-contained unit within the poem.

Line 6 construes a new figure which introduces a radical ideational shift, replacing the fabric context with *cloven rock*. This unusual collocation is not referentially opaque, as a quick online search yields 'split rock' as a result. Even so, 'cloven' is highly unexpected here, since its almost unique collocate is 'hoof' (source: COCA). The linguistic bond between 'cloven' and 'hoof' is so strong that the last word, although absent from the text of the poem, is likely to be subconsciously activated during the reading experience[8]. The processing load is further increased by the odd past participle *misled*, a verb that typically selects human agents rather than

[8] Notice also how *woof* (l. 5) is a quasi-homophone of the unmentioned 'hoof'.

inanimate ones as *rock*. From an interpretive standpoint, *misled* turns out to be unexpectedly appropriate as a linguistic meta-comment for the reader's parsing uncertainty. There is even an idiom supporting this interpretation: 'to be led down the garden path' – literally, to be *misled*[9]. All these foregrounding devices and the inferences they give rise to make line 6 the most semantically challenging of the poem, despite its fewer parsing hurdles than lines 1-4. Lines like this seem to support Fabb's thought-provoking argument that in verse writing, contrary to everyday communication, 'word-choice can be driven by any characteristic of the word, and *meaning may emerge by accident*' (Fabb 2010: 1222; emphasis added). Overall, the shift enacted by line 6 is interpersonal as well as ideational, since the interrogative structure of this line marks it off from the declarative one of the previous lines. Line 7 continues the interrogative mood of the previous line – interpersonal coherence is brought forward by the two WH- questions at the end of the poem. Finally, *pine tree* (l. 8) ideationally links back to *cloven rock* in alluding to a potential landscape. These shifts do more than undermine coherence: they foreground representational incoherence.

The ultimate juxtaposition the poem presents us with is that between a figure based on human artefacts (ll. 1-5) and a series of figures hinting at natural elements (ll. 6-8). This transition is stylistically highlighted by a shift of mood, from declarative to interrogative, and by one of rhythm. More specifically, the strong enjambments of the former part push the reading forward as to mark continuity or even to ideally mimic the movements of a hand that knits and weaves; by contrast, the end-stopped lines of the latter create a 'jagged' rhythm, perhaps more suited to accompany the untamed setting alluded to.

[9] I owe this observation to Dr. Violeta Sotirova.

3.5.4 Deferred symbolism and intertextuality

Once the poem has been read, we sense that some kind of metamorphosis has taken place; yet, its ultimate point is elusive. In other words, the poem dispenses with what Culler (2002 [1975]: 204) calls *rule of significance*, that is, the expectation that a poem should deal with a subject at the core of human concerns. In my proposed model (see 2.3), this implies that the poem does not allow to formulate a *theme*. Because the theme is generated by a system of signs called *symbolic articulation* (Hasan 1985: 98), renouncing it logically implies to discard or at least to defer symbolism.

The reader of this thesis may at this point recall Tsur's criterion for symbolism (2008: 402; see 3.1.1), which depends on a representation of reality as suffused – a view consistent with the way Howe's poem construes its ideational world. Nevertheless, since Howe's poem resists theme attribution, one more constraint should be added: perception of symbolic meaning must also rest (a) on the symbolic potential of the material selected in the poem; and (b) on the inferable attitude of s/he who selects – the poet or a persona in the text. From this perspective, Howe's poem inherits, and departs from, William Carlos Williams's 'The Red Wheelbarrow'. In this famous objectivist poem, Adamson points out, 'the symbolic status of the object rests only on its deracination from any context of use' (1999: 652). The fundamental difference is that in 'The Red Wheelbarrow' the referent is explicit from the title and is preceded by a proverb-like statement ('so much / depends upon') indexing an authorial evaluation. None of these aspects can be traced in Howe's poem.

There is, however, an intertext that may unveil a religious or animistic (hence essentially symbolic) potential in the poem, bearing in

mind that *Bed Hangings* also quotes excerpts from sermons (Perloff 2003: 341):

> But religion is more than rite and ritual. There is what the rite and ritual stand for. Here too I am an Hindu. The universe makes sense to me through Hindu eyes. There is Brahman, the world soul, the *sustaining frame* upon which is woven, *warp and weft*, the cloth of being, with all its decorative elements of space and time. (Martel 2003 [2001]: 48; emphasis added).

This passage is from Yann Martel's best-selling novel *Life of Pi*, published in the same year as *Bed Hangings*. Without denying the possibility of a sheer coincidence, my awareness of Howe's poetics of citation and reuse of sources alerted me to the possibility of conscious borrowing when I came across the above passage. Howe's poem uses the same 'raw' conceptual material as Martel's passage. The idiomatic expression *warp and weft* is found, delinearised, in Howe (*weft* is in line 3, *warp* is in line 5); Martel's extract explicitly glosses it (*sustaining frame*; *warp and woof* has a similar meaning) and there is possibly also a wordplay on the etymology of *religion* ('religio' = 'bond', possibly from 'religere' = 'to bind together' → hence the fabric imagery). This can be semantically linked to Howe's *should hold*.

Intertextual readings seem relatively uncommon in stylistic analysis, despite some recent and robust theoretical contributions (Panagiotidou 2012; Hogan 2014). This may be because such readings originate from a post-structuralist tradition that puts the reader/analyst at an increased distance from the observable text, and is thus potentially at odds with the close focus and linguistic rigour demanded by stylistics. Nevertheless, such

readings should be attempted whenever suggested by the text itself, as well as by what is known about the author's writing practice. After all, if intertextuality is conceived of as a process of semiosis from text to text, then it becomes open to linguistic analysis and to empirical observation.

Recalling Perloff's characterisation of Howe's subject as 'emblematic' (3.5), I further propose that the poem can be literally thought of as a sort of emblem. According to the *OED*, an emblem is 'a picture of an object (or the object itself) serving as a symbolical representation of an abstract quality'. This conceptualisation fits the poem's emphasis on materiality (through the nouns referring to objects, both man-made and natural) without denying – only deferring, perhaps – the possibility of a symbolic import, suggested by relying on a possible intertext. In addition to this, an obsolete meaning of the word is that of 'ornament of inlaid work' (*OED*): a nice analogy for the stylistic artistry of the poem.

3.5.5 Reading strategies and posited processes

I have at various points hypothesised the reading strategies likely to be prompted by the style of the poem. My remarks can be summed up as follows: on a first reading, the poem poses exceptional parsing challenges. At the same time, the ideational shifts crowding ll. 5-8 resist any top-down superimposition of schemas, even of poetry-specific schemas acquired by a well-read person. Such an overload on almost all the basic stages of processing (parsing, construing and integrating; only word identification is straightforward) should leave little room for higher order processes, such as topic and theme attribution, to take place at this early stage.

Even so, the 'fabric' lexical set of ll. 1-5 and the 'nature' one of ll. 6-8 allow for a post-reading attribution of aboutness, although at the cost of performing a delinearised reading whereby the content words are isolated

from the tenuous syntactic grid hosting them. Dillon makes a similar remark on Faulkner's prose: 'when both rhetorical and syntactic structures break down, passages dissolve into "things" and "events" loosely associated but indeterminately related' (1978: 132). In summary, all attempts at linear, stepwise readings are defied in favour of a synthetic, 'sensorial' approach. This, in turn, is encouraged by the foregrounding of objects and their synesthetic qualities, not least brought out by the alliterations on /w/ and /s/. The poem therefore forces us to linger on its very textual surface, and here again the 'emblem' analogy proves handy.

On re-reading, however, this 'resistant' text surface reverberates with the everyday language of idioms and collocations, either linguistically disguised or placed in a defamiliarising co-text. This re-use of linguistic material is so well-integrated in the text that it may elude the reader. Yet the poem acquires depth once an intertextual reading re-locates it within a wider realm of possible texts.

3.6 Jeremy Prynne – Lobster-orange, shag in parvo…

Analysis after analysis, the range and density of the linguistic indicators of difficulty in each poem have steadily increased, from Strand's 'The Late Hour' (3.1) up to Howe's 'A small swatch bluish green…' (3.5). Is there a limit beyond which no payoff compensates for the effort invested in the reading of a poem? A point at which a poem can only be attributed meaninglessness or an unjustifiable lack of readability? These are empirical questions that will be tackled in the next chapter. In the meantime, it seems profitable to further apply the list of indicators to one of the most radical examples of avant-garde poetry available. The ability of the list to

explain most of the effects associated with difficulty in such texts would test its success.

Prynne is a viable candidate in this respect, having produced poetic work deemed utterly inaccessible. Here I will focus on a standalone, untitled poem from *Pearls that were* (1999). This choice is based on a perception of stylistic uniqueness even within Prynne's extensive corpus. In contrast to the poet's late tendency to abolish punctuation – as Howe does in *Bed Hangings* (see 3.5) –, 'Lobster-orange, shag in parvo. Peaceful/…' foregrounds small information (and intonation) units through intense punctuation.

Lobster-orange, shag *in parvo*. Peaceful/
pushful kid wants it better, wants sex not fish upfront
as well in touch. Spring peaks red-inked, blissful dogged
doggerel at joint screaming with rind orange blind-gut

Dangle by bad phantoms sparking strictly: new lady
prowler in profile. Rienzi in fancy stabs out
splatter-blot scenic spot, egg picnic no. 4:
nose into cream bridge, singalong crowding round *m*

– Jesus! Traitor cow-juice, we slurped that
Next, chairs All are, tables.

Already on a first, cursory reading, the poem appears at least as replete with linguistic indicators of difficulty as Howe's. One rather obvious shared element is the lack of a title, likely to deter readers from applying top-down driven reading strategies (see 2.2.5). At the same time, its heavy punctuation, its less ill-formed syntax and the presence of individuals set it stylistically apart from Howe's poem. As usual, I will begin by focusing on the most noticeable stylistic features that also instantiate the indicators of difficulty. These are often mutually implicated and implicate other

indicators too, so I will seek to strike a balance between expository clarity and the noticing of concomitant features whenever appropriate.

3.6.1 Referential disruption and avoidance of deixis

Wilkinson poignantly notices that Prynne's poems seem 'cut off almost autistically from any recognizable world' (2007: 7), a claim perhaps reflecting the critic's work experience in the UK mental health services. Wilkinson is using what Fabb (1995) calls *dense schemas*, that is, analogical statements conveying complex readerly responses in powerful but unverifiable terms. Together with Toolan (2014: 14), I believe that a major goal of stylistics is that of finding the clusters of minimal, verifiable components that lead critics to formulate such elusive remarks. Wilkinson's 'recognizable world' can be interpreted as a hint at problems in reference assignment or construal, one of the pivotal indicators of difficulty (2.2.4).

'Lobster-orange, shag in parvo…' is referentially disruptive to the point that each information unit needs to be analysed separately. This itemising approach derives from the impossibility of holistically introducing the poem through paraphrase or summary. Indeed, the poem stages an array of awkward, unrelated and disparate micro-events without time and space specification. One can trace a parallel with an absurdist poem by Charles Simic characterised by 'a lack of world-building detail' (Gavins 2013: 142). Prynne's poem is even more radical in this respect, as it lacks the familiar world-building elements still present in the Simic poem (e.g. 'a broad avenue'; 'a schoolboy's eraser').

The poem opens with a verbless construction ('lobster-orange, shag in parvo') in which a comma ungrammatically divorces the colour adjective *lobster-orange* from the noun that follows, *shag*. This choice affects the rhythm of the opening (balanced in two tone units, both trochaic in meter)

and, crucially, impedes a syntactic parsing of the line. In order to explain how this effect is achieved, one can envisage two grammatically acceptable variants where either the comma is removed (i.e. 'lobster-orange shag in parvo') or a premodifying adjective is inserted (e.g. 'lobster-orange, noisy shag in parvo'). Noun and adjective(s) form a noun phrase in both the made-up variants, so that one or more qualities are indisputably attributed to a thing. However, it is precisely this automatism which is challenged in Prynne's opening, as *lobster-orange* is treated as a noun, its modifying function dispensed with. The density of this opening is further reinforced by *in parvo*, an example of intertextual cut-up likely drawn from the Latin idiom 'multum in parvo' ('much in little'). *In parvo* is of very low accessibility: two English native speaker PhD candidates, to whom I posed an informal enquiry, admitted they had never heard the expression before. Overall, the stylistic effect of this string is that of 'itemising' the portrayed experience in such a way that a holistic construal is impeded. This effect could be perhaps named *ideational fragmentation*.

In spite of the syntactic ill-formedness of this opening, its interpersonal import is not dissimilar to the effects proposed by Fois-Kaschel in her analysis of nominal opening in the hermetic poetry of Hölderlin, Trakl and Celan:

> En effet, l'ouverture d'un poème par un énoncé nominal sans déterminant invite toujours à cette double lecture selon laquelle l'objet posé agit à la manière d'un sujet apostrophé. [Indeed, the opening of a poem by a nominal utterance without determiners always invites to this double reading according to which the object presented behaves like an addressed subject]. (Fois-Kaschel 2002: 151-2; trans. mine)

Prynne's nominal opening, although ungrammatical, seems to possess this functional ambiguity. The acknowledged influence of Celan's poetics on Prynne (Mellors 2005) may explain why a stylistic remark independently made on German Hermetic poetry can be wholesale applied to Prynne.

The sentence that follows ('Peaceful/pushful kid wants it better, wants sex not fish upfront / as well in touch', ll. 1-2) mimics the style of personal ads[10]. In these ads, love seekers first describe themselves through a few adjectives, and then specify the kind of person they are looking for. While the object of the kid's desire is straightforwardly expressed (*sex*), what follows is confusing: the mention of *fish* seems irrelevant to the context, although it creates a backward semantic link with *lobster*; *upfront* is an anomalous collocate for *fish*, so that one may suspect a manipulation of the collocation 'cash upfront' – a conjecture reinforced by the half-rhyme between the posited and the replaced noun (/kæʃ/ vs. /fɪʃ/) and by the idea of sex for pay. Finally, the qualifying element *as well in touch* – whose syntax is not permitted in English – may imply that what is sought is a real, physical experience (i.e. 'in the flesh'), rather than one in which the sense of touch plays no part (i.e. 'in sight').

Next we find *spring peaks red-inked* (l. 3), a syntactically ambiguous structure where (a) *spring* functions as a noun, *peaks* as an intransitive verb in the third person and *red-inked* as a qualifier; or where (b) *spring peaks* is a subject realised by a noun phrase and to which the qualifier *red-inked* is attributed by positing an ellipsed attributive copula ('are'). The legitimacy of this parsing is couched in the extensive employment of this technique in modernist poetry for imagistic effects, as noticed by Fairley (1980: [1975] 244). Each parsing also construes a different figure: the former leads to a construal depicting Spring (the capital letter allows for the noun/adjective cross-class ambiguity) as a dynamic agent; the latter

[10] I owe this observation to Violeta Sotirova.

sketches a mountainous setting where *red-inked* can be referentially rationalised as an allusion to the sunset.

A non-finite, unpunctuated and oddly post-modified sentence ('blissful dogged / doggerel at joint screaming with rind orange blind-gut' ll. 3-4) poses an additional hurdle to readers. From an integration standpoint, its juxtaposition with the previously analysed ambiguous sentence lends itself to either a list or an appositional reading. From a construal standpoint, the behavioural verb *screaming* is incongruous with *doggerel*, leading to a metaphor that makes a verse form (*doggerel*) animate. The screaming is extended (via *at joint*) to even less plausible agents – those found in the juxtaposed noun string *rind orange blind-gut* (l. 4). There is no semantic relation between *rind* and *gut*, except perhaps a loose shape similarity between their referents. This is a post-processing interpretation, however, and one very unlikely to be activated by readers. The unusual collocation *sparking strictly* (l. 5) again appears to manipulate idiomatic language, for it can be regarded as a phonetic scrambling of the expressions 'strictly speaking' and 'strictly no parking'. As can be seen, there is virtually no unit that does not offer some stylistic instantiation of difficulty.

In lines 5 to 7 new individuals are abruptly introduced (a 'new lady prowler', 'Rienzi') while connectives continue to be avoided. I will expand on this point in the next section, in relation to critical attributions of fragmentation and authorial presence. Here I instead want to draw attention to *nose into cream bridge* (l. 8), where *cream* can function both as an adjective premodifying *bridge*, and as a noun in the nearly formulaic 'nose into cream' sequence. This syntactic ambiguity construes a counterfactual, surrealist-like figure in which *cream* no longer stands for the colour of the bridge but it points to its consistency instead. The nose, that can be attributed via synecdoche to the closest human antecedent,

Rienzi (l. 6), literally sinks in the non-solid bridge, with a humoristic effect thematically forestalled by the earlier mention of the comic verse form *doggerel* (l. 4). *Rienzi* is also an explicit intertextual reference to Wagner's opera *Rienzi* (1840).

The odd noun phrase *round m* (l. 8) is worth some commentary too, as the letter 'm' is conferred a visual attribute (*round*) that makes it more tangible, an effect similar to Charles Olson's 'what the A hides' in the poem 'For Cy Twombly Faced with His First Chicago & N.Y. Shows' (see 6.2). Incidentally, Olson is another poet claimed to have exerted a decisive influence on Prynne (Mellors 2005; Lopez 2006: 169), so this stylistic pairing acquires fuller significance. If one ponders mechanisms of textual production, it becomes evident that *round m* is a noun phrase only formally, not functionally. This is because the co-text in which it is embedded, 'crowding round m' is in all likelihood a graphologically manipulated variant of 'crowding around him', a sequence attested in the COCA. To trace back the poem to everyday language in use allows interpreting 'm' as a third person pronoun perhaps co-referential with *Rienzi*, and *round* as functionally working as a spatial preposition. Grapheme deletion is a practice also deployed by the Italian experimental poet Nanni Balestrini. More generally, it can be looked at as an instantiation of that broad erasure phenomenon that McHale ascribes to postmodernist poetry (2004: 252).

The instances discussed so far unveil how Prynne linguistically enacts ideational fragmentation, multiplicity, and counter-factuality (the last two cases). This provisional taxonomy illustrates, and gives substance to, the isolation of Prynne's poems from any 'recognizable world' noticed by Wilkinson (2007: 7). The perceivable sense of isolation is also a function of the sparse reliance on deictic items. Except for the baffling pronoun *it* (l. 2) analysed earlier, there is virtually no deixis throughout lines 1-8. Even

definite and indefinite articles are altogether eschewed. As a result, things and individuals are decontextualised when put in the singular form (e.g. *kid*, *doggerel*, *blind-gut*, *lady*, *spot*) or both decontextualised and undifferentiated when in the plural form (e.g. *peaks*, *phantoms*, *chairs*, *tables*). In principle, the only deictic element proper in these lines is the present tense of the verbs. However, these are sparse (*wants*, *stabs out*, *peaks* in one of the parsing routes) and non-deictic in function, since the lack of any time expression and/or of defined spatial setting in the poem foregrounds the timeless component of the English simple present (Lyons 1977: 680).

While lack of deixis excludes readers from the textworld of the poem, its occasional presence in the poem can be no less estranging. Indeed, in the final coupled, we find the first person plural pronoun *we* and the demonstrative pronoun *that* (l. 9), both of which create opacity. *We* is abruptly introduced and immediately discarded just like the other individuals in the poem (see next section). What is more, its interpretation as dual or collective rests on the verb *slurped*, the object of which (*that*) is another deictic with an unidentified referent (*cream bridge*?). Alongside the indeterminate reference of the pronoun *it* in line 2, line 9 follows and even intensifies the 'opacity and relativity of deictic reference' that Adamson (1999: 673) singled out in a passage by Ashbery (see also 2.2.4). The use of deixis in l. 9 is estranging because the context it interpersonally evokes has not been ideationally constructed.

These stylistic choices can be related to an objectivist conception of poetry that Altieri sees as opposite to the symbolist one. Symbolist poets 'stress in various ways the mind's powers to interpret concrete events or to use the event to inquire into the nature or grounds of interpretive energies' (Altieri 1999 [1978]: 26). Objectivist poets, on the other hand, 'seek an artifact presenting the modality of things seen or felt as immediate

structures of relations' (1999 [1978]: 26). What discriminates the two attitudes is then the extent to which the poetic persona reminds the reader of herself (*symbolism*) or is conversely effaced from the poem (*objectivism*). In Prynne's poem, the paucity of evaluative elements cueing a personal attitude towards the world (possibly only the evaluative adjectives *bad* and *dogged*) is compatible with an objectivist poetics. It may well be that this in-built impersonality contributes to offline difficulty, since it undermines the idea that poems can be read as communicative acts originating from their authors.

The distance the poem keeps from readerly expectations through the adoption of an objectivist stance may be further linked to Bernstein's *anti-absorptive* techniques (1992). These are summarised by Broom as 'methods which make it difficult for the reader to become entirely absorbed in the 'world' of the poem and which act to remind the reader of the process of writing' (2006: 224). Their psychological validity can be appreciated in light of Yaron's finding (2002: 148) that difficult poems are recalled more incompletely (= less immersion, minor grasp of content) but with more accuracy (= stronger focus on expression) compared to accessible poems.

3.6.2 'Empty' narrativity

The challenges to representation examined earlier have a systematic presence in the poem. All of them affect the poem at intra-clausal or even intra-phrasal level, whence the impression of density and compression. A quick comparison with how lack of coherence is realised in the Pound extract (3.4.3) illustrates the difference. In Pound, none of the juxtaposed turns is deviant on a referential level. In systemic-functional terms, its logogenesis unfolds unrelated sequences, but leaves the sub-levels of

elements and figures intact. In the Prynne poem, by contrast, also figures and sometimes elements (i.e. 'lobster orange, shag in parvo', 'round m') are hard to construe. Although a few phrases (e.g. 'peaceful/pushful kid' or 'splatter-blot scenic spot'[11]) can be interpreted referentially, problems arise as to how to relate syntagmatically the figures they construe. This is the level of overall coherence, the processing correlate of which is integration.

Prynne's writing practice radicalises a stylistic hallmark of twentieth century poetry through which 'allucinanti realia' ('absurd entities', Testa 1999: 150) are juxtaposed through a nominal style (see 2.2.3). As Mellors puts it in his bird-eye-view description of the poet's style:

> Narrative structure is not sequential but recursive; definition of statements is continually promised but usually elided; sentences frequently change course, hopping from referent to referent without regard for continuity; scholarly quotations hang in the text without qualification; demonstratives create a strong referential effect, but their exact referents all too often cannot be located. (Mellors 2005: 129)

While this excerpt is mostly congruent with my previous discussion of reference and deixis, what I want to focus on here is Mellors's remark about narrative structure. It is actually possible to sense a narrative undertone in the poem. This is a theoretically interesting point, as I have argued for narrativity to be a negative indicator of difficulty (2.2.5). Checked against Toolan's definition of narrative (2001 [1988]: 8), the poem resembles a series of unconnected events, without crisis to resolution progress and without foregrounded individuals. Structurally,

[11] Notice, however, the lexical ambiguity of *spot* as both place and advertisement.

then, its lack of narrativity should be no less radical than that in Howe's poem, which also responds negatively to the definition. Yet, the definition captures prototypical narratives – it cannot discriminate between texts low to null in narrativity such as Prynne's and Howe's.

Characters, in Prynne's poem, are textually salient due to their dominant role of grammatical subjects (*kid*, l. 2; *Rienzi*, l. 6; and an indeterminate *we*, l. 9). Even when this is not the case, as with *lady prowler* (ll. 5-6), the colon plus noun phrase construct allows the referent to visually stand out, let alone the phonetic emphasis of the 'prowler/profile' paronomasia. Yet individuals are backgrounded since their functional contribution is marginal when compared to the human types of 'The Late Hour' or to the dramatic personae of the Pound extract. This claim can be corroborated by a substitution test whereby all the individuals in the three poems are replaced by non-human entities (e.g. objects). In the Strand poem and the Pound extract the effect would probably be defamiliarising. By contrast, it would hardly be perceived in the Prynne poem, whose disruptive ideational world levels off any ranking concerning the plausibility of agency attribution. This can be witnessed by a personifying parsing option that reads *doggerel* as the subject of *screaming* (l. 4), a behavioural verb formally functioning as part of a free modifier. Furthermore, differing again from what happens in Pound (see 3.4), their selection appears independent from any defensible rationale.

Yet their presence, no matter how cursory, and the presence of events, no matter how disconnected, do betray a narrative mould. One can verify some narratorial presence in the poem by checking it against the cline of narratorial intrusiveness proposed by Toolan (2001 [1988]: 67) and indexed by the following textual markers: description of settings; identification of characters; temporal summaries; definition of characters; reports of what characters did not think or say; commentary. The poem

eschews the 'intrusiveness' pole of the cline, from the definition of the characters up to the reliance on commentary. Yet, one can sense a sort of narratorial intervention in the last line (l. 10). The line is the only one in the poem that echoes the structure of generic sentences stating timeless or omnitemporal truths (Lyons 1977: 681). It does so by featuring a relational, identifying process in the present tense (*are*) and the indefinite pronoun *all*. The logical fallacy it states once its words are reordered ('all chairs are tables') is mirrored in the ideational fragmentation analysed earlier. What is more, the poem fulfils markers at the low-end of the cline: characters are identified and settings are, if not described, still hinted at ('spring peaks red-inked'; 'splatter-blot scenic spot').

3.6.3 Implied author and juxtaposition technique

The narrator in the poem is so minimally intrusive that he can be conceived of as an editing director. The analogy calls into question the two issues spelled out in the title of the section. On the one hand, the act of editing directs our attention towards a stylistic aspect of the poem – its juxtaposition technique. On the other, the editing director analogy seems to parallel the construct of *implied author*, defined by Rimmon-Kenan as 'a set of implicit norms rather than as a speaker or a voice' (2002 [1983]: 91). While it is in principle true that 'an implied author can be projected on all texts, narrative or otherwise' (Toolan 2001: [1988] 65), the disjointedness of the poem threatens the very idea of an organising consciousness.

This intellectual puzzle has been insightfully formulated by Mellors: 'Prynne never quite gives up the claim to *an authorial presence that might unify the fragmented text*' (2005: 169; emphasis added). In a similar vein, Wilkinson addresses the issue of authorial presence: 'why the authority

which marks the lines, the impression that they say something which ought to be said?' (2007: 6). The critic employs 'authority' rather loosely, but what he adds later partly clarifies the notion and partly it demands to be verified on stylistic grounds: 'authority is connected with a consistent and recognizable syntactical or gestural repertoire – with the explicit quality of linkages' (2007: 6). These critical knots form the basis for my analysis to follow.

Except for *next* (l. 10), the poem dispenses with connectives – there are neither coordinate nor subordinate conjunctions. As in much postmodernist writing, these are replaced by punctuation, with the result that 'the link [between any two phrases, clauses or sentences] must be inferred' (Adamson 1999: 632). I wish to exemplify the point by focusing on the comma between *red-inked* and *blissful* in l. 3. The comma gives rise to an ambiguity between list and apposition, or between extension (A + B) and elaboration (A = B). This double reading is complicated by the syntactic ambiguity of 'spring peaks red-inked' highlighted earlier (3.6.1), resulting in four possible reading paths. Adding to the ambiguities noticed throughout the analysis, a preference for syntactic structures that literally multiply experiential construals (2x2) is beginning to emerge.

So, as far as this poem is concerned, Wilkinson's 'explicit quality of linkages' needs to be ruled out on stylistic grounds. Yet the avoidance of connectives itself is iterated to the point that it does betray a strong (dis)organising consciousness, or implied author. Wilkinson's link between authorial presence and the consistency of structural choices, as well as Mellors's mention of 'an authorial presence' can now be supported. It must be emphasised, however, that consistency in structural options is hardly a noticeable phenomenon, so the implied author of the poem is inferable at a highly abstract level. The ideational fragmentation and the lack of a discernible motivational structure are by contrast much easier to sense.

The tension between these two poles, I submit, justifies and explains the critics' seemingly paradoxical perception of both an authorial presence and its failure to materialise, to rephrase Mellors's quotation above. This critical knot can be explored further by taking into account one of Prynne's own remarks on the relationship between poetic composition and authorial design:

> the focus of poetic composition, as a text takes shape in the struggle of the poet to separate from it, projects into the textual arena an intense energy of conception and differentiation, pressed up against the *limits which are discovered and invented by composition itself*. (Prynne 2010b: 596; emphasis added)

Intra-clausal referential disruption, re-use of idiomatic language and a kind of 'editing' juxtaposing technique are the main guidelines regulating the production of the text, but is there anything else preventing Prynne's poems from looking like 'a heap of intriguing phraseology', as Wilkinson (2007: 11) puts it? I propose that, similarly to Howe (3.5), non-contiguous sense relations give the poem a faint trace of unity.

To begin with, *lobster-orange*, *red-inked*, *rind orange*, and *cream* belong to the semantic field of colours, to which *eggs* (because of their orange yolks) can perhaps be added as a fairly strong inference. This semantic field partly overlaps with one centred on liquids, encompassing *inked*, *blot*, *egg*, *cream* and *juice* (one strong collocate of which is 'orange', linking back to the poem's opening). Likewise, *shag* and *sex* should prime towards a sexual interpretation of *fish*, *peaks*, *dogged*, *screaming*, *lady prowler*, *egg*, *nose*, *slurped*. These are all inferences, but Freudian psychoanalysis has made them part of common knowledge. The sexual chain partly overlaps with another chain alluding to violence: *screaming*,

blind-gut, *splatter-blot*, possibly *prowler* and *bad phantoms*. Venturing even weaker inferences, as is customary in literary interpretation (Furlong 1995; see Chapter 4), one could also read *scenic spot* (l. 7) as co-referential with *spring peaks red-inked* (l. 3). Colours, sex, violence and landscape/nature therefore run across the poem as four potential topics. This observation adds some coherence to, and removes some 'randomness' from, the poem; however it also requires the reader to perform an unnatural, delinearised reading. Yaron's point about delinearised reading being typical of difficult poems (2002: 138) can now be supported textually rather than through responses biased by the researcher's instructions (see 1.3.1).

3.6.4 Posited processing and reading strategies

The texture of Prynne's poem vigorously inhibits top-down analytic approaches: schema theory would not work for any of the clauses from the poem, let alone for its entirety; theoretical constructs such as narrativity and implied author can be glimpsed in specific parts but fail to holistically account for the poem; its objectivist commitment makes the attitude of the poetic persona hard to recover, thus depriving readers of an important clue for the meaning-making process. From the standpoint of basic comprehension, no overarching situation model is likely to be construed from the text – a saturation of ephemeral situation models is more likely to occur. This saturation is prompted by lexical and syntactic ambiguities leading to an overall 'defective representation' (Yaron 2008: 146; see 1.3.1). More precisely, the phases of construal and integration should be the most impeded during online processing, whilst word activation and parsing should pose fewer hurdles. The extreme fragmentation of the poem and its refusal to instantiate any schemas of the kind found in more

traditional contemporary poems (e.g. Semino 1995) should force readers to adopt an atomistic, bottom-up reading strategy. As with the Howe poem, this poem is one of those cases where 'the perceived density of texture might lead readers to regard richness as approaching saturation and overload' (Stockwell 2009: 67). And yet, as with the Howe poem, the feeling of unfamiliarity should be attenuated, on re-reading, by the identification of patterns of everyday language all native readers are familiar with. Prynne's estranging move consists in using spoken language (idiomatic expressions, taboo words, solecisms, expletives) for non-expressive, non-realistic purposes – indeed, the objectivist stance of the poem is left intact despite the presence of these features.

3.7 Conclusion

3.7.1 The indicators: revised and compared across the poems

The analyses carried out have shown that the list of indicators outlined in 2.2 allows for a systematic and explanatory approach to difficulty that is also respectful of the stylistic uniqueness of each poem. Specific difficulty-related aesthetic effects have been argued for each poem based on the interaction of the indicators against the background of processing and interpretive operations. The analyses have also resulted in a more nuanced portrayal of the indicators. The current section sets out to summarise such a qualitative gain.

In the case of reference, the analyses led to refinements in the internal structure of this indicator. For instance, Pound's problematic speaker identification, enabled by a peculiar interplay between line arrangement and repeated patterns (i.e. Sayer + Direct Speech), differs

fundamentally from Hill's ambiguous addressee attribution, which rests on an inferred 'you' whose referent(s) remain unspecified. It is as if Saussure's notion of the 'instability of referents', deplored by Pilkington for its revival in post-structuralist thought (2000: 42), acted as an implicit guideline or Riffaterrean matrix in the making of these poems.

The challenge concerning other key global indicators – namely, coherence and narrativity – is to establish working clines: what counts as null, low or partial in narrativity and what as a good approximation to a prototypical narrative? What difference does it make, from a processing viewpoint, if lack of coherence seems motivated by compositional techniques that mock conversation (Pound), by a kind of heteroglossia whose function is to criticise liberal values (Hill), or it appears as a defamiliarising device in its own right (Howe, Prynne)? To my knowledge, these are more than unsolved questions; these are questions that have never surfaced in the existing literature. Drawing on empirical methods, the next chapter will attempt to shed some light on them.

On a more local scale, the analyses have revealed the internal undermining of the noun phrase in the experimental writing of Howe and Prynne. For instance, the opening strings of both poems arguably have a presentational function but cannot be parsed as phrases. In such cases the modernist drive towards a phrase-based style (Adamson 1999: 640) is pushed to the extreme whereby it is single words that are juxtaposed. In the case of Howe, it has been proposed that receptiveness to post-structuralist ideas attacking the notions of order and hierarchy may have motivated such a stylistic choice. Alternatively, the shift could reflect the culmination and hence stylisation of a tendency which does not necessarily have the backup of a philosophical motivation.

Two new sub-indicators emerged from the analyses. Blurred constituency in Howe is encompassed by the indicator *asyntactic strings*;

odd use of determiners in Hill is encompassed by the *reference* indicator. A new addition to the list is the presence of cultural intertexts that require the activation of specialised knowledge, such as the French Revolution motto alluded to in the Hill stanza. In particular, I have shown the linguistic basis of the intertext: substitution by direct translation ('Liberté' → *civic freedoms*), by reference to the same semantic field ('Fraternité' → *son*) and by a salient inference ('Egalité' → [Enlightment] → *lumière*). While the presence of cultural intertexts is intuitively a straightforward indicator, it was not in the list proposed in 2.2. This is due to the fact that such intertexts are seldom discussed in the literature on difficulty, and even then there is little attempt to elucidate the linguistic mechanisms regulating them – perhaps with the exception of Toolan's contextual interpretation of unusual collocations (1993; see 1.2). Cultural intertexts should become conspicuous on re-reading and therefore impact on offline difficulty.

Impersonality can be introduced in the list as a higher-level indicator of difficulty: the absence or marginalisation of human participants and the avoidance of interpersonal features make it hard for the reader to engage emotionally with the poem. In turn, lack of emotional involvement has been recognised as a behavioural indicator of difficulty (Eva-Wood 2004; see 4.4.4 for empirical results concerning the current poems). Foregrounding of objects over animate entities, lack of affective adjectives and avoidance of first and second person pronouns are all stylistic cues of impersonality.

A synoptic view of the distribution of the indicators in each poem is provided in Table 6 below. Presence of the indicator is marked in green; most boxes are annotated. The new indicators discussed above occupy the last two rows in the table (23 and 24).

Table 5 Distribution of the linguistic indicators of difficulty in six poems

	Linguistic indicator	Strand	Stevens	Hill	Pound	Howe	Prynne	Online difficulty	Offline difficulty
1	Non-standard orthography				ll. 1-2		l. 8	√	√
2	Graphological foregrounding			Accents, capital letters	Parent. indent.	No punct.	Italics, slash, spaces	√	√
3	Abstract nouns	l. 4; ll. 17-21	Half of them	All but one				√	√
4	Unfamiliar words		Some	Some			Some	√	√
5	Proper names				Most text		l. 6	?	√
6	Lexical ambiguities			l.11		l. 7	l. 1, 8	√	√
7	Syntactic ambiguity			l. 11		ll. 4, 6, 7	ll. 3, 4	√	√
8	Asyntactic strings		l. 10			Most text	l.1, 10	√	√
9	Phrase juxtaposition	ll. 17-21	ll. 7-17	ll. 9-12		ll. 1-4	ll. 1, 7, 8	?	√
10	Lack/misuse of connectives	ll. 17-21	ll. 7-17	ll. 6, 9-12	All text	All text	All text	?	√
11	Verb phrase delay, deviant word order					l. 4 (*should hold*)		√	?
12	Parentheticals, subordination, embedding				Parent.			√	√
13	Reference (problems)		Non-factual entities	Addresse attr.	Speak. id.	Ideation. shifts	Ideation. fragm.	?	√

14	Deixis (lack of/present but estranging)							?	√
15	Negation	Phrasal ll. 4, 10, 18, 20	Clausal ll. 1, 18				Clausal l. 2	√	√
16	Novel metaphors	ll. 7, 18	ll.1-2, 6, 16	l. 1-2		l. 6		√	√
17	Cohesion/coherence (lack of)			Intra and inter clausal	Inter clausal	Intra and inter phrasal	Intra and inter clausal	√	√
18	Titles (lack of)			number	number			-	√
19	Register clashes			ll. 6-7			ll. 1-2	√	√
20	Narrativity (lack of)		low	null		null	low	?	√
21	Adjacent stresses		Most text	esp. ll. 4-8		esp. ll. 1, 3, 8	esp. ll. 3-7	√	-
22	Line/syntax interference		Half text	Most text		Half text	Most text	√	√
23	Cultural intertexts		l. 2, ll. 11-12	ll. 2-3				-	√
24	Impersonality/objectivism							-	√

The table illustrates how a bottom-up, text-driven taxonomy of difficulty may be developed, thus revamping the attempts of typological approaches (see 1.1) while allowing for the flexibility demanded by those defending the plurality of difficulty (see 1.4.2). Indeed, the combination of indicators in each poem is always bound to vary, thus producing each time a qualitatively different aesthetic effect, but one that can still be related to difficulty.

The Strand poem displays the indicators to a minimal extent: only five out of twenty-four. What is more, these tend to cluster in lines 17-21, in correspondence with a turning point – the characters give way to cosmic elements, and a clause-based syntax gives way to a phrase-based syntax. By contrast, the Prynne poem instantiates most indicators: nineteen out of twenty-four, a striking visualisation of its linguistic drive towards difficulty. Second in ranking comes Hill's poem, instantiating seventeen indicators. Howe's poem is third, with sixteen indicators. Finally, Stevens's poem instantiates fourteen indicators whilst Pound's poem eleven.

My ensuing hypothesis is that *the more indicators in a poem, the more difficult it will probably be felt to be*. The hedge 'probably' is necessary here, as it would be naïve to assume an infallible match between number of indicators and level of difficulty. Indeed, the indicators are not likely to evenly contribute to difficulty, since much depends on their stylistic realisations and unique interaction in a given poem. Despite this, the quantification provided remains useful insofar as it charts Dillon's observation that writers can be 'difficult in some areas but not in others' (1978: xxx; see 1.2). In particular, the distribution of abstract nouns seems worth commenting on. Granted that it would be foolish to establish a trend based on six poems only, it is still surprising that the most challenging poems – Pound's, Howe's and Prynne's – tend to avoid this lexical indicator of difficulty. A preference for concrete nouns can be taken

as a sign of these authors' commitment to an objectivist poetics that has indirect yet profound consequences on difficulty – as argued in the next section.

Finally, although the six analyses are meant to be chiefly descriptive rather than interpretive, I have not refrained from attributing *symbolic meaning* to the poems whenever it felt appropriate to do so. As explained in 2.1.2, symbolic meaning lies in the formulation of a theme. Interestingly, such formulation became more remote or less plausible from Strand to Stevens, from Stevens to Hill, and from Hill to Pound, Howe and Prynne. The resistance posed by some poems to the construction of symbolic meaning could be regarded as a symptom of their difficulty because it undermines the engrained readerly assumption, proposed by Culler, that a poem should disclose its significance to readers:

> To write a poem is to claim significance of some sort for the verbal construct one produces, and the reader approaches a poem with the assumption that however brief it must contain, at least implicitly, potential riches which make it worthy of his attention. (Culler 2002 [1975]: 205)

This order of difficulty tallies well with Steiner's modal difficulty, occurring whenever 'we do not understand the *raison d'être* of the text' (1978: 29; see 1.1). Higher-level indicators such as *narrativity*, *coherence* and *impersonality* have a linguistic basis that allows discussing their instantiations in specific texts in a verifiable manner. In contrast, the attribution or construction of *symbolic meaning* is more dependent on readers' assumptions and interpretive orientations. This is why resistance to symbolic meaning is excluded from the list of indicators in Table 5.

3.7.2 A note on authorial intention

There is still one last, contentious issue that needs to be addressed at this point. This is the notion of authorial intention, surfacing at various points throughout the thesis (1.4.3, 2.1.1, 2.2.6) as well as in the analysis on Stevens's poem (3.2). Intention is related to difficulty via the shared relevance of meaning to both concepts. On the one hand, a difficult poem is almost by definition one that withholds its meaning – be it semantic meaning or general significance (see esp. 2.1.2 and 2.2.4). On the other, much of the debate on intention originates from an attempt to locate or circumscribe meaning. From a philosophical perspective, Irvin (2006) identifies four main stances towards intention: *actual intentionalism*, proposing that meaning is entirely determined by authorial intention; *modest intentionalism*, according to which 'the author's intention is not sufficient to imbue the work with a meaning it cannot conventionally support' (2006: 119); *conventionalism*, depriving authorial intention of any role in the attribution of meaning; and *hypothetical intentionalism*, mediating between intentionalism and conventionalism and of which Irvin further identifies two subcategories. The former relies on 'the best hypotheses that a careful, appropriately informed audience would form about the actual author's intentions' (2006: 122). The latter differs from the former in that the informed audience's hypothesis is attributed to 'an idealised author whose intentions are able to account as fully as possible for the work's features' (2006: 123).

The first position, actual intentionalism, appears to be endorsed by Hurley (2007), who models literary reading after pragmatic principles: against the deconstructionists, he forcefully argues that 'illocutionary force is not mortgaged exclusively to the opinion of the interpreter' (2007: 55).

An even fiercer defence of actual intentionalism is in Toolan's integrational approach that merges meaning and intention:

> Once authorial intention is seen to be the meaning of a text (and not, as in Hirsch, some form of "hidden basis" for that meaning), then there is no longer a categorized dualism (meaning vs. intention) or any coherence to the idea of getting to one via the other. Once you have one, you have the other. (Toolan 1996: 123)

Being primarily concerned with the philosophy of language, it is unclear what sort of implications Hurley's and Toolan's stances may have in terms of textual analytic practice.

A different manifestation of this intentionalist stance, but one whose effects on textual analysis are evident, is Sotirova's (2014). Sotirova contests the view that authorial intention precludes the possibility of a thorough stylistic analysis. She demonstrates this point by examining Virginia Woolf's revisions to *Mrs Dalloway*. Indeed, 'authorial agency is nowhere more clearly visible than in the construction of a final text from early drafts' (2014: 138). Levelling a criticism to Herman's claim that readers infer motivation from deictic shifts in literary works, Sotirova's counterargument is that 'by this rationale any linguistic choice made by an author can be said to be motivated and so conveys some communicative intention' (2014: 137). If all choices presuppose a willing agent, inferring authorial intention from some features at the expense of others can become an arbitrary act. On these grounds, Altieri's hypothetical intentionalist argument that 'we begin to trust intention when we see the explaining relations between parts and whole' (1984: 148) appears, although appealing to me, in need of convincing evidence that nobody, to my knowledge, has yet been able to provide.

As shown by this brief overview, authorial intention has never been discussed in relation to difficulty. Conversely, difficulty has often been associated with authorial intention, albeit always in cursory ways. The present thesis ideally endorses a hypothetical intentionalist position that retains a conventionalist component (i.e. the analysable semantics of the text *is* undeniably part of the total meaning of a literary work). In terms of analytic practice, however, I refrain from anchoring specific features to authorial intention, and likewise I resist identifying authorial intention with readerly comments that infer authorial intention (see next Chapter). The study of intention in relation to difficulty remains therefore a desideratum of future research.

3.7.3 Interim summary

Throughout the chapter, an effort has been constantly made to pay due respect to the stylistic uniqueness of each poem without renouncing the application of a theory-driven method of analysis. Overall, the stylistic analyses (a) have increased the internal sophistication of most linguistic indicators, and (b) have identified new indicators that are a genuine contribution to the existing literature. At the same time, the indicators have worked as guidelines for principled stylistic analyses. They have also enabled the analyst to trace the remarks of literary critics back to the linguistic configuration of the poems and to solve controversies surrounding difficulty.

In light of the above discussion, the benefits of having detailed the textual side of difficulty seem beyond question. Yet a comprehensive study of this phenomenon should be equally concerned with specifying the readerly responses that, ultimately, underpin its very definition and existence (see 1.5). This is what the following two chapters set out to

achieve. In the next chapter, the response indicators elucidating offline difficulty will be examined through a comprehension test centred on the six poems. In Chapter 5, a psycholinguistic test will examine a response indicator of online difficulty – the reading speed for each of these very poems.

4 Testing offline difficulty

4.1 Empirical research on poetry comprehension

This chapter reports the results of a qualitative comprehension task designed to explore offline difficulty across the six poems analysed in Chapter 3. Offline difficulty can be rephrased as faulty or unsatisfactory understanding, and it occurs whenever readers fail to access one or more of the meaning components outlined in 2.1.2 (situation model, theme, formal symbolism). Previous empirical research has revealed some readerly indicators of difficulty that will help to contextualise the results obtained in the current test. Such difficulty-related findings are summarised in Table 6 below and discussed afterwards.

Table 6 Difficulty-related findings in empirical research

Study	Object of research	Method	Difficulty-related findings
Spiro 2011	Literary judgment on poetic quality	Anonimised poems ranked by professional and leisure readers; 8 participants	Low rankings for the poem deemed as 'most ambiguous' by the researcher; obscurity seen as an indictment against poetry
Goodblatt and Glickson 2010	Real-time responses to poems	Think-aloud protocols for poems presented incrementally on a screen; 13 participants	A greater number of alternative interpretations is related to difficulty in poetry comprehension
Zyngier et al. 2007	Cross-cultural evaluation of complexity*	Predictions about complexity by experts; simple open questionnaire; 115 participants;	Intercultural consensus on textual complexity, but not on its evaluation
Eva-Wood 2004	Influence of feeling on poetry comprehension	Think vs. Think-and-feel aloud protocols; 10 participants	Interest ratings independent from both conditions only with the poem deemed the most difficult by the researcher
Yaron 2002	Difficult poetry processing	Recall task followed by general explanation of the poem; 40 participants	Difficult poems elicit fragmented protocols but also better retention of linguistic form
Hanauer 1998a	Poetry vs. encyclopedic items processing	Recall task, reading times and comprehension judgments on a scale; 38 participants	Poetry is read more slowly and considered more difficult than encyclopedic items

Peskin 1998	Differences between expert and novice readers in poetry reading	Think-aloud protocols compared across the two groups; 16 participants	Expert readers treat poetry as a problem-solving activity and adopt special strategies to understand it
Harker 1994	Interpretive skills in students	Think-aloud protocols followed by four questions; 15 participants	Students struggle to move from paraphrase to symbolic meaning
Svensson 1987	Interpretive strategies in students of different age levels	Individual interviews; poems listened to and read and questions asked by researcher; 72 participants	Symbolic reading depends on age; more common in 15 yr. old than in 7 and 11 yr. old

*uses literary prose extracts

As shown in the 'Object of research' column, only the study by Yaron is explicitly concerned with difficulty in poetry (see 1.3.1 for an extensive review). Her comparative approach allows appreciating how different poems are differently processed. Hanauer (1998a) tackles the issue of difficulty from a cross-genre perspective, instead. He set out to compare the way poetry and encyclopaedic items are read according to measures of recall, reading times and comprehension judgments (1998: 68). He found that poetry is read more slowly and considered more difficult than encyclopaedic items. The quantitative approach he relies on is designed to test hypotheses from linguistics (Jakobson 1960) and literary theory (Culler 2002 [1975]); it lacks the power of refining them, however.

A notion intuitively related to difficulty, complexity, is addressed by Zyngier et al. (2007), who used literary prose extracts rather than poems. They characterise complexity as involving 'the perception by the reader of a multiplicity of parts or units, forming patterns' and therefore as more related to 'pattern organization rather than chaos or chance' (2007: 656). Their finding that readers agree on the presence of textual complexity irrespective of their culture is encouraging, as something similar may reasonably hold true of difficulty.

In the remaining cases, either the findings on difficulty fall outside the main research question (Peskin 1998, Eva-Wood 2004, Goodblatt and Glickson 2010, Spiro 2011) or their link with difficulty is indirect (Harker 1994, Svensson 1987). Within the first group, Spiro (2011: 239) quotes comments that explicitly state the challenges to intelligibility posed by Libby Houston's poem 'Desolution' reported below:

> blue as ice but not cold, no
> sea green but not wet, this
> deep abyss bright, bright as mist -
>
> my whole past flashed past last
> time I surfaced, guess it's still
> up there careering about
>
> or, lifeless raft, rocked bland,
> sits like some dumb microland
> gulls use, let them: I float down -
>
> look! it does not drown!

The researcher ascribes the low aesthetic rankings received by this poem to 'its capacity to confuse and obscure meaning' (2011: 243). Notice that the linguistic indicators account for this feeling of difficulty: one can identify a logical fallacy ('no sea green but not wet'), the opacity of deictic reference ('this / deep abyss', *abyss* being also a syntactically delayed thematic word; and 'it does not drown!'), an unusual collocation plus a coinage (*dumb microland*) and an asyntactic string (*gulls use, let them*). Eva-Wood (2004: 185) similarly proposes that, in opposition to Robert Frost's 'Away!', 'the brief, abstract, and less accessible nature of "There Are Mornings"' accounts for its low interest ratings in both the think-aloud and the think-and-feel aloud conditions'. The same inverse correlation between difficulty and appreciation in novice readers has been observed by Peskin (1998: 256). The overall aim of her study was to compare the interpretive strategies deployed by expert readers (PhD candidates) and

those by relatively novice readers (1st or 2nd year undergraduates). She found that expert readers apply specialised knowledge that novice readers had not yet acquired, despite having 'internalized a general poetry schema' (1998: 254). Peskin also highlights a section (ll. 27-36) of 'On a Drop of Dew', by Marvell, that even her expert readers deemed obscure:

> In how coy a figure wound,
> Every way it turns away:
> So the world excluding round,
> Yet receiving in the day,
> Dark beneath, but bright above,
> Here disdaining, there in love.
> How loose and easy hence to go,
> How girt and ready to ascend,
> Moving but on a point below,
> It all about does upwards bend.

A 17th century metaphysical poem, its style is at a remove from the twentieth century poems the thesis is centred on. Yet, one can still notice many of the linguistic indicators: vague use of deixis (here disdaining, there in love); non-finite clauses and baffling use of connectives ('So the world excluding round, / Yet receiving in the day'; 'hence to go'); contradictions and other conceptual oppositions (e.g. 'the world excluding round, / yet receiving in the day'; 'dark *beneath*, but bright *above*'; 'upwards bend'); omission of a conjunction and article where they would help clarify syntactic relations, together with an ellipsis of the main verb *express* retrievable from the preceding co-text ('And recollecting its own light / Does, in its pure and circling thoughts, *express* / The greater heaven in an heaven less. / [And] In how coy a figure [express a] wound'). It is in these lines that the indicators cluster to form a *congruence of foregrounding* (Leech 2010: 64). So, despite having been developed for twentieth and twentieth-first century poetry, the indicators can still

account for poetry written much earlier. Goodblatt and Glickson (2010) found that the coexistence of two interpretive routes in Donne's 'The Bait', which stages an extended analogy between fishing and courting, correlates with lower comprehension scores (2010: 419).

The latter group of studies addresses the development (Svensson 1987) or availability (Harker 1994) of strategies for symbolic interpretation. At first sight, their results seem to conflict. The participants in Harker (1994), aged 15-16, generally failed to provide in-depth readings of the two poems selected (1994: 212). Svensson found instead that 'the older subjects often preferred this sort of symbolic response, in which some kind of abstracted summarizing statement is made' (1987: 491). The oldest among Svensson's participants, who had a preference for symbolic response, were the same age as Harker's participants, whose protocols appear more discouraging. Harker eventually holds New Criticism responsible for such results (1994: 213). He points out its persisting influence on teaching in Canada, where the study was conducted. Epitomised by Wimsatt's *The Verbal Icon* (1954), New Criticism placed a strong emphasis on texts as organic artefacts. Its influence must have been less decisive in Sweden, where the Svensson study was conducted. Peskin and Wells-Jopling (2012) explored precisely how different educational strategies affect the development of symbolic reading. They found that exposure to domain-specific knowledge and scaffolding techniques improve students' symbolic reading abilities. This study is not shown in Table 7, however, since none of its findings are related to difficulty.

Despite these divergences, the studies by Svensson and Harker share an interest in the general dynamics of poetry reading irrespective of the poems used. Of course, researchers do ponder the selection of reading materials, but what counts is their adequacy to the research question

rather than a literary interest in how authors are read. Their findings are nevertheless pertinent to the overall argument of this thesis, especially in light of the importance of symbolic meaning (see 2.3 and 3.7.1). In brief, the ability of reading a poem symbolically should solve the initial impairment caused by the perception of difficulty.

Overall, the studies reviewed tend to treat the reading of poetry as a uniform phenomenon. This has led them to underestimate or even disregard the style-driven mechanisms through which each poem can prompt certain responses and inhibit others. The current study is meant as a corrective to this trend.

4.2 Aim of the study

The study has been designed to fulfil the broad aim of exploring the degree of comprehension elicited by the poems analysed in Chapter 3. The speculative proposals made there, especially in terms of posited processing and reading strategies, can thus be compared with the 'real' (i.e. observable) response they elicit in a group of readers. It must be stressed, however, that its design (see 4.3.3) does not follow from the insights generated by the stylistic analyses. Rather, the analyses act as a post-hoc interpretive frame for the results independently obtained in the test. This is because the stylistic and the empirical strands of this thesis developed in parallel, continually feeding into each other. As a consequence, it would be misleading to propose a hierarchical relation between them.

4.3 Method

4.3.1 Participants

Ten 2nd year undergraduates in English volunteered for the test, as part of the IEL (Investigating English Language) module at the University of Nottingham. All are native speakers of English (nine females, one male; mean age 19.6 years; SD = 0.7 years); none of them knew any of the poems in advance. While relatively low, the number of participants in this qualitative study is comparable to the studies by Spiro, Eva-Wood, Harker and Peskin all deal with similarly sized groups. The respondents' reading habits were assessed through the personal questionnaire below, handed once the comprehension task (see 4.3.4) was terminated.

Figure 6 - The personal questionnaire (offline difficulty study)

Thank you for dedicating your time to this project. Before you leave, please answer some additional questions about yourself: they will be useful for me to interpret the results of the test.

1. What is your age?
2. What is your first language?
3. What is your course and level of study?
4. Did you know some of the poems presented? If so, which one? (provide number)
5. How many books of poetry do you read per year, approximately?
6. Are they usually 20th century poetry collections?
7. Are they in a language other than English?
8. When did you start reading poetry regularly, if you do so?
9. Do you like reading in general? Which kind of texts do you usually read?
10. Add any comments about yourself if you wish to do so

The questionnaire revealed that participants read on average three poetry collections per year and that these included twentieth century collections in six cases out of ten. When asked about their reading preferences, however, none of them mentioned poetry. By contrast, novels were mentioned as many as seven times. Participants were also asked (Q 8) to locate in time their first approach to reading poetry, in the belief that familiarity with literary forms depends on exposure over time. Answers to

this question were tentative, as some participants had difficulties in recalling where they started reading poetry. As a consequence, it was decided not to report them.

4.3.2 Materials

The poems used in the test were those analysed throughout Chapter 3. The texts were printed in a stapled booklet, each on a separate A4 sheet. The names of the authors and the years of composition were omitted to prevent preconceptions on the notorious difficulty of some authors (e.g. Pound) from affecting the responses. Compared to Yaron (2002), having six texts rather than two allows representing a wider spectrum of styles and themes. Samples larger than this are ruled out by practical considerations concerning the time and energy at the participants' disposal. There are less contingent reasons too, as exposed by van Peer in his pioneering study on poetry and foregrounding where he too selected just six poems:

> The selectional procedure gains force from general methodological considerations too, as outlined by Lindauer (1974: 181), who suggests that empirical research on literature should strike a balance between a reductionist approach and the broad requirements of literary relevance. (van Peer 1986: 59)

In a qualitative reader response study like this, choosing too many poems would have hindered the emergence of patterns, clines and categories, all essential for the goal of outlining a model of poetic reading. Choosing only one or two poems, by contrast, would have resulted in response data so

undifferentiated that they would arguably have been of little interest to literary theorists and critics.

4.3.3 Design

The study is qualitative and exploratory, and as such aimed at generating new insights into reading poems of variable difficulty rather than into testing previous knowledge. As my review in 4.1 has shown, little is known about differences in reading performance and comprehension that depend on the difficulty of the items (the poems). Qualitative studies are the best option whenever a phenomenon has been granted little empirical attention in the literature (van Peer et al. 2012: 53).

As shown in the 'Method' column in Table 7, most studies have so far relied on think-aloud protocols, whereby participants are asked 'to verbalize only the thoughts that enter their attention while still in the respondent's short-term memory' (Dörnyei 2007: 148). While this technique captures the respondents' ongoing mental processes, it is less adequate for the post-processing, self-reflective nature of offline difficult*y*. What is more, the poems selected could be too intimidating for respondents to spontaneously think-aloud. A high number of prompts by the researcher may be needed to overcome the impairment, but this strategy would endanger a more natural reader-text relationship.

To circumvent the problem, it was decided to rely on written reports elicited by a pencil-and-paper questionnaire mainly consisting of open questions. Written reports encourage a more mediated reading experience, more in touch with the demanding nature of the materials and the very notion of offline difficulty. As noted by Hansson (1991: 111), a potential limitation of the study may come from the difference in ability among participants to put what they have understood in writing. Such a problem

would be serious in a study interested in comprehension performance from the standpoint of readers, as individual differences in writing skills are hard to control. However, the focus of this work was on the most common response types to each poem, so individual differences were not interfering. More technically, this study has a within-subject component (different items are read by the same participant) but it focuses on between-subject data (the average or typical response to each item). Below is the questionnaire used for the comprehension task:

Figure 7 The pencil-and-paper questionnaire for the comprehension task

Please answer the following questions after each poem, providing the number of the question to which the answer refers

1. Rate each poem from 0 to 5 on the basis of your understanding (0 = extremely easy to understand; 5 = extremely difficult to understand). Two or more poems can be assigned the same score, and you do not necessarily have to use all the numbers.
2. Have you had specific problems in understanding some parts of the texts? If so, highlight the difficult bits and provide your own comments if you want (it should be clear which section the comment refers to)
3. What is the poem about?
4. Have you enjoyed the poem?
5. Add any comment you wish (optional)

While the questionnaire is very simple, this sort of open questions is geared to leaving the participants enough leeway in their approach to reading poetry. Open questions of comparable simplicity (e.g. 'Is it an example of good literature?' or 'Did you enjoy it?') were also used in the study by Zyngier et al. (2007) reviewed earlier.

The purpose of the first request is to evaluate the impact of difficulty according to the respondents' self-assessed comprehension on a five-point scale. The purpose of the second request is to have respondents focusing on passages that stand out for their lack of accessibility. This request is supported by Yaron's finding that difficult poems are recalled more

accurately than accessible ones, hence eliciting better retention of expression over content (2002: 148; see Table 7). This request also conforms to an empirically attested reading strategy, as it has been found that poetry readers discuss specific passages prior to constructing an interpretation (Hanauer 2001). The third question reflects the importance of topic construction in all kinds of text comprehension (Giora 1997: 24; Graesser et al. 2002: 19). This operation fits the way offline difficulty has been characterised: lack of satisfactory import at various levels, including the level of content. What is more, the instructions given to respondents (see next section) should favour an understanding of aboutness less constrained than mere topic identification. The fourth question asks respondents whether or not they enjoyed the poems. Its pertinence stems from the link between difficulty and interest or aesthetic appreciation that emerged in some of the studies reviewed earlier (i.e. Spiro 2011 and Eva-Wood 2004). Finally, the fifth request is optional and is intended to give respondents a chance to add any observation or thought that the previous questions failed to prompt.

The open format of the test was designed to prevent readers from behaving like trained decoders, a pitfall that can be identified in Yaron (see 1.3.1). While closed formats allow responses to be readily quantified, they also restrict readers' freedom of response, with the risk of losing important information about the impact of the poems. Conversely, the drawback of the minimally prescriptive approach adopted here lies in the heterogeneity of the readerly data it elicits, which makes the analytic stage particularly challenging (see esp. 4.4.2 and 4.4.3). Although open-ended, the questions are phrased as to indirectly probe the difficulty of the poems without featuring the word 'difficult' or related ones. There are two reasons for this choice. The first is that such a direct line of questioning would have disclosed the researcher's aims to the participants, thus biasing their

responses. The second concerns the unease caused by the term 'difficult' as evidenced in a production task conducted previously. Asked to describe a few poems, readers tended to avoid this adjective and to prefer neutrally connoted alternatives (e.g. 'confusing', 'cryptic'…).

4.3.4 Procedure

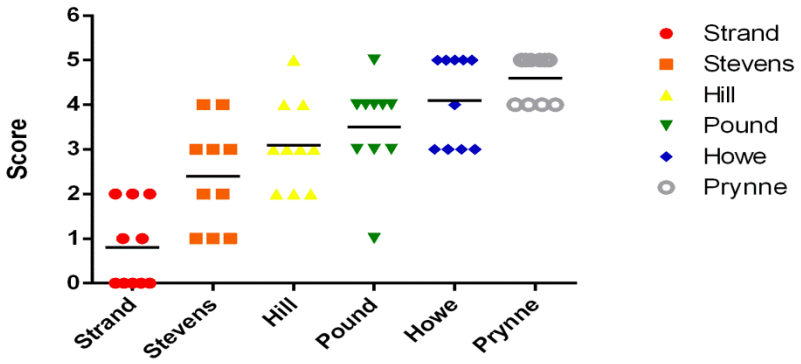
The study was conducted on a one-to-one basis in a quiet room, with the researcher sitting in a corner as unobtrusively as possible. Before starting the comprehension task, participants were told their responses would contribute to a research focusing on poetry and comprehension. 'Understanding a poem' was broadly defined as sense-making, implying claims about the content, theme, situation or message of the poem. Just as 'difficult' and related terms did not appear in the questionnaire, they were also avoided during the instructions for the same reasons explained above. Respondents were also reassured that their answers would have had no influence on their academic assessment. To make the point even clearer, they were identified by numbers, so that they did not need to reveal their identity by signing the questionnaire. At this point, they were given the booklet and were instructed to read all the poems once. Next, they engaged in the comprehension task elicited by the questionnaire reproduced in the previous section. Based on the performance of a pilot subject, they were allocated one hour to complete the task. The answers were written in the blank space below each poem, and the participants could return to the texts as frequently as needed. Once they had finished, they handed the questionnaire back and completed the personal questionnaire. Finally, if they wished, they could inquire about the authorship of the poems.

4.4 Results and discussion

4.4.1 Self-assessed comprehension

The mean rating and standard deviation (SD) for each poem (0 = very easy; 5 = very difficult) was calculated. The poems are identified by author rather than by title for the sake of simplicity, and this notation will be kept constant henceforth. Their order in the table follows the scores given, from highest to lowest. Values were calculated on an Excel spreadsheet, suitable for the basic statistical operations involved. The results are shown in Figure 8 below.

Figure 8 Self-assessed comprehension per poem



The chart shows the range of the ratings across participants (the coloured dots) as well as the average rating per poem (the horizontal black lines). Due to the ordinal nature of the data (scores on a Likert scale) the Friedman test with Dunn's correction method was run. Dunn's method corrects possible mistakes from multiple comparisons between subjects. Running the test shows that, while there is a visually apparent ranking in the authors in terms of difficulty, the study would need more subjects in order to detect the subtle differences between authors belonging to the

middle of the scale. Prynne was deemed the hardest clustering closest to Howe, while Strand was the easiest followed by Stevens. Hill and Pound were on the same level clustering in the middle of the difficulty scores.

4.4.2 Comprehension problems

The second point of the questionnaire ('Have you had specific problems in understanding some parts of the texts? If so, highlight the difficult bits and provide your own comments if you want'; see 4.3.3) asked participants to self-reflect on the comprehension problems they encountered by referring to specific textual features. Some of these explanations have been also identified in answers to question 4 ('Have you enjoyed the poem?') and to request 5 ('Add any comment if you wish'). They will therefore enter the analysis and discussion here.

73 comments have been identified after carefully perusing the protocols and excluding near-restatement by the same participant on the same poem. The comments are reported below and will be classified on the basis of the linguistic indicators of difficulty listed in 3.7.1, including some higher-level constructs (marked off by italicisation) presented in 'models and constructs' (2.1) and in the 'beyond language' section (2.2.6).

Table 7 Comments verbalising local comprehension problems

	Comment	Poem by	Participant	Linguistic indicator/other construct
1	I am not sure what 'telegraphese' means	Hill	1	Unfamiliar vocabulary
2	Poem starts as though it is a section out of a longer piece.	Hill	2	Lack of cohesion
3	the final section does not appear to offer any conclusion to the piece	Hill	2	Lack of cohesion
4	difficult subject matter makes the piece quite frustrating to read	Hill	2	*Specialised schema*
5	I don't understand why some parts are capitalised	Hill	3	Graphological foregrounding
6	cannot find meaning in this as it seems to not fit in the poem (lines 6-9)	Hill	5	Lack of coherence
7	The feel that some of the lines are fragments and thus do not make sense in the initial reading.	Hill	6	Lack of cohesion
8	At first it seemed a little disjointed	Hill	8	Lack of cohesion
9	simply because of the different language [referring to 'et lumière']	Hill	8	Unfamiliar vocabulary
10	I only have vague ideas about the meaning of the word [referring to 'amnesty']	Hill	8	Unfamiliar vocabulary
11	words from languages I am not fluent in make those parts harder to understand	Hill	9	Unfamiliar vocabulary
12	Lack of title makes it more difficult to read	Hill	10	Lack of title
13	Some words hard to understand	Hill	10	Unfamiliar vocabulary
14	this bit seems obscure in the context of the poem (lines 7-8)	Hill	10	Lack of coherence
15	not sure of the meaning of this word [referring to 'defamation']	Hill	10	Unfamiliar vocabulary
16	It is also confusing how there is no punctuation in the entire poem	Howe	1	Asyntactic string + graphological foregrounding
17	The ending ("What pine tree wildeyed boy") is confusing as well as it does not grammatically follow	Howe	1	Asyntactic string + lack of coherence
18	I am not sure of the relevance of the first highlighted section ("Woollen slight grain in the") or what it refers to	Howe	1	*Contextually felt inappropriateness* + Reference
19	It would be easier to consolidate knowledge/interpretation if it had a title	Howe	1	Lack of title

20	The lack of punctuation means that it is hard to tell when one idea ends and another starts	Howe	2	Asyntactic string + graphological foregrounding
21	There also don't appear to be many verbs which makes the meaning hard to get	Howe	2	Phrase juxtaposition
22	Not clear if this is the same idea or not [on 'Is the cloven rock misled / Does morning lie what prize']	Howe	2	Lack of coherence
23	I don't quite 'see' what is being described, it's very hard to place in a specific context	Howe	3	*Disrupted situation model*
24	poem appears disjointed, despite the use of enjambment that 'allows' the poem to flow	Howe	4	Lack of cohesion
25	the lines appear solitary & fragmented in their disjointed arrangement	Howe	4	Asyntactic string + lack of cohesion
26	sounds of an animal which does not inter-relate to the following image of a rock [on 'woof']	Howe	4	Lack of coherence + *disrupted situation model*
27	words I don't understand as single words": "swatch", "weft", "fustian".	Howe	5	Unfamiliar vocabulary
28	cannot follow or find any chain of thought	Howe	5	Lack of coherence
29	The lack of punctuation makes the text difficult to understand	Howe	6	Asyntactic string + graphological foregrounding
30	What is a cloven rock?	Howe	7	*Disrupted situation model*
31	What is the relation between 'warp and woof'?	Howe	7	Unusual collocation (in UK English)
32	I can't figure out any overall meaning, only fragments according to lines	Howe	8	Lack of cohesion/coherence
33	I have no idea what this means, if asked by a friend I would probably think it wasn't a word [referring to 'weft']	Howe	8	Unfamiliar vocabulary
34	I found the combination of 'warp' and 'woof' particularly difficult to decipher as the verbs seems to be so different in the action performed and different in terms of what or who performs them, yet they are linked in their line	Howe	8	Unusual collocation (in UK English)
35	no title made this more difficult	Howe	10	Lack of title
36	don't know what this means [referring to 'fustian']	Howe	10	Unfamiliar vocabulary
37	The ending is ambiguous	Strand	1	*Alternative situation models (dual interpretation)*

38	Out of all the poems, this one does not appear to have any really tricky bits	Strand	2	Lack of indicators
39	greater flow and less ambiguity	Strand	4	Lack of indicators
40	ambiguity of what 'wounds of the night' means	Strand	8	Novel metaphor
41	'heal without sound' it is less obvious what it refers to	Strand	8	Novel metaphor
42	Being a clear story, this was much easier than some other poems	Strand	9	Lack of indicators (presence of narrativity)
43	Referring to specific people makes it easier to understand	Strand	10	Lack of indicators (lack of impersonality)
44	[the proper names] were very difficult to understand as I do not know what they refer to	Pound	1	Proper names + reference
45	was confused by the graphology of it	Pound	1	Graphological foregrounding
46	The references are lost on me	Pound	2	Proper names + reference
47	It seems like a series of random quotes	Pound	3	Lack of coherence
48	who is this making reference to? 2 men or a couple? [on 'if it is baker and concierge visibly']	Pound	4	Reference
49	who is the poet referring to here? [on '(not G.D.H., Horace)']	Pound	4	Proper name + reference
50	can't find where one idea ends & another begins	Pound	5	Lack of cohesion
51	All the different names mentioned with no reference point-confusing	Pound	5	Proper names + reference
52	My issue in understanding is not with the language or lexicon used, but with the cohesion of the text	Pound	6	Lack of cohesion
53	who is this and why is what he says relevant? [Jo Bard]	Pound	7	Proper name + reference + *contextually felt inappropriateness*
54	separate pockets of meaning	Pound	8	Lack of (overall) coherence
55	individual aspects making sense	Pound	8	Lack of indicator (presence of local coherence)
56	it is difficult to understand without knowing the context, or the people who the poem refers to.	Pound	10	Reference + proper names
57	The title aided interpretation a lot!	Stevens	1	Lack of indicator (presence of title)
58	the poem does not clarify whether it's 12 in the sense of time, or 12 people	Stevens	2	Reference
59	unsure what this is [phantomerei]	Stevens	4	Unfamiliar vocabulary

60	what is this pyramid? is it his ear? [on pyramid']	Stevens	4	*Disrupted situation model*
61	not sure of meaning [phantomerei]	Stevens	5	Unfamiliar vocabulary
62	who does this refer to? ['its', line 16]	Stevens	5	Reference (endophoric)
63	Some issues with vocabulary.	Stevens	6	Unfamiliar vocabulary
64	the time one or a person? [referred to 'one', line 4]	Stevens	7	Reference
65	is this a sundial? [referred to 'a pyramid with one side / like a spectral cut in its perception', lines 14-15	Stevens	7	*Disrupted situation model*
66	The final two stanzas seem most ambiguous to me, as the metaphor becomes less clear	Stevens	8	Novel metaphor + phrase juxtaposition
67	'élan' (don't know the word)	Stevens	8	Unfamiliar vocabulary
68	dramatic descriptions but of what I am not sure	Prynne	1	*Disrupted situation model*
69	I'm not sure what the references which have been highlighted are ['Rienzi in fancy stabs out', 'egg picnic no. 4' and 'Traitor cow-juice']	Prynne	2	Reference
70	short sentences & the fragmentary lines are off-putting	Prynne	4	Phrase juxtaposition + asyntactic strings
71	A lot of nonsense words used	Prynne	5	Unfamiliar vocabulary
72	don't understand meaning or relevance [referred to 'Rienzi in fancy stabs out / splatter-blot scenic spot']	Prynne	7	*Contextually felt inappropriateness*
73	don't know this word [referring to 'in parvo']	Prynne	10	Unfamiliar vocabulary

In most cases, each comment could be mapped straightforwardly to one or more overlapping indicators. Lack of cohesion and/or coherence (the two are often combined) account for 17/73 (23.3%) of the problems identified, followed by problems with vocabulary (15/73 = 20.5%), and problems with reference (10/73 = 13.7%). As for coherence, a recent paper by Alonso (2014) has convincingly shown just how often readers search for coherence when interpreting complex literary texts, including two poems by Cummings. The aim of Alonso's study, however, is that of contributing to a theoretical debate concerning strategies of text comprehension, rather

than accounting for fine-tuned response differences across literary texts. These three indicators relate to basic comprehension problems: coherence is the foremost textual correspondent of the integration phase, unfamiliar vocabulary of the activation phase and reference is closely related to situation models, as stated in 2.1.1. These operations have been identified as implicit processing operations (Jacobs 2014: 142; see 2.1.1). By virtue of its unusualness, disruption of implicit processing cannot but be consciously felt by readers.

In section 3.7.1, when charting the distribution of the indicators across the six poems, it was asked how different stylistic realisations of semantic incoherence would impact on readers. A closer look at these comments may provide a preliminary answer. While some of them are unable to discriminate between texts (i.e. those generically verbalising semantic fragmentation), others are more informative. Comment 8, for instance, ('*At first* it seemed a little disjointed'; emphasis added) cues the fact that in the Hill poem lack of coherence can be overcome on re-reading. Readers were also sensitive to the abrupt beginning of Hill's poem, as shown by comment 2: 'Poem starts as though it is a section out of a longer piece'. In 3.3.1 notions from conversation analysis have offered a stylistic explanation for this sense of immediacy. Another comment (no. 47) captures Pound's collagist technique: 'It seems like a series of *random* quotes' (emphasis added). It is worth mentioning that the Strand and the Stevens poems received no such comments. This is due to the higher coherence and more overt reliance on cohesion of these poems, evidenced in Chapter 3.

Unfamiliar vocabulary (see 2.2.2) had the second largest share of comments. At first glance, this can be seen as surprising, given that readers are native speakers of English with a good educational background. However, the French and Latinate words in the Hill poem

proved hard for readers: 'words from languages I am not fluent in make those parts harder to understand' (11), or, 'I only have vague ideas about the meaning of the word' (referring to *amnesty*) (10). In the Howe poem, it was precisely the hyponyms of 'fabric' that were not known by some readers: *weft* and *fustian*. Not surprisingly, *élan* and *phantomerei* in the Stevens poem and *in parvo* in the Prynne one also elicited similar comments.

Problems with reference are often linked to Pound's proper names (comments no. 44, 46, 48, 49, 50, 53), but there is also a more subtle case. In comment no. 62, for instance ('who does this refer to? ['its', line 16]'), the possessive pronoun *its* was circled as a cause of difficulty. The participant may have had some hesitations in assigning *its* to *tilt*, both because the qualifying entity (*tawny caricature and tawny life*) is semantically deviant with respect to *tilt*, and because *tilt* is preceded by a long list of other possible candidates in the noun phrase series analysed in the stylistic analysis (see 3.2.2).

Participants also demonstrated sensitiveness to Howe's asyntactic strings, singled out in several comments (no. 16, 17, 20, 25, 29). This result matches the importance given to blurred constituency relations in the stylistic analysis of the poem (3.5) and are also in keeping with Jeffries's contention that 'the lack of conscious awareness of syntactic deviation, though, does not necessarily mean that these features are not foregrounded' (2010: 109). This syntactic problem is often verbalised by participants in graphological terms, that is, by referring to the lack of punctuation in the poem.

Graphological foregrounding has also been noted in Pound and Hill. A participant says she 'was confused by the graphology of it [Pound's extract]' (no. 45). For another participant, the graphological foregrounding in the Hill stanza could potentially work as a gateway for self-reflection: 'I

don't understand why some parts are capitalised' (no. 5). Here the indicator should push towards further interpretive work. The effort invested is likely to be rewarded, since in the Hill poem these capitalised parts signpost the heteroglossia of the stanza and its effects on the poetic persona (see 3.3.1).

Other comments mention the *lack* of one or more indicators (no. 38, 39, 42, 43, 55, 57). Unsurprisingly, four out of six of them relate to the Strand poem. Comment 43 ('referring to specific people makes it easier to understand') interestingly suggests that the personal experience of having an experiencing subject makes the poem easier to understand, which conversely supports the idea that impersonality is an indicator of difficulty (see 3.7.1). Another participant mentions the presence of 'a story' (no. 42) as a factor aiding her understanding. This comment supports the view that narrativity is an indicator of easiness – as argued in 3.7.1 – while its absence may cause difficulty.

Elsewhere participants verbalise the disruption of a mental representation (no. 23, 26, 30, 60, 65, 68). In these cases it has been necessary to resort to a higher level construct – that of situation model. Comments such as 'I don't quite 'see' what is being described, it's very hard to place in a specific context' (no. 23) or 'dramatic descriptions but of what I am not sure' (no. 68) presuppose a possible situation outside the text and yet opaque to participants. Two interesting cases-in-point are the comments no. 60 and 65, which try both to make sense of Stevens's mysterious 'pyramid with one side / like a spectral cut'. The former comment relates the pyramid to the ear, possibly influenced by the earlier mention of 'an ambitious page dog-eared', while the latter interprets it as an indirect description of a 'sundial' – an interpretation supported by the triangular shape of both objects and the prominence of time as a theme of the poem. Yaron's definition of the difficult poem as one that prompts a

defective representation (see 1.3.1) proves apt when interpreting such comments.

Also comment no. 37 involves situation models, but in a different way. The participant claims that 'the ending [of Strand's poem] is ambiguous'. Later in the protocol, this ambiguity is clarified as follows: 'I take it to mean death or the end of his passion for her'. Hence, the reader is considering two alternative scenarios, both possible in the world of the poem and compatible with the broad semantic scope offered by the word *end*. Comment no. 3 ('difficult subject matter makes the piece quite frustrating to read') can be accommodated by the higher construct of schema reviewed in 2.2.6: a subject matter deemed difficult requires specialised knowledge in order to be made sense of. Schemas developed by familiarity with abstract cultural sources (e.g. theories of physics, philosophical concepts) are likely to be less common than schemas emerging from basic human experience, as the childbirth scene in a Heaney poem (Semino 1995).

Finally, a few comments (no. 18, 53, 72) mention the explicit lack of 'relevance' of certain phrases. These comments cannot be forced into the 'lack of coherence' indicator, as 'relevance' refers to a less generic violation of textual expectations. More specifically, 'relevance' as used in these comments points to the contextual inappropriateness of certain referents, actions or events. It would be misleading, albeit tempting, to trace a parallel with Sperber and Wilson's notion of *relevance*. Indeed, these scholars 'expect this theoretical concept [relevance] to help predict people's intuitions, *but not necessarily their use of the word 'relevance' or of similarly ordinary language terms*' (Sperber and Wilson 1995: 125; emphasis added). As a consequence, the more theoretically neutral label 'contextually felt inappropriateness' was used.

All in all, the 73 comments verbalise a variety of indicators and involve some of the constructs introduced in Chapter 2. They provide an empirical basis that sheds light on the local, real-time problems that readers frequently face when reading difficult poetry. At the same time, the model is equipped for explaining these remarks through the components (i.e. indicators and constructs) that have been included in it (see 2.3).

4.4.3 Topics and inferences

As part of the strategy outlined in the 'Design' section, Question 3 ('What is the poem about?') has been kept deliberately vague. The answers have been examined according to (a) topic identification, and (b) pattern of interpretations as cues to processing depth.

4.4.3.1 Content of the responses – topic identification

The concept of topic as used in this thesis is distinct from that of theme. Van Peer illustrates the difference with a telling example: 'the 'topic' of Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* is the journey into the heart of the jungle; its 'theme', however, could be said to be 'isolation' or 'the savagery of the civilized'' (2002: 256). Topics are situated at a paraphrase level and are typically more concrete than themes. To focus on topics rather than on themes may seem counterintuitive; after all, it is the thematic level that is claimed to matter in literary comprehension (see 2.2.3). Yet theme construction is certainly eased by previous topic identification. What is more, some of the studies reviewed in 4.1 (Svensson 1987, Harker 1994, Peskin and Wells-Jopling 2012) revealed that students underperform in symbolic thinking and theme formulation. Although the participants in the

current study are older than those in the Harker and in the Svensson studies, they too went beyond topic identification only occasionally. The cases in which they did so are discussed in the next subsection, which addresses interpretive patterns.

According to the literature on comprehension, to identify one or more topics means to generate a macroproposition that subsumes a set of sentences (van Dijk and Kintsch 1983: 205). Topic identification is a relatively high processing operation, as it builds on successful activation, construal and integration. The results presented in the previous section evidenced how these very comprehension phases are challenged by five out of the six poems. As a consequence, any cognitive operation that rests on these basic operations should be hindered to some extent. This work is focused on how each of the six poems impedes or eases topic identification, in order to cross-compare such a main facet of offline difficulty.

Analysing the answers for topic identification proved challenging. While in some cases it is straightforward to assign a dominant topic to a comment, in others it is less so. Take the following example: the comment 'I believe that the poem is about freedom. The poet is saying that fantasies provide a freedom and relief for us. But this belief/hope is fantasy' (on Hill) may legitimately be assigned the topic 'freedom', but one may argue that 'hope' and 'fantasies' could be included as additional topics. Manually tagging the comments for topicality is open to critiques of arbitrariness on the researcher's part. As a consequence, this path was not pursued, not to mention that a manual analysis fails to capture the degree of intersubjective agreement across the comments.

One possible solution was to rely on programs for qualitative content analysis, which could automatically tag and code responses (Van Peer et al 2012: 92). Some of the programs are web-based and freely available, for

instance the CAT software (Coding Analysis Toolkit). However, this option was excluded since in this case codes needed to be established from the beginning, while the aim was to let them emerge from the response data. Computer-assisted analysis may be useful with large datasets, but the collated answers to Question 3 amounted to just a few hundred words. Such methodological difficulties were less acute when analysing responses to Question 2, since the coding system used there (the linguistic indicators) is a close, pre-established class that is also theoretically well-grounded. The range of possible topics, by contrast, is an open class to be inductively inferred from the responses.

A satisfactory solution was to deploy WordSmith Tools 6.0, the popular software for corpus analysis. Since the aim was to assess intersubjective topic agreement, WordSmith Tools needed to identify recurrent content words in the answers to each poem. The advantage of WordSmith over content analysis software is that the former does not rely on text-external categories. The analysis procedure is illustrated below. First, the answers to Q3, dealing with the aboutness of the poems, were selected from a file containing all the participants' answers to all the poems. In this way, 60 small plain text files were created, each containing a participant's answer to Q3 related to one of the poems (10 participants, 6 poems = 60 items). By selecting the 'Wordlist' function, the software generated six wordlists (one per poem) and computed the frequency of appearances and the number of participants using each word.

It has to be noted that the absolute frequency of a word alone is often misleading, since it is common for a word to be repeated in a comment by the same participant. This is why, next to the absolute frequency, it is important to assess how widespread a word (hence the topic it cues) is across the responses. While mainly lexical words were considered for each wordlist, there were a few exceptions: 'poem', which is

a convenient referring item; and the pronoun 'I', which cues the respondent herself. Nevertheless, function words were occasionally included whenever they seem contextually meaningful. All words need to occur independently in at least two responses, since this is, by definition, the minimal threshold for intersubjective agreement. Each such 'filtered' wordlist will be discussed on its own, with cross-references to the other lists whenever appropriate.

Since comprehension scores are expected to be reflected in topic agreement, the order of presentation follows the difficulty ranking obtained from Request 1: Strand-Stevens-Hill-Pound-Howe-Prynne.

Table 8 Wordlist for responses to Q3 - Strand

Word	Absolute freq.	Freq. across different participants
MAN	12.00	9.00
HER	10.00	6.00
HE	9.00	5.00
HIS	7.00	5.00
LOVE	7.00	6.00
SHE	4.00	3.00
WOMAN	4.00	4.00
CANNOT	3.00	3.00
LOST	3.00	3.00
GOES	2.00	2.00
HIM	2.00	2.00
HOPE	2.00	2.00
LOVES	2.00	2.00
NIGHT	2.00	2.00
PASSION	2.00	2.00
RELATIONSHIP	2.00	2.00
WEIGHT	2.00	2.00

The wordlist in Table 8 shows that almost all participants (9/10) referred to the man, the main character of the poem as well as its focaliser (see 3.1.1). Other references to the man are through the personal pronouns 'he' (5/10), 'his' (6/10) and 'him' (2/10). Next in the ranking comes the woman, lexicalised in four answers and referred to pronominally ('she') in three answers. These results indicate that the two protagonists are salient

in the responses and vividly retained in the participants' memory. There is a strong correspondence between their linguistic foregrounding in the poem and the effect they elicit on readers. The same holds true of 'love', mentioned in six answers and reinforced by word-forms from the same lexeme ('loves', 'lover') and loose synonyms ('relationship', 'passion'). Notice that 'love' itself is never mentioned in the poem, but is inferable from the general situation portrayed and from semantically related words. 'Cannot' and 'lost' midway through the list are particularly interesting, as both are charged with negativity – in connotation ('lost') and in grammar ('cannot'). Although an auxiliary verb, and hence not fully lexical, 'cannot' proves meaningful once the comments where it appears are inspected. Consider the comments featuring the word:

> 'He **cannot** forget about her and wants for her to come back' (Participant 1)
>
> 'A man who is being cheated on by the woman he loves & **cannot** let her go' (Participant 5)
>
> 'He goes to her grave everyday but **cannot** send the thought away' (Participant 6)

In all these comments, 'cannot' can be related to the lack of purposeful actions identified in the stylistic analysis (3.1). 'Cannot' is part of the elaboration of the male character and, as such, meaningful in its two occurrences. The already striking similarity between these two comments is even more noticeable in the two comments that follows:

> 'I interpret the poem to be about a man who has **lost** his wife' (Participant 5)

'I think the poem is about a man who has **lost** his love to another man' (Participant 6)

'It seems to be about a man pining for a **lost** love who wishes for' (Participant 8)

This is not uncommon in the comments on the Strand poem, which tend to be reformulations of each other. Interestingly, by scanning the wordlist one may roughly reconstruct what the poem is about. Perhaps the schema of the forlorn lover may be activated just by these words.

The response picture for Stevens's poem is remarkably different:

Table 9 Wordlist for responses to Q3 - Stevens

Word	Freq.	Freq. across different participants
WE	10.00	5.00
WHAT	7.00	4.00
SEE	5.00	4.00
BUT	3.00	3.00
DIFFERENT	2.00	2.00
INTERPRET	2.00	2.00
PEOPLE	2.00	2.00
SHADOWS	2.00	2.00
THINKS	2.00	2.00
WORLD	2.00	2.00

Contrary to the wordlist elicited by Strand's poem, here there is no absolute consensus because the most frequent words only appear in half the participants' responses. Three out of the four words most often retrieved come from the poem's title and last line (*we*, *what*, *see*), implying that the poem's perceived aboutness largely rests on these 'framing' elements. Surprisingly, the semantic field of colours and time were not strongly elicited despite their prominence in the poem (see 3.2.2). Although a function word, it was decided to include 'but' in the wordlist because it is meaningful in the context of the comments:

'I think the poem is about people imaging the world around them, **but** it in fact being very different to the way we think it is' (Participant 2)

'The poet describes what he thinks/hopes to see **but** he never actually does' (Participant 3)

'People expect change in a second **but** change occurs over time' (Participant 7)

Line 4 in the poem ('One imagined the violet trees but the trees stood green') may have been perceived as salient by some readers, who read the poem in terms of a conflict between imagined and experienced reality. Overall, participants picked up on different topical or thematic aspects (e.g. the importance of time, of change, the light of the day) but none of these was as dominant as the 'man+woman+love' topic of the Strand poem.

This lack of overlap across responses cues the higher offline difficulty of the Stevens poem compared to that of the Strand poem.

The reception profile of Hill's stanza in terms of aboutness shows the elicitation of two main topics – dreams and society:

Table 10 Wordlist for responses to Q3 - Hill

Word	Freq.	Freq. across different participants
DREAMS	3.00	3.00
INSTEAD	3.00	3.00
LIFE	3.00	3.00
SOCIETY	3.00	3.00
DESPAIR	2.00	2.00
EURO	2.00	2.00
FANTASIES	2.00	2.00
FANTASY	2.00	2.00
PEOPLE	2.00	2.00
POET	2.00	2.00
THEM	2.00	2.00

Intersubjective agreement per word is low (max. 3/10), and, of the top three content words in the list ('dreams', 'life' and 'society'), none of these words is mentioned in the poem verbatim: 'dreams' arguably stems from the synonym *fantasies* in line 1 (a lexeme retrieved as four times in its singular and plural forms); 'society' is alluded to by words in the same discourse field, such as *general amnesty*, *civic freedoms*, *duties*, *rights*. 'Life' derives from a more indirect inferencing, for which no obvious linguistic basis can be found. It could be that 'life' inferentially derives from 'society' and 'dreams', each concept representing life's interactive and the private facet, respectively. Inferencing is more demanding than retrieval of words already in the text, leading to an enhanced offline difficulty effect. The selection of comments below illustrates how these topics are elaborated:

> 'I think the poem is about media's hold on people and the overall power media can have on **society**' (Participant 2)
>
> 'A series of declarations on what is wrong with **life** and how we should live it' (Participant 3)
>
> 'I interpret it to be about the vanquish of the **dreams** of man' (Participant 6)
>
> 'It is about everyone making their **dreams** a common cause, instead of just living and accepting everything **life** gives you' (Participant 9)

These comments conform to Culler's rule of significance (2002 [1975]: 205; see 3.7.1): in the Hill stanza, readers sensed themes that are core to human concerns. An adversative conjunction, 'instead' is particularly meaningful as its occurrences are confined to the responses to this poem.

As exemplified in the comment above by Participant 9, 'instead' aligns readers to the disillusioned and yet pugnacious stance of the speaking I (see 3.3).

The Pound extract elicited very little intersubjective agreement:

Table 11 Wordlist for responses to Q3 - Pound

Word	Freq.	Freq. across different participants
SOMETHING	2.00	2.00
POETRY	2.00	2.00
POLITICS	2.00	2.00
THINK	2.00	2.00

The table is a straightforward demonstration of Pound's offline difficulty. Participants either diverged in their topical interpretation, or plainly admitted their inability to fully grasp the text. The last point can be illustrated by comments like 'As a whole I cannot decipher it' (Participant 8), 'It's intended for a political message, though don't know what it is' (Participant 9), or the tentative 'The confusion & disagreement of critical response?' (Participant 5). As for the two specific topic words elicited, 'poetry' arguably derives from *pentameter*, 'politics' from the proper names associated with it (*Mr Jefferson* and *John Adams*).

The poem by Howe elicits some intersubjective agreement instead, as shown by Table 15:

Table 12 Wordlist for responses to Q3 - Howe

Word	Freq.	Freq. across different participants
NATURE	6.00	4.00
BOY	4.00	3.00
THINK	3.00	3.00
MORNING	2.00	2.00

Table 12 shows that 'nature' is salient among readers, certainly due to meronyms such as *cloven rock* and *pine tree* in the text, or the adjective *wildeyed* which possibly belongs to the same discourse field. Also 'boy' resulted salient, which may be explained by its end-position, its attention-catching premodification (*wildeyed boy*) and *empathetic recognisability* (i.e. its 'human' status), a feature typical of attractors according to Stockwell (2009: 25). The 'fabric' semantic field was not recognised as a prominent topic, either because as a topic it is perceived as an odd one (as Perloff points out in her review) and/or because some of the 'fabric' words were unknown to the participants (see 4.4.2). The presence of 'think' in the wordlist is not really meaningful, since it is used as a conventional hedge in two cases, and only once it cues a genuine interpretive uncertainty:

> 'I **think** it's about nature, but I'm really not sure!' (Participant 2)

This statement is not the only one cueing tentative topic identification. A similar function can be seen in other comments displaying hedges such as *might* or the interrogative mood: 'A scared boy in the mountains?' (Participant 5) and 'the poem might be about the sunrise and the beginning of a new day' (Participant 6). These strong hedges were tellingly absent in responses to the Strand, Stevens and Hill poems. Other comments verbalise an impairment of understanding in a vein similar to responses to Pound: 'I actually don't know' (Participant 3), 'I can't figure out any overall meaning' (Participant 8) and even 'It seems senseless, as though the poet is just rambling' (Participant 9).

Together with Pound's extract, the wordlist for Prynne shows one of the lowest intersubjective agreements among the poems:

Table 13 Wordlist for responses to Q3 - Prynne

Word	Freq.	Freq. across different participants
SEX	3.00	3.00
NATURE	2.00	2.00
PEOPLE	2.00	2.00
PICNIC	2.00	2.00

The threefold elicitation of 'sex' is accounted for by the early mention of the word in the text along with a hyponym (*shag*). 'People' possibly stems from the cursorily mentioned human figures (*kid*, *Rienzi*, *lady-prowler*; see 3.6), while 'nature' has been arguably elicited by *peaks* via meronymic inference (peaks as part of landscape, hence of nature) and by *picnic* via metonymic inference (a picnic circumstantially involves nature). As in Howe, the semantic fields of colours and liquids identified in the stylistic analysis (3.6) were not activated, as the deviance of the text overshadowed the presence of such non-contiguous cohesive chains. The only intersubjective agreement created by the Prynne poem lies in statements of rejection or tentative topic identification: 'I don't know' (Participants 3 and 6); 'I have no idea' (Participant 9); 'I thought the poem was about sex to start with, but the later references have me unsure' (Participant 2); 'As a wild guess, a picnic area/campsite place overrun with people and the confusion this creates' (Participant 8).

To recapitulate, offline difficulty is cued by a decrease in the number of responses with shared topical elements, leaving more freedom to each reader. Comments high in hedging or admitting one's inability to comprehend the poem are another response indicator of offline difficulty, and are found in the Pound, Howe and Prynne poem only.

4.4.3.2 Inferences and interpretive patterns

Inferences are cognitive processes implying 'the derivation of additional knowledge from facts already known; this might involve going beyond the text to maintain coherence or to elaborate on what was actually presented' (Harley 2008: 368). This is a topic worth exploring for poetry processing, also in the light of Peskin's remark that 'the construction of meaning when reading poetry must make far greater demands on the inferential process' (1998: 236).

The inferential comments place emphasis on different textual aspects according to the poem they refer to. The comments elicited by the Strand poem often focus on its main character, the man. Participants endow him with volition and emotional states: 'he is so distraught & overcome by emotion that he commits suicide'; 'he doesn't want the night to end'. The psychological portrayal of the man (see 3.1), accounts for such character-related elaborations. The ephemeral, backgrounded characters in the Pound and Prynne poems (see 3.4 and 3.6) failed by contrast to elicit any elaborative inference. Similarly, all the comments elaborating on the poetic persona have been prompted by the Hill poem only: 'the poet is saying that fantasies provide a freedom and relief for us'; 'This poem appears to be one written by a radical and protesting voice' and 'She wants to bring about a sense of disillusionment'. The I-initial position and the interpersonal import of the poem should make the poetic persona conspicuous to readers despite the deconstruction of his self (see 3.3.1). This sort of inferences is classified as *author's intent inferences* in Magliano et al. (1996: 211).

Hill's poem also elicited inferential comments that the aforementioned study classifies as *thematic* (1996: 210). Here respondents made statements on the point(s) of the poem in relation to

states of affairs applying to people in general: 'how a person will never fully realise what they want to make of their life and instead give to reality', for instance, or 'It seems to refer to problems within society and how, as a whole, people don't face up to them which can only lead to a worse future'. The outward-oriented stance of the poem should be responsible for this additional prominence. Indeed, Vipond and Hunt (1985; cited in Magliano et al. 1996) have also shown that stylistic features containing evaluative cues prompt this sort of inference. Other examples include: 'hope diminishes with the sunrise' (on Strand); 'poetry is an individual experience, as is true in life' (on Stevens); and 'there is a fear of being alone but also the hypocrisy of people not wanting others to know about their connections' (on Pound). Importantly, none of these three types of inferential comment (related to a character, to the poetic persona or to the content in general) are found in the responses to the Howe and the Prynne poems. As shown in Chapter 3, in these two poems (a) characters are either absent or backgrounded, and (b) no poetic persona can be identified. The response data in the previous subsection has additionally shown that (c) there is uncertainty in terms of their aboutness. These kinds of inferential comment are thus unequally distributed and rather poem-specific, the element(s) a poem foregrounds being the decisive factor.

A more ubiquitous type of inference elaborates on specific passages. Commenting on 'BLOOD-IN-URINE SAMPLES' in the Hill poem, one participant writes 'perhaps a ref. to the medical system → proposing a sense of danger / threat in this unhealthy age?'. Here a discrete object (*samples*) is interpreted as an allusion to a human institution (*medical system*). This is possible because of the loose relation of meronymy, or part-whole inclusion, between *blood-in-urine samples* and *medical system*. Through a further inferential move, *medical system* leads in turn to

unhealthy age, where the clinical aspect is downplayed to accommodate an existential one. These associations are ordered according to an increasingly higher emphasis on human concerns: urine samples are meaningless per se, and the medical system itself is symbolically meaningful only if seen as the instantiation of something else. Culler's often mentioned *rule of significance* (2002 [1975]: 205) tacitly guides the inference. The same pattern underpins comments like 'Is 'What pine tree wildeyed boy' about expectation of growing up?', 'the 'morning lie' seems to be referencing the promise of a new day' (both on the Howe poem); 'nature blowing at his back could be a metaphor for the 'natural' & 'healthy' relationship that he is oblivious to' (on the Strand poem)[12].

One inference is adamantly paradigmatic: 'The 'cloven rock' reminds me of the devil with 'cloven' hooves'. When analysing this unusual collocation in 3.5.2, I posited an influence of the text-absent collocation on the anomalous one, leading to the retrieval of *hoof*. The further association to *devil* obeys visual cues instead, as the participant seems to have in mind a popular iconography of the devil with cloven hooves. The same interpretive pattern can be observed in an analysis by Toolan on Hill (1993: 39) where *fatted marble* reminds the stylistician of the usual collocation 'fatted calf' (see 1.2).

All the aforementioned comments are characterised by a move away from the text, be it in terms of generalisations or of paradigmatic associations. Contrary to this trend, the comments elaborating on passages from the Stevens poem always lead back to the poem in an explanatory way. Three independently made comments illustrate the point: 'a lot of contrary comments 'of violet gray, a green…' to reflect this questioning of our perspective'; 'the confusing stanzas support this [an

[12] Notice also the elaboration on the character, although this is subordinate of the inference on 'nature'.

interpretation given before] as they appear to be nonsense about a subject'; 'do we see things incorrectly – poet getting us to 'look twice''. The passage *a violet gray, a green violet* was appreciated for enacting or reflecting the perceived topic of the poem, rather than serving as the basis for less constrained interpretive associations. It is possible that the framing effect of title and last line played a role in enabling such to-the-point inferences.

Having focused on local inferences, it is now time to examine three fully-fledged comments by participant 10. These are reported in Figure 9 below and provide the basis for a small case study of how a skilled reader is still constrained in different ways by the text of each poem.

Figure 9 Three interpretive comments by participant 10

[on the Hill poem] I think the poem is about being disappointed with the self-interested nature of today's society as 'each makeshift honour botched' suggests that the 'fantasies' that we delude ourselves with are thrown aside in the pursuit of greed. It uses the jargon of politicians to expose the emptiness of those words. 'Telegraphese' suggests the language of the newspaper. Perhaps these are headlines that sum up today's society, used in this poem to be nonsensical. The poem is suggesting that what we think we know about in regard to politics and the economic climate does not really provide a solution. For example, 'something mùst give, make common cause' is vague. The use of the accent on mùst places the emphasis on this word, reflecting the voice of a critic of the times who might insist on change but not specify what that change must be. The first line 'YES, I know: fantasies see us out…' illustrates the actual lack of understanding of human who attempt to pass judgement on the general state of the world but are actually unable to encompass every aspect.

[on the Howe poem] I think the poem is referring to the brain. I feel that the imagery creates for me a unusual image of the brain. The 'bluish-green' suggests the colour of the brain, 'woollen' describes the texture. I think it encompasses the different senses. Sight in first line, touch in the second, the mouth in the fifth line – all of which are controlled by the brain. I think the vivid language suggests the abstract nature of the brain, in that we do not know much about it. I think the lack of punctuation and enjambment suggests the links between the brain and the body. The questions at the end suggest conscious thought. The 'right fustian' made me think of the right hemisphere.

[on the Strand poem] This poem is about broken love. It refers to a man and a woman whose relationship has broken down. His passion is a burden that can't be lifted, even if the woman is in bed with another. He is calling out to her at night, whether literally or metaphorically I don't think is important. She is lying awake and the 'wounds' of their love are healing gradually. The punctuation keeps them apart, for example when he is imagining her coming to the window, a full stop and then the line after that shows that this does not happen. The poem ends ambiguously. Is this the end of their heartbreak or their lives. Either way 'lonely and feckless', it is the end of their love and gives it a sad final note.

These comments are unmatched for their insight and argumentative development. However, each adopts a different strategy. The comment on

Hill's poem features a tight interplay between the topics identified and the stylistic evidence through which they are interpreted. Various textual elements are recruited to support what is basically an exegesis of the poem, with interpretive insights culminating in a theme formulation like 'The poem is suggesting that what we think we know about in regard to politics and the economic climate does not really provide a solution'.

In the second comment, the Howe poem is paired with a discrete object, 'the brain', never mentioned nor alluded to in the text. The rest of the comment ingeniously selects lexical cues from the poem that can be matched to qualities attributed to the brain. 'Brain' is top-down applied to the text to the point that some claims force the text into it (e.g. 'I think the vivid language suggests the abstract nature of the brain, in that we do not know much about it'). Notice that the 'nature' topic identified across the protocols is never mentioned, as it is incongruous with the interpretive superimposition of 'brain'. Later on, answering to the optional request, the participant self-critically acknowledged that she 'might have been influenced because this research is for a module on language and the brain'. Such an eccentric reading could result from a failure to infer the intended meaning, that is, to perform an exegetic interpretation: 'even though I found it hard to grasp the meaning that the poet intended, I enjoyed the connections that I made myself because of the language'. Contrary to the interpretation performed on the Hill poem, the one on the Howe poem is not exegetic but *eisegetic*. Furlong (1995) describes it in the following terms:

> In eisegetical interpretations, we often find that the reader has used contexts which are unintended, unforeseen, or unforeseeable from the writer's point of view. While such interpretations may well have a richness, consistency and unity comparable to the best of exegetical

> interpretations, to the extent that they could not have been intended by a writer aiming at optimal relevance, they are *entirely the reader's responsibility* (Furlong 1995; emphasis added).

I evidenced the last part of the quote in italics because it tallies with the participant's remark 'I enjoyed the connection I made myself' as well as with the degree of readerly freedom that I posited for this poem (see 3.5). The idea that the semantic, stylistic and structural configuration of texts can preferentially prompt either an exegetic (Hill) or eisegetic (Howe) interpretation *in the same reader* is an intriguing possibility. If corroborated, it would amount to a serious argument against conventionalist positions laying emphasis on predetermined interpretive behaviour (Fish 1980). This possibility warrants further research, as it would be obviously misguided to make any strong claim based on just two interpretations by a single reader.

The comment on Strand's poem can be regarded as a paraphrase of the poem. Neither a theme is formulated – in contrast to the first comment – nor is any interpretive top-down superimposition at work – in contrast to the second comment. Even the nice iconic interpretation of the enjambment 'imagine / her eyes' fails to shed light on the poem as a whole. It can be argued that the comment on Strand is less interpretive compared to the previous ones. The content of the poem, both explicit and imbued with symbolic meaning, is likely to deter any need for further interpretation.

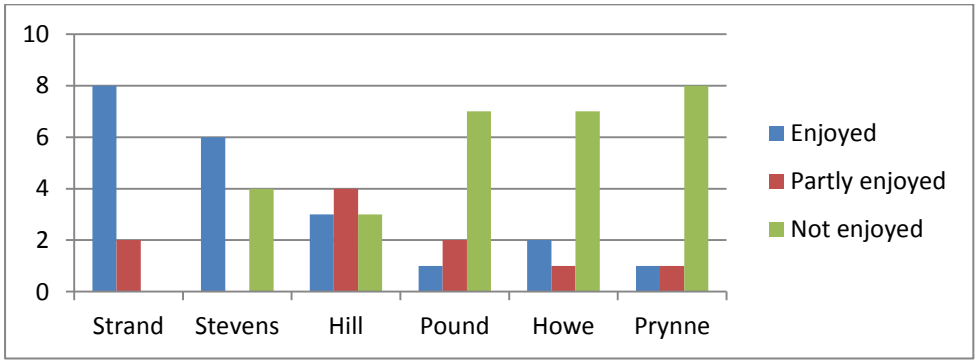
To conclude, in this small case study three poems have elicited three different offline responses in the same reader, differing either in the direction of interpretation (exegesis vs. eiseigesis) or in its depth (interpretation proper vs. summary/paraphrase). The next and last

subsection addresses the issue of how much readerly enjoyment factors in the between-poem readerly differences examined so far.

4.4.4 Enjoyment, 'deep' meaning and compensatory strategies

A self-censored word in a preliminary test (see 4.3.3), 'difficulty' frequently emerges in responses to question 4 ('Have you enjoyed the poem?'). In fact, readers went often beyond a yes/no answer and blamed the difficulty of the poems to justify their lack of enjoyment. Such discrepancy is arguably due to the different nature of the two tasks. In the informal test other participants adopted a neutral stance since they were required to describe a set of poems using a few adjectives. In the current study, by contrast, their personal experience was brought into the foreground. The comments have been grouped in three categories: enjoyed (e.g. 'I enjoyed reading it'); partly enjoyed (e.g. 'I believe I would enjoy this poem more if I had been provided with a cultural & historical background'); and not enjoyed (e.g. 'I did not really enjoy it as I found it very difficult to interpret'). There were no borderline cases, as such categorisation proved intuitive and straightforward. The results are summarised in Fig. 10 below. Important related issues emerging from the answers are addressed immediately after.

Figure 10 Participants' enjoyment of the six poems



The 'enjoyment profile' is similar for the Pound, Howe and Prynne poems, which scored the lowest in the self-assessed comprehension task. The profile for the Strand poem is diametrically opposed, which again is consistent with the comprehension scores. The Stevens poem polarises judgments instead, with a slight prevalence of positive over negative answers and none in the 'partly enjoyed' category. The Hill poem features all three kinds of answers to a similar degree. The middle difficulty ranking for both poems (see 4.4.1) seems to tally with the less clear-cut responses they elicited in terms of enjoyment. Difficulty, then, decreases appreciation (Spiro 2011), interest (Eva-Wood 2004) and enjoyment (the current study). These findings can be accounted for by the proposal that processing fluency boosts aesthetic pleasure (Reber et al. 2004).

From a qualitative angle, readers hinted at a presence of a 'deeper meaning' and the need for rereading when expanding on their degree of enjoyment. All the comments hinting at either or both phenomena refer, very interestingly, to the Hill and the Stevens poem. Four participants mentioned re-reading as an aid to better understanding the Hill poem: 'I did enjoy it – especially upon re-reading it and I could explain what I thought its meaning was' or 'the meaning I have got from it became clearer after multiple readings'. One refers to this dimension for the Stevens poem: 'if I had more time I would've liked to read it more thoroughly, I might've liked it'. These data highlight the importance of adopting a re-reading paradigm in empirical studies (Dixon et al. 1993: 17). The risk of low ecological validity of asking respondents to re-read irrespective of their willingness to do so means that sensitive methods (e.g. longitudinal studies, board diaries…) will have to be adopted for research on difficult poetry to develop.

The Stevens poem also elicited two comments related to the perception of a deep or complex meaning: 'Seems this poem should be saying more than just describing the start of afternoon but this is hard to find' and 'This wasn't particularly easy to understand initially but required a moments more concentration to consider meaning. Further thought clarifies the meaning more'. A comment on the Hill poem constructs 'deeper meaning' as dependent on outer knowledge: 'I believe I would enjoy this poem more if I had been provided with a cultural & historical background. So that I could apply such knowledge to the poem to draw deeper meaning'. Each in its own way then, the Hill and Stevens poems are sensed to communicate more than can be accessed initially. Emerging only for these poems, issues of deeper meaning and the need for re-reading appear as a response indicator of medium difficulty.

Responses to poems at the end of the difficulty continuum are marked by a narrower appreciation of formal features as aesthetically rewarding in themselves: 'I enjoyed reading it because it sounds poetic through the phonetics: the alliteration retains an upbeat tone to it' (on Howe); 'I like the form of the poem & the alliteration but it is difficult to enjoy anything beyond that as it's hard to understand' (on Howe); 'it's interesting to read & the form & sound of the poem is entertaining however it is hard to enjoy something I can find no meaning in' (on Prynne); 'Interesting imagery. Like the sounds in the poem' (on Prynne). The emergence of such remarks is arguably the by-product of a compensatory strategy: readers readdress their attention to non-semantic aspects after their failure in building a coherent mental representation out of semantic content.

4.5 Conclusion

The study has brought to light many measures for offline difficulty that allow a flexible, multifaceted view of this response phenomenon. The comparison of the poems' elicited response has been a constant focus of the chapter, thus substantially adding to previous knowledge of differences in processing across poems (Yaron 2002). Table 14 below provides a synoptic view of such differences:

Table 14 Summary of elicited responses per poem

Readerly measures of offline difficulty	**Strand**	**Stevens**	**Hill**	**Pound**	**Howe**	**Prynne**
Comprehension Score (0 to 5)	**0.8**	**2.4**	**3.1**	**3.5**	**4.1**	**4.6**
Enjoyed the poem	**8** subjects	**6** subjects	**3** subjects	**2** subjects	**1** subject	**1** subject
Deemed meaningless	-	-	-	**1** subject	**2** subjects	**3** subjects
No. of topic keywords shared by two or more respondents	**17**	**10**	**11**	**4**	**4**	**4**
Hedging in topic identification	None to mild	None to mild	None to mild	Mild to strong	Mild to strong	Mild to strong
Hinted at need of re-reading/deeper meaning	-	**3** subject	**5** subjects	-	-	-
Appreciation of formal features in comments about meaning	-	-	-	-	**2** subjects	**2** subjects
Interpretation type (subject 10)	Paraphrase	Not available	Exegetic	Not available	Eisegetic	Not available

Some of the results can be explained with reference to previous research – namely, the inverse relationship between enjoyment and difficulty (Eva-Wood 2004, Spiro 2011), the inverse relationship between topic identification and comprehension scores (Goodblatt and Glickson 2010) and an enhanced discernment of formal features in more difficult texts (Yaron 2002). Even so, the experienced difficulty has for the first time

been linked back to the poetic texts through detailed stylistic analyses (Chapter 3), which in turn relied on a list of linguistic indicators (2.2). The more tentative but also more enticing results seem genuinely new in the empirical camp as well as in literary theory: a) the link between medium difficulty and perception of deeper meaning and b) the possibility that the nature of interpretation is guided by the textuality of poems. As for the former, one can speculate that a partial grasp of a poem's meaning should persuade readers to invest further interpretive effort. As for the latter, it may be proposed that the more a poetic persona is effaced from the poem, the more eisegetic the interpretation will probably be. What is more, a corpus linguistics approach (analysis of wordlist) has been relied on as a viable alternative to content analysis software.

Due to its exploratory commitment, this chapter has generated a number of findings and proposals. These are gathered in the list below for ease of reference:

(1) The linguistic indicators are a viable coding system for difficulties verbalised by readers;
(2) There is an inverse relationship between enjoyment and difficulty in the group of readers analysed;
(3) Offline difficulty is cued by a decrease in the number of responses with shared topical elements;
(4) Readers' interpretive behaviour is constrained in different ways by different poems;
    a. Textuality of a poem can constrain the nature of interpretation (exegetic vs. eisegetic) and its depth (distance from paraphrase level);
    b. Inferential activity focuses on what each poem foregrounds;

c. Explicitness and inherent meaningfulness of content inhibits further inferential activity;

(5) Perception of deeper meaning and the need for re-reading are response indicators of poems of medium difficulty;

(6) Focus on formal properties is typical of very difficult poems and may be a compensatory strategy for failure in accessing semantic content;

It is worth stressing that the statements from 4 to 6 are proposals rather than findings; but the goal of a qualitative study is precisely that of generating fresh insights to be tested in controlled experiments in the future. Indeed, all the findings and proposals have been written in a form that makes them amenable to falsification.

Despite its contribution, this study has limitations that became apparent during the analysis of the responses. The most obvious concerns the little control of the researcher over the open-endedness of the data, which required a number of *post hoc* strategies to be categorised and interpreted. Another potential limitation stems from the fixed text presentation order, leading to imbalances in the time and effort spent on each poem. Even so, the text effects related to difficulty that have been found are robust enough as to supersede text presentation order. Finally, a limitation shared with most empirical research to date is the fact that the sample of readers is representative of a specific population only – a social bias criticised by Stockwell (2009: 12). Yet it must be emphasised that a sample in a qualitative study cannot, nor should, be representative of the whole reading population. A PhD project in English usually has limited resources to recruit participants from settings other than universities or colleges. This is a path for future empirical research, a path in need of

combined expertise from sociology, education, literature and literary reading.

Participants in the current study expressed a desire for re-reading that applies only to some poems, so future research might design re-reading tests to shed light on how and if difficult poems are understood over time. Difficulty itself may be legitimated in readers' eyes if one such development is supported empirically. It may also be useful to test proposal no. 4 by asking two groups of expert readers to interpret different poems to see whether really the direction of interpretation is in-built in the textuality of the poems. Interest in interpretation has recently experienced a surge in stylistics (see Jeffries 2014), so the suggested experiment would suit the research agenda well. Finally, future tests should also encompass response indicators of difficulty below the threshold of awareness. The next chapter is a contribution in this direction, since it uses reading times to integrate the readerly picture for difficulty that has emerged so far.

5 Testing online difficulty

5.1 Reading time as a measure of processing effort

A key assumption in psycholinguistics is that what is time-consuming to read is difficult, and viceversa. As Smith sums up, 'the notion prevails that linguistic complexity increases processing time and perhaps processing difficulty' (Smith 1988: 248). Similarly, Sanford and Emmott point out that 'the amount of time spent reading the region and re-inspecting earlier portions of the text by regressions provides an indication of processing difficulty' (2012: 50). A number of experiments have compared reading times for a control word/phrase/sentence and a manipulated version, establishing causal links between linguistic structures and processing effort. An extensive review of these studies, centred on eye-tracking methods, is Staub and Rayner (2007), while a general overview is Harley (2008, esp. Ch. 12). Ease/difficulty of processing also feeds into theories on the nature of our mental lexicon. The finding that formulaic sequences are read more quickly than non-formulaic ones, for instance, has led Conklin and Schmitt (2012) to argue that the former are stored as whole units in the mind rather than the result of compositional operations. Reading times do not cue processing operations in a mechanical fashion, however. Indeed, 'a certain level of reading speed can be reflective of both a time investment (careful reading, rereading, etc.) and severely compromised reading activity (problems with decoding, prolonged but unresolved uncertainty, etc.)' (Wallot et al. 2014: 1751). In the following section, I review the pioneering studies that rely on reading times to shed light on literary texts, since they are the benchmarks for the empirical study on online difficulty presented in this chapter.

5.2 The use of reading times in the processing of literature

As early as 1917, Shklovsky argued that the technique of art is 'to increase the difficulty and *length of perception*' (1998: [1917] 12; emphasis added). Art, difficulty and reading times are tightly intertwined in this famous claim. Half a century later, Riffaterre (1971: 51) restated the point whilst speculating that readers would slow their reading down when reading certain striking features in a literary text. Zwaan (1993 [1991]: 48-56; see 2.1.1) conducted an experiment in which reading times were recorded for a set of texts read under two different conditions. In the former, a group of respondents was told that they were reading newspaper articles; in the latter, another group was told that they were reading fictional excerpts. Zwaan found that the literary perspective elicited a 12% increase in reading time despite the fact that the texts were the same. The implication is that there is indeed a literary mode of reading that leads readers to invest more processing effort than when reading for information.

The study by Zwaan is criticised by Miall and Kuiken (1994) on the grounds that 'Zwaan's texts were deliberately chosen because they contained few 'literary qualities'' (1994: 396). The critique stems from the different perspective taken by Miall and Kuiken, interested in readerly response to indisputably literary texts rather than in the effects of predetermined reading behaviours. Following van Peer (1986), they assigned a foregrounding value to segments in three short literary texts. They found that segments high in foregrounding were read more slowly than those low in foregrounding. Although they cautiously remark that 'reading times provide only a coarse indication of the complexity of the interpretive efforts that unfold in response to foregrounding' (1994: 404), it would have helped to provide the reading times recorded alongside the

correlation values. This would have enabled a cross-comparison with the reading times obtained in the current study (see 5.4).

It must be stressed that neither Zwaan, nor Miall and Kuiken, study the processing of poetry. Zwaan justifies such neglect with the methodological consideration that 'a cognitive approach to literary prose is more likely to be on solid theoretical and empirical grounds than a study of poetry would be' (Zwaan 1993: 5). This argument raises no objection, only the bitter acknowledgment that seldom has poetry been subjected to the systematic scrutiny carried out by narratologists on fiction. The use of fictional texts by Miall and Kuiken is instead justified by the researchers' commitment to broaden the purview of van Peer's research (1986). The study by van Peer focuses on poetic texts indeed, yet it does not rely on reading time measurements.

The first study examining poetic texts through reading times is Hanauer (1998a) reviewed in 4.1 for the finding that poetry is read more slowly than encyclopaedic items. Differently from Miall and Kuiken, Hanauer does report reading times. These vary from 1.84 to 3.58 seconds per word across the poetic excerpts, compared to a mere 1.31 to 1.58 seconds per word for encyclopaedic items. Reporting reading times as word/sec ratios is hardly accurate, however, as words vary considerably in length. Granted the variation in reading times across poetic excerpts partly stems from this kind of measurement report, it still seems that differences in processing are substantial within poetry. Hanauer pays little attention to this aspect of his own data, though, as he is primarily interested in variation across – rather than within – genres.

This gap has been filled by Carminati et al. (2006), who examine variations in reading times across poetic subgenres. They selected stanzas from Byron's *Don Juan* as a representative of the epic subgenre and stanzas from Thomas Gray's *Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard* as a

representative of the lyric subgenre. They found increased reading times whenever a shift occurred from an epic to a lyric stanza and viceversa (2006: 212). They took the increase in reading times to reflect readerly awareness of subgenre distinctions; however, the possibility that thematic or ideational world shifts co-influenced these results cannot be ruled out. The experiment could be replicated with poems from the same subgenre: if a comparable variation in reading times still occurs, the subgenre hypothesis would be falsified.

Sanford and Emmott (2012) draw on psycholinguistic findings to shed light on narratological notions, including perspective and suspense. They review experimental work showing that longer reading times are elicited by a mismatch between verb aspect and images suggesting either aspect (2012: 154) or by a change of emotional state in characters (2012: 206). They also report that shorter reading times have been recorded for words 'in narrow focus' (2012: 88) by means of marked sentence structures (e.g. cleft structures, fronting). Again, they do not provide the exact reading times, nor are they specifically concerned with difficulty, leaving aside the fact that their focus is on a genre other than poetry.

Mahlberg et al. (2014) do report reading times for patterns of body language in novels by Dickens. Relying on eye-tracking and follow-up interviews, they investigate readerly awareness of such patterns – instantiated in clusters, or repeated sequence of words – as compared to their surrounding co-text. They found that the clusters were read significantly faster than the average for each extract and conclude that 'body-language clusters are part of the readers' literary competence that is built up through exposure to a number of literary texts' (2014: 15). From the perspective of the current study, the interest of Mahlberg et al. (2014) lies in its strong methodology that detects background elements with a contextualising function (2014: 16). The challenge will be to investigate

whether any background or contextualising function can or cannot be ascribed to stretches in the dense poems analysed in Chapter 3, and tested in Chapter 4 and in the current chapter.

Eye-tracking methods are also used by Jagt et al. (2014), who study the influence of enjambments on the processing of poetry. Although they used text fragments rather than full texts, their sophisticated design allows for comparing various conditions: not only presence vs. lack of enjambment, but also effects of enjambment type (i.e. syntactically complete vs. syntactically incomplete) and modes of presentation (i.e. prose, non-lineated; poetry, lineated). They report reading time measures for fixations at critical words immediately preceding and following the line breaks. However, since fixations are taken for single words rather than for lines, it is not possible to directly compare the reading speeds they obtained and those discussed in 5.5. Their main findings are the following: (a) longer reading times when texts are presented as poetry; (b) more difficult interpretation processes for poetry with enjambment; and (c) processing difference between syntactically complete and incomplete enjambment. More specifically, it seems that the default tendency by readers is to slow down when faced with an enjambment that does not disrupt syntax. By contrast, when this happens reading speeds up in an attempt to repair the perceived incompleteness.

Fabb (2013) too makes use of time measurements, although he takes into account spoken performance rather than silent reading. His aim is to disprove Turner and Pöppel's claim (1983) that 'lines of metrical poetry tend to measure three seconds or less when performed aloud, and that the metrical line is fitted to a three second 'auditory present' in the brain' (cited in Fabb 2013: 1). This claim, Fabb points out, rests on data of uncertain provenance, and one that can be easily disproved when compared against recordings of lines performed by professional actors.

Assuming Turner and Pöppel were right in spite of this evidence, we would be faced with a very unlikely consequence: 'this failure to fit into the temporal window should have a bad consequence: the performed line would fail because we would not be able to process it as a whole' (2013: 13). By showing that line duration is not constrained by listeners' psychological capacity, Fabb challenges 'empiricist/embodiment/contextual approaches, which would see the characteristics of the verse as arising from its manifestation in the world as performance in the temporal world' (2013: 2). The view taken in the current study is complementary to Fabb's. In particular, it is shown how the structural and semantic properties of lines influence processing during silent reading.

To recapitulate, reading times in the study of literature serve a variety of purposes: from investigating readerly expectations (Zwaan 1991) to detecting response differences across genres (Hanauer 1998a) and within genres (Carminati et al. 2006); from testing stylistic features (Sanford and Emmott 2012, Mahlberg et al. 2014) to matters of affect and foregrounding (Miall and Kuiken 1994), including their potential to falsify claims of wider theoretical interest (Fabb 2013). As a consequence, it surprises me that a fundamental function of reading times – the cueing of processing effort – has received little emphasis so far. Yaron tellingly downplays the significance of reading time data on the grounds that they neglect qualitative information on the 'strategies readers activate when the reading time increases' (2002: 134). Yaron's critique may hold for orthodox psycholinguistic studies, which are not interested in qualitative differences but rather in evidence that neatly supports or disproves models of processing. Throughout the rest of the chapter I intend to demonstrate, *pace* Yaron, that reading time data can advance our understanding of difficulty as a qualitative response phenomenon.

5.3 Aim of the study

At its broadest, the goal of the current study is to explore online difficulty. Reading time is obviously an online measure as it provides information on the reading process during its unfolding. Findings from the previous chapter suggest that the linguistic indicators are fairly reliable in accounting for offline difficulty, but does the same hold true of online difficulty? Another interesting issue concerns the extent to which reading times, and thus the processing effort, keeps constant throughout each poem. Intuitively, an even processing should tally with stylistic and rhythmic uniformity in a given poem. Contrary to the patterns of body language investigated by Mahlberg et al. (2014), poems are less likely to feature perceptually backgrounded elements. This is due to their brevity and avoidance (or radical re-contextualisation) of formulaic sequences. Finally, the addition of an originally narrative extract to the materials used (see 5.4.1 below) will allow testing a central global-scale indicator, narrativity (2.2.5).

5.4 Method

5.4.1 Materials

The six poems analysed in Chapter 3 and tested in Chapter 4 were used in the current study as well, so that data for offline and online difficulty can be compared. This time, however, I decided to also include an extract from a narrative text. This is the opening of J. G. Ballard's *The Drowned World*, a science fiction novel published in 1962. Because I discussed narrativity as inversely related to difficulty (see 2.2.5), Ballard's opening works as a better control text compared to Strand's poem, as the latter exhibits

markedly poetic elements alongside some degree of narrativity (see 3.1). While I left the language of the Ballard text unaltered, I disguised it as a poem by adding lineation to it. This decision was guided by Zwaan's already discussed finding (1993 [1991]; see 5.2) that genre awareness influences processing time. Since I am interested in the language of literary texts rather than in genre expectations, my purpose was to predispose participants to mistake Ballard's fictional extract for a standalone narrative poem. Together with the added lineation, this genre misclassification should be aided by Ballard's literary style:

> Soon it would be too hot. Looking out
> from the hotel balcony shortly after eight o' clock,
> Kerans watched the sun rise behind the dense groves
> of giant gymnosperms crowding over the roofs
> of the abandoned department stores for a hundred yards
> away on the east side of the lagoon.
> Even through the massive olive-green fronds
> the relentless power of the sub was plainly tangible.
> The blunt refracted rays drummed
> against his bare chest and shoulders, drawing out the first sweat,
> and he put on a pair of heavy sunglasses
> to protect his eyes. The solar disc was
> no longer a well-defined sphere, but a wide expanding ellipse
> that fanned out across the eastern horizon
> like a colossal fire-ball, its reflection
> turning the dead leaden surface of the lagoon
> into a brilliant copper shield. By noon,
> less than four hours away, the water would seem to burn.

The 'poetic' suggestion created by the passage lies in the presence of a simile (*like a colossal fire-ball*), of lexical foregrounding (the technical word *gymnosperms*), in the elaborate use of attributive adjectives (*dense*, *giant*, *abandoned*, *massive*, *relentless*, *heavy*…). The rhymes created by lineation (*horizON-reflectiON*; *lagOON-nOON*) should further mitigate the feeling that Ballard's text is the odd one out of the sample of poems. At the same time, the text contains the linguistic features (third person pronouns,

proper nouns, past tense verbs, adverbials of time and place) that are prototypical of narrative fictional texts (Biber and Conrad 2009: 150).

5.4.2 Participants

Twelve 1st year undergraduates from the University of Nottingham volunteered for the test as part of the IEL (Investigating English Language) module. All were native speakers of English (all female; mean age 18.2 years; SD = 0.4 years). Their literary competence has been assessed through the personal questionnaire reported in Fig. 11 below, which can be regarded as an improved version of the personal questionnaire in Chapter 4 (see 4.3.1).

Figure 11 The personal questionnaire (online study)

Thank you for dedicating your time to this project. Before you leave, please answer some additional questions about yourself: they will be useful for me to interpret the results of the test. Your identity details (name and surname) will not be collected, so please be honest in your answers!

Male ☐ *Female* ☐

1. *What is your age?*
2. *What is your course and level of study?*
3. *Did you know some of the poems presented? If so, which ones? (provide number)*
4. *Below you will see a list of 20 names. Some of the people in the list are poets, some are not. Please read the names and circle **only** those of the individuals you know to be poets. Try not to guess.*

Wallace Stevens	Thomas S. Eliot	Julia Baker
Paul Walker	John Donne	Ezra Pound
Karl Popper	Emma Lewis	Mark Strand
Susan Howe	Jeremy Prynne	Umberto Eco
Seamus Heaney	Geoffrey Hill	Philip Larkin
Jim Fisher	John Keats	Laura Gardner
Aubrey West	Jamie Graham	

5. *How much time do you devote to reading **for leisure** (all kinds of texts) everyday?*

10-30 min ☐ Less than 1 hour ☐ 1-2 hours ☐ 3 hours or more ☐

6. *How many novels do you read **for leisure** each year, approximately? (tick as appropriate; books read because in a module reading list should not be counted)*

None ☐ 1 to 3 ☐ 4 to 10 ☐ More than 10 ☐

7. *How many books of poetry do you read **for leisure** each year, approximately? (tick as appropriate; books read because in a module reading list should not be counted)*

None ☐ 1 to 3 ☐ 4 to 10 ☐ More than 10 ☐

8. *Are they usually 20th century poetry collections? (If answer is other than 'None')*

Yes ☐ No ☐ Just some of them ☐

9. *Circle* **YES** *or* **NO** *if you wish to be informed about the purpose and the results of the test (if YES, take note of my e-mail, which is displayed on the top left of this page, and contact me after December 2013 to enquire about the results)*

10. *Add any comments if you wish to do so*

From the questionnaire it emerged (Q3) that none of the participants knew any of the texts used in the study, so they all were read for the first time ever during the test. The list in Q4 is an Author Recognition test, a test which 'can be used as a measure for "print exposure"' (van Peer et al. 2012: 221). It includes poets, other intellectuals and made up names. It has been prepared to check whether the participants knew some of the authors of the texts they were about to read, as well as to gather information on their familiarity with poetry. On average, participants correctly identified four out of the twelve poets in the list. The top scorers were, unsurprisingly, canonical authors included in the syllabus (e.g. Donne, Keats, Eliot, Pound) or well-known poets writing in the second half of the twentieth century (e.g. Larking and Heaney). Except for Pound, identified by twelve participants, the authors used in the test were little or completely unknown: Stevens and Strand were identified twice in total, Hill only once, Howe and Prynne never. In terms of time devoted to leisure reading, 16% of participants read less than 30 min. per day and none more than three hours. The majority of responses are split between 30 min. and one hour (50%) and from one to two hours (50%).

A comparison between poetry and novels (Q6 and Q7) puts in relief the greater popularity of the latter genre, thus confirming what emerged from the personal questionnaire in Chapter 4. As many as 42% of the participants read more than ten novels per year, against 0% for poetry;

conversely, one third of the participants (33%) read only one to three poetry collections per year, and even more are those who did not read poetry collections at all (58%). In contrast to this, all the participants read at least one to three novels per year. These data show that even well-read participants like those in this study by and large favour fiction over poetry when it comes to leisure reading. This picture must be borne in mind when analysing some of the results from the reading time task in the next section.

5.4.3 Design

The test was carried out using the E-prime software. The test type is a self-paced reading task: participants control the reading speed by pressing the space bar button on the keyboard to move from a segment of text to the next one. In the meantime, the software programme records in milliseconds the time between each pressing of the button. The resulting output, automatically produced by the software, consists of a table of reading times per participant that the researcher can transfer onto an Excel file for statistical analysis (see 5.5).

It is up to the researcher to determine the length of each segment. This can range from single words to entire paragraphs. These segments are technically called 'regions of interests' (ROI), as the research question is based on them. In general, longer segments favour a more natural reading experience, but also dramatically reduce the precision of the information provided by reading times: how is it possible to know, for a whole paragraph, which linguistic factor influenced the total reading time? Word-by-word measurements are by contrast much more precise, but they come at the cost of a very unnatural reading experience.

The region of interest for the current study is the line, which allows drawing meaningful information from the reading times whilst preserving a readerly experience as close as possible to natural reading. Lines have indeed been argued to be processed as whole units in the working memory: 'There is evidence […] that the line must be processed "quantally" as a whole unit, rather than incrementally as the line proceeds' (Fabb 2014: 13). Although Fabb confines his argument to metrical verse, something similar may hold true of free verse, where regularities are not uncommon. In Adamson's words, poets attempt 'to create verse-forms in which such regularities are structural, as in Frost's proposal to base metre on intonation patterns […] or Olson's claim that his lines […] correspond to breath units' (Adamson 1999: 615). Another strong reason to segment the poems following their original lineation is that readers are sensitive to line-endings, as the study by Jagt et al. (2014) reviewed earlier has shown. Furthermore, segmenting the texts according to their original lineation minimises the researcher's direct intervention in the texts[13]. Last, but not least, the alternative of using clauses as segmentation units is not feasible, since some of the poems rarely exhibit fully grammatical clauses.

The technical name of the test is 'window-moving accumulating test task'. 'Accumulating' implies that previously read segments remain on the screen after pressing the button, so participants are allowed to reread parts of the text. Carminati et al. (2006) opted for a non-incremental presentation of the texts. This choice increases the artificiality of the reading experience, as readers are prevented from returning to passages they find problematic or to retrace coherence and cohesion. Yet this readerly behaviour is likely to be favoured by the proved difficulty of most of the poems tested (see Chapter 4). Indeed, difficult poems lead readers

[13] This choice does not apply to the Ballard genuinely narrative extract, because it was segmented by the analyst.

to monitor their own comprehension, a cognitive operation that is one among 'higher order reading processes' (Cremer and Schoonen 2013:1213).

The text presentation order was randomised to eschew order effects like fatigue or improved performance through exposure to the task (van Peer et al. 2012: 130). Each text appeared once only, and readers could not return to it once they proceeded to the following text. This ensured that reading times were recorded for first readings only, as the focus of the present thesis is on the *impact* of difficulty more than in its overcoming. Future research could and should compare reading times for the first and second reading of difficult and accessible poems, in order to gain a fuller picture of how these are processed over time.

5.4.4 Procedure

Sessions took place on a one-to-one basis in the psycholinguistics laboratory at the University of Nottingham. Each participant was asked to sit in front of a computer screen and, when ready, was instructed to open the file of the experiment. At this point, they read the instructions displayed on the screen and reported verbatim in Fig. 12 below.

Figure 12 On-screen instructions for the reading task

- *Thank you for accepting to take part in this test.*
- *You will read **a set of seven poems** on the screen.*
- ***You will view one stretch of text at a time**: just press the space bar button to proceed to the next stretch (the preceding text will not be deleted in the operation)*
- *When each text is finished, you will see the message **'End of text'**; at that point, take a short pause if you want (10-15 sec.) then press the space bar button again for the following text to start.*
- *Repeat this operation each time. The last* 'End of text' *message will be followed by the message **'End of test'** as you press the space bar button. At that point the test is finished and you can leave the computer.*
- *Please try to read **as naturally as you can**: there are no time restrictions, but consider that you should read at the same pace as when you read for leisure, not as when you have to study or learn a text by heart nor when you just skim through a text.*
- *Ready? Let's start!*

A 'leisure' mode of reading was emphasised in the penultimate point, bearing in mind the influence of the reading mode adopted on reading times (Zwaan 1993 [1991]; see 5.2). Although it may sound odd that an instruction should ask readers to behave naturally, the omission of such instruction would have resulted in non-comparable response data, with some participants trying to analyse a poem and others skimming through it. There is no problem-free approach in empirical studies, especially when it comes to testing literary texts rather than examples constructed for specific purposes. The general rule is therefore to do 'the next best thing' (van Peer et al. 2012: 135). The task was completed in five to ten minutes. Before leaving, the participant received the personal questionnaire presented in 5.4.2. Once this was completed too, it was handed back and the participant could leave the room. This procedure was repeated for each participant.

5.5 Results and discussion: online difficulty and processing profiles

The analysis of the reading times was done per item (i.e. poems) rather than per participant, as the interest was in the average response to each poem rather than in the variability of readerly skills or attitudes. This decision, together with the randomisation of the text order, ensures that the variability found in the reading times per item can be attributed to the language of the items rather than to readerly idiosyncrasies or to order effects. Throughout the analysis, I discuss the average reading speed per poem as a general measure of its online difficulty and also compare the reading speed of the lines within the parameter of each text. This provides

a measure of its processing uniformity. The average reading speed per poem is the average reading speed for all the lines of a given poem. The reading speed for each line, in turn, is the average speed across all the participants. As the regions of interest (the lines) vary in their length, the reading speed per line is obtained by dividing the reading time in milliseconds by the number of characters of that line, counted by the software. This practice is standard in psycholinguistics dealing with non-manipulated data, as exemplified by Carminati et al. (2006) and by Mahlberg et al. (2014). Another preliminary step was that of removing outliers, that is, abnormally low or high values stemming from human error (e.g. momentary distractions) and likely to skew the results. Following a standard procedure in psycholinguistics (e.g. Jagt et al. 2014), to be classed as outlier a value needs to exceed the average by 2.5 standard deviations (SD) in either direction (SD is the average distance of all the values in a sample from the mean value). This operation resulted in the removal of 2.87% of the original reading speed data.

Some quantifiable textual features seem likely to influence the overall reading speed of each text, so they are worth mentioning before introducing the reading speed values. These are a) type/token ratio, b) mean word length, c) word/punctuation ratio, and d) word/adjacent stress ratio. *Type/token ratio* indicates density of information through the amount of full lexical repetition. Where there are fewer words repeated, the information is denser in a text, resulting in a higher type/token ratio (the highest possible value is 100). *Mean word length* is a measure of vocabulary complexity – abstract words tend to be polysyllabic. *Word/punctuation ratio* could have an influence on reading times in case subvocalisation occurs during silent reading. Indeed, Steinhauer and Friederici report evidence that 'punctuation slows down reading locally' (2001: 269). While this claim holds true in controlled conditions, it will be

queried from a stylistic perspective in which full texts are used. The inclusion of *adjacent stresses* is warranted by the finding that phonologic foregrounding (including spondaic patterns) positively correlates with reading times (Miall and Kuiken 1994: 403). This feature refers to instances where two or more strong stresses follow each other without intervening weak stresses, leading to a spondaic rhythm (— —). Table 15 below displays these numerical factors as they are instantiated in the seven texts used as test materials. An explanation of how the values have been obtained follows afterwards.

Table 15 Possible numerical factors influencing reading speed

	Ballard	**Strand**	**Pound**	**Hill**	**Stevens**	**Prynne**	**Howe**
Type/ token ratio	76.51	61.90	78.70	91.55	65.36	96.15	91.89
Mean word length	4.60	4.11	4.42	5.01	4.25	4.78	4.78
Word/punctuation ratio	7.7	5.3	8.2	2.7	4.4	3.9	-
Word/ adjacent stresses ratio	14.6	16.8	9.7	13.6	16	8.2	7.2

The values for type/token ratio and mean word length (in characters) were calculated by Wordsmith Tools. Once a text is uploaded onto the programme and the 'Wordlist' function is selected, a table is generated that includes the general statistics for that text.

Strand's poem has the lowest type/token value, since it relies on repetitions rather extensively (see 3.1.1). At the opposite end of the scale, Prynne's poem is very dense in terms of information content, as cued by its near avoidance of repetition. The highest value for mean word length is found in Hill's poem, which tallies with its Latinate vocabulary (see 3.3.3).

The lowest value, by contrast, is in Strand's poem, which favours a simple and concrete vocabulary (see 3.1).

The word/punctuation ratio has been calculated manually. A note of caution is needed at this point. To my knowledge, no study has so far investigated the relationship between length of pause and type of punctuation mark involved. Therefore, I had to rely on my own judgment in assigning numerical values to punctuation marks. Full stops were considered strong pauses and each occurrence was assigned the value '2'. Commas were considered weak pauses and each occurrence was assigned the value '1'. All the remaining marks (colon, semicolon, dashes, slashes, ellipsis dots…) were considered medium pauses and each occurrence was assigned the value '1.5'. Summing up the obtained values (e.g. three commas, a colon and two stops = 3*1 + 1*1.5 + 2*2 = 8.5) a punctuation score was obtained. Its density in each text was calculated by dividing the total number of words in the text by the aforementioned score. The lower the value of the ratio, the more densely punctuation is deployed. Hill's poem is the most heavily punctuated, while Howe's dispenses with punctuation altogether.

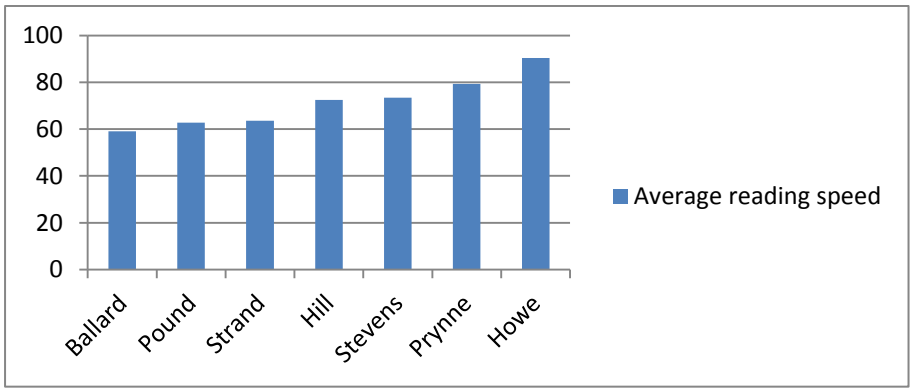
Howe's and Prynne's poems are replete with adjacent stresses, which is probably due to their heavily pre- and post-modified noun phrases. This should favour a slow-paced reading due to the subvocalisation of adjacent strong stresses – as found by Miall and Kuiken (1994).

In Table 16, the average reading speed for each text is provided alongside the standard deviation (SD). The higher the SD value, the less uniform the processing of the text, and viceversa.

Table 16 Average speed and SD across lines per text

Text by	Average speed	SD across lines
Ballard	59.01 ms/char	8.77 ms/char
Pound	62.76 ms/char	11.79 ms/char
Strand	63.51 ms/char	8.38 ms/char
Hill	72.45 ms/char	10.90 ms/char
Stevens	73.39 ms/char	10.47 ms/char
Prynne	79.34 ms/char	12.48 ms/char
Howe	90.41 ms/char	13.05 ms/char

Figure 13 Visualisation of average reading speed per text



The table reveals differences in both SDs and mean reading speed across the small corpus. As for the SD values, the lower ends correspond to the Strand poem (8.38 ms/char) and to the Ballard extract (8.77 ms/char). The Pound extract, although read at nearly the same pace overall, has a considerably greater variation (11.79 ms/char). The poems eliciting more processing variation are also those read the slowest: Prynne (SD = 12.48 ms/char) and Howe (SD = 13.05 ms/char).

Howe's poem is read more slowly than the heavily-punctuated Hill poem. This finding seems to question, or at least to complicate, the aforementioned assumption that punctuation slows down the reading of a text. Far from easing the processing of the text, lack of punctuation can

expose a lack of sentence constituency. With its holistic perspective on texts (Jeffries 2014: 409), stylistics can make a valuable contribution to discourse processing research.

Another noteworthy observation is that the average reading speed of the texts by Ballard, Pound and Strand is close to the 61.85 ms/char figure reported in Mahlberg et al. (2014: 12) for a passage from Dickens. I believe this is not accidental, as these four texts contain key narrative elements despite notable differences in vocabulary and degree of cohesion. The Ballard extract features third person narrator, proper names, past tense, adverbials of time and place; the Strand poem contains third person narrator, foregrounded characters and some adverbials of place (see 4.2.1); the Pound extract exhibits proper names, inquit formulae and direct speech (see 4.5.1 and 4.5.2); the Dickens passage shows a combination of all these features.

From a cognitive standpoint, these stylistic elements should activate a *narrative schema* (van Dijk and Kintsch 1983: 16), even though the overall narrativity of Strand's and Pound's poems is, of course, weaker than Ballard's and Dickens's. The participants' attested familiarity with fictional writing (see 5.4.2) makes their narrative schema stronger than their poetry schema. This may help to explain the similarity in reading times for texts that are so different under many other respects. Online difficulty is thus lower for texts that are narrative or contain narrative elements.

The result for the Pound extract may seem surprising, both considering its difficulty indicators analysed in 3.4 and the response data regarding its offline difficulty (Chapter 4). My proposal is that these two dimensions of difficulty are to an extent independent from each other. On the one hand, the Pound extract is characterised by a lack of coherence, which obviously affects comprehensibility – hence its high offline difficulty.

On the other, it is also a cohesive text, with clear sentence structure and no radical grammatical deviations. Its degree of intra-sentential cohesion, its narrative elements, simple syntax and vocabulary, should enable readers to process it with relatively little effort. So, at least in this particular instance, ease of processing is at odds with ease of understanding. This result supports Walker's proposal (1995; see 2.2.5) that reader-response studies should treat coherence and cohesion as two distinct phenomena.

The poems by Hill, Stevens and Prynne are all read at a lower speed (over 70ms/character). As the analyses in Chapter 3 revealed, none of them is particularly narrative and all of them are likely to pose processing hurdles at the activation level (e.g. low-frequency or even non-English vocabulary) and at the construal level (e.g. anomalous collocations, intra-clausal lack of coherence).

The Howe poem is by far the one eliciting the slowest reading speed: at 90.41 ms/character, it is read around 30% more slowly compared to the Ballard extract (59.01 ms/char). The poem's ill-formed syntax and the garden path problems identified in the stylistic analysis (see 3.5.1) are the main factors accounting for such a slow reading. Readers may have been repeatedly forced back to previous lines once misled by the garden paths. So, the Howe poem takes longer to read than the Prynne poem although the latter is not less deviant from a semantic viewpoint. This suggests that parsing problems stemming from syntactic inconsistencies are more central to online difficulty than integration ones stemming from semantic anomalies.

Correlations have been calculated between each of the four factors in Table 15 and the mean reading speeds in Table 16, in order to gauge the influence of these factors on reading speed. For this purpose, SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences) was used (see van Peer et al.

2012, Chaps. 8 to 11). SPSS has a specific function for calculating correlations out of a set of values to be input on a spreadsheet.

The effect of punctuation on reading speed is borderline significant (value = .048). Nevertheless, as we can see, the Howe poem makes no use of punctuation and yet it is read more slowly than the other texts. The only plausible explanation is that the parsing problems it poses override the speeded-up reading generally associated with a sparse to absent punctuation. This illustrates how a stylistic approach can shed light on global reading dynamics that remain out-of-reach in the controlled experiments carried out by psycholinguists.

The correlations for the other factors are not significant, implying that neither mean word length, nor adjacent stresses, nor type-token ratio alone are good predictors of reading speed in non-manipulated literary texts. For instance, the Stevens poem was read rather slowly despite (a) its low mean word length (4.25) and (b) its low type/token ratio (65.36), which stems from its lexical repetitions (see 4.2). Clearly, semantic and structural aspects such as unusual collocations and noun phrase juxtaposition override these two numerical factors. It is the linguistic indicators of difficulty that are likely to best account for reading speed; however, given their qualitative nature, it would be inappropriate to assign them numerical values.

The finding that adjacent stresses are not meaningfully correlated with reading times challenges the aforementioned finding by Miall and Kuiken that phonological foregrounding affects reading times (1994: 403). It has to be noted that Miall and Kuiken used prose texts that, on the whole, pose fewer processing hurdles than the poems used in the current test, where the effect of adjacent stresses is overshadowed by more salient semantic, syntactical and structural features.

It is now time to describe the processing profile of the texts, focusing on their degree of processing uniformity or otherwise. It will be interesting to link the internal variation in processing demands to internal variation in style. It may also be interesting to begin by comparing the processing of two texts that were read at a similar pace but differed in the internal variation of processing effort: Ballard (reading speed = 59.01 ms/char; SD = 8.78 ms/char; Fig. 14) and Pound (reading speed = 62.76 ms/char; SD = 11.79 ms/char; Fig. 15).

Figure 14 Processing profile for the Ballard extract

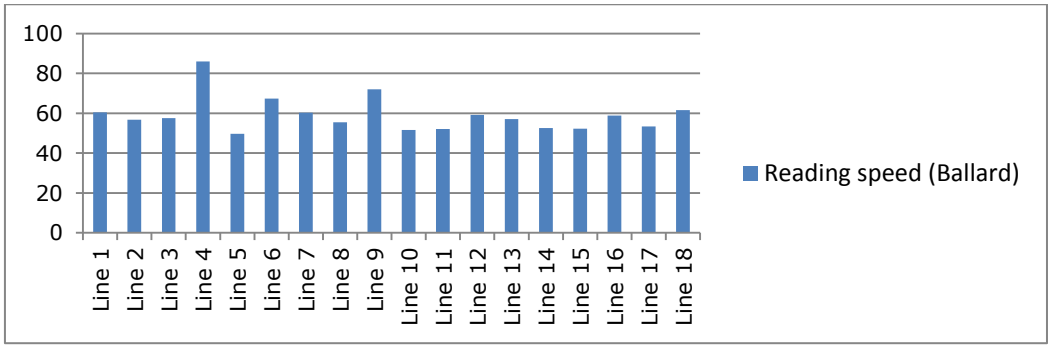
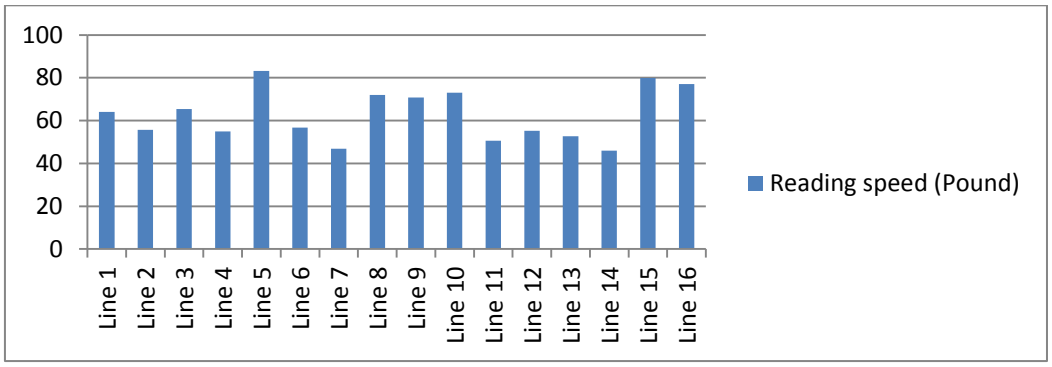


Figure 15 Processing profile for the Pound extract



In the Ballard extract (Fig. 14), most lines are read at 50 to 60 ms/char, which constitute the processing dominant of the text. The most blatant exception is line 4 ('of giant gymnosperms crowding over the roofs'), read

at 86 ms/char vs. an average of 59 ms/char. This is very probably due to the botanic term *gymnosperms*. The other exception is line 9 ('The blunt refracted rays drummed', read at 72 ms/char) where the verb chosen is unusual in combination with the subject. By contrast, the Pound extract (Fig. 16) lacks any such processing dominant, and it rather appears split into two dominants.

The first dominant is formed by lines that are read at a high reading speed, such as line 2 ('was danced by the same dancers in divers localities', 56 ms/char), line 4 ('the technique of demonstration', 55 ms/char), line 7 ('"that every man on that board (Crédit Agricole)', 47 ms/char) and lines 11 to 14 ('speaking of fears in the abstract / to his volatile friend Mr. Jefferson, / (to break the pentameter, that was the first heave) / or as Jo Bard says: "They never speak to each other,' max 55 ms/char). Most of these lines cohere with their neighbouring lines, so readers are led to speed their reading up until they reach the end of each sentence. This effect is even likely to override the linguistic indicators of difficulty that do occur in such low-effort processing lines (e.g. the proper names in lines 7, 12 and 14, the marked sentence structure in line 13). A concomitant explanation is that readers already expect proper names and marked structures at this point of the extract, as they encountered other occurrences earlier in the text.

The second dominant refers to those lines read at 70 ms/char or more: line 5 ('Cole studied that (not G.D.H., Horace)'), lines 8-10 ('has a brother-in-law" / "You the one, I the few" / said John Adams') and lines 15-16 ('if it is baker and concierge visibly / it is La Rochefoucauld and de Maintenon audibly.''). These lines display proper names plus parenthetical (line 5), proper name plus syntactic ellipsis (lines 8-10), foreign proper names plus logical fallacy (lines 15-16). Overall, the processing unfolding

throughout the Pound extract is more jagged and varied compared to Ballard's.

The above discussion exemplifies how reading time data complements the linguistic evidence at the disposal of the stylistician. In particular, it became apparent that different instantiations of the same indicator can be processed differently. Here considerations on the co-text come into play: earlier appearances of an indicator in the text and the extent to which the syntax carries on from one line to the next have both a bearing on readers' processing performance. The processing profiles of the remaining five poems can be visualised in Appendix B (p. 334). These processing profiles will not be commented on in the same level of detail, however, as this would result in a mechanical exposition. Instead, I propose a categorisation according to the overall processing profile of each text. Three possible patterns can be identified:

1. One processing dominant plus a few peaks (Ballard, Strand, Stevens)
2. One processing dominant plus a few valleys (Hill, Prynne, Howe)
3. Two processing dominants (Pound)

The first pattern is one in which, as in the discussion of Ballard above, a uniform processing is occasionally disrupted by passages high in processing demands (at least 1SD above the mean). In Stevens such peaks are line 2 ('began, the return to phantomerei, if not'; 99 ms/char), line 9 ('The imprescriptible zenith, free of harangue', 86 ms/char), line 13 ('On the pedestal, an ambitious page dog-eared', 90 ms/char) and 16 ('And its tawny caricature and tawny life', 83 ms/char). The coinage *phantomerei*, the low-frequency adjective *imprescriptible*, the personifying metaphor *ambitious page* and the emphatic repetition (*tawny* x 2) plus

unusual collocation (*tawny caricature*) explain why readers spent longer reading these regions. It is true that the poem includes other foregrounded patterns (see 4.2.1). Nonetheless, in terms of reading time, these lines were the most salient to readers. In the Strand poem, peaks are more modest, at around 75 ms/char, and affect three lines only: 1, 2 and 6. Line 1 is semantically plain but it opens the poem with its setting (or 'world-building', in Text Word Theory terms) function. This is in accordance with findings in text comprehension research:

> Gernsbacher and her colleagues show that building a coherent, mental structure starts with laying a foundation for that mental structure. Laying the foundation, both within discourses and within sentences, is effort consuming. The first word, picture, or sentence takes longer to process than subsequent information (Giora 1997: 25).

Line 2 is a non-finite clause ('a slack breeze smelling of earth') whilst line 6 introduces a viewpoint shift rich in emotional implications ('still cared for him'). These attentional foci are discrete, and contribute to a feeling of readerly immersion according to the model proposed by Jacobs 2014 (see 2.1.1).

In contrast to the first pattern, in the second the norm is formed by lines high in online difficulty. As a result, deviations from this dominant are worth discussing. In the Hill stanza, lines 4, 11 and 12 are read at 60ms/char or less. Line 4 relies on formulaic sequences ('Something mùst give, make common cause,') that account for the speeded up reading. A relatively short time was spent on line 11 ('As though by royal appointment. And PASS to all') despite its graphological foregrounding and

temporary syntactic ambiguity (*all* as a pronoun vs. all as an adjective). Based on the reviewed findings by Jagt et al. (2014), it is possible that readers speeded their reading up to restore syntactic continuity at the next line. By contrast, the accumulation of nouns in the preceding two lines ('Succession of expenses; nominal / Acceptance, each makeshift honour botched') was read at a slower rate (89 ms/char the first line and 70 ms/char. the second, respectively). Another line read at a low speed is 'So talk telegraphese, say: FORTITUDE' (81 ms/char). In this line we find a conjunction (*so*) whose logical function is not apparent from the surrounding co-text, and the unfamiliar abstract noun *fortitude*, that is also graphologically foregrounded.

In the Prynne poem, lines 5 and 8 are read at less than 70ms/char. This poem being replete with difficulty indicators (see 4.6), it is wrong to automatically assume that these lines are easier than the rest of the poem. Line 5 ('Dangle by bad phantoms sparking strictly: new lady') is grammatically deviant, features a scrambled collocation (*sparking strictly*) and suddenly introduces a new character (*new lady*). Line 8 ('nose into cream bridge, singalong crowding round *m*') is no less deviant. It may be that readers will pay less attention to some passages after they felt overwhelmed by the preceding text. This phenomenon has been documented in psychology, where it is called *attentional blink*. Attentional blink may arise when stimuli closely following each other 'compete for limited-capacity processing resources' (2006: 176), with the result that 'attention is temporarily unavailable in the same way that vision is briefly cut off when we blink with our eyelids' (Styles 2006: 175). Stockwell applies this idea to literary reading. On his account, 'it seems that the effort required to pay attention to an attractor in a reading leads to a momentary period of attentional exhaustion immediately following' (2009: 67).

The extremely slow reading speed of the last line ('Next, chairs All are, tables', 106.6 ms/char) can be explained in two convergent ways. First, the line is asyntactic, since the comma interposed between *are* and *tables* indicates that *are* is not a copula connecting subject and complement, but it should rather be interpreted as the existential 'to be' – which leaves *tables* outside the syntactic template. Second, the line concludes the poem, so readers probably re-read previous lines in a last attempt to make sense of the poem globally.

The poem by Howe presents valleys (at least 1SD below the mean) that would be considered peaks in other poems: these are lines 2 and 7, read at 75 and 72 ms/char., respectively. The former ('Woollen slight grain in the') may have been speeded up by the strong enjambment in a drive to overcome the syntactic incompleteness – as found by Jagt et al. (2014; see 5.2). The latter ('Does morning lie what prize') replicates the interrogative mood of the preceding line ('Is the cloven rock misled'). This continuity on the interpersonal metafunction should ease the processing effort. At the opposite end, one finds the lines 'Is the cloven rock misled' (95 ms/char), 'A small swatch bluish-green' (99 ms/char) and 'Weft watered and figured' (107 ms/char). The unusual collocation *cloven rock* creates problems for visual representation, as it emerged in 4.4.2, not to mention the verb *misled*, which usually implies an experiencing agent. 'A small swatch bluish-green' opens the poem – thus conforming to Giora's quotation above – and features either a deviant word order, with *bluish-green* being an adjective following the noun (as in old poetic diction), or the ellipsis of the verb 'to be' ('A small swatch [is] bluish-green'). Finally, the high online difficulty of 'weft watered and figured' can be accounted for by the adjacent stresses and strong alliterations in line-initial position (**W**e**f**t **W**a**t**ered), the relatively uncommon word *weft* (unknown to some of

the participants to the offline test; see 4.4.2) and the ambiguous grammatical status of *watered* (past participle, passive adjective or main verb in the past tense) and *figured* (past participle or main verb in the past tense).

More generally, a scrutiny of the relationship between reading speeds and the linguistic indicators of difficulty reveals that all the lines processed at around 80 ms/char or more exhibit at least one indicator each. In other words, it is unlikely that lines that feature no indicators (e.g. Strand's 'He stands under her window, calling her name', read at 52 ms/char) are read at 80 ms/char or more. The reverse does not hold to the same degree, however, as indicators are occasionally found in lines read more quickly. The prediction works one-way, from the amount of processing effort to the linguistic features.

5.6 Conclusion

The central idea behind this chapter has been to work backward from effect to structure, from experienced reading speed to immanent linguistic properties. Although numerical data and basic descriptive statistics have been used, the aim was to complement evidence-based differences in processing effort through a stylistic analysis. The reading speeds have been interpreted with reference to the texts as whole units. In doing so, the study has overcome one of the limitations Yaron attributed to reading time studies, that is, their neglect of full texts (2002: 134; see 5.2). The other alleged limitation, the impossibility to infer reading strategies, was overcome through the qualitative response data of the previous chapter. Of course, any test dealing with non-manipulated data leaves the door open for interpretive leeway and speculation, and the explanations that can be offered always have to be tentative. In general, however, reading times

provide meaningful data on where readers place attention during the unfolding of literary texts. In this way, emphasis is placed on 'the sequential experience of reading' (Caink 2012: 121), which tallies with the focus of the current work on the initial impact of difficulty. Reading time data allowed us to notice unexpected processing similarities between different texts, as is the case with Ballard, Pound and Strand. To accommodate the finding that these texts elicit comparable reading speeds, attention has been drawn to their shared narrative features, which would receive less emphasis in a non-empirical stylistic approach where differences are stressed over similarities.

A study partially comparable to the current one is Miall and Kuiken (1994), as they found that 'slightly different components of foregrounding were predictive of reading times' (1994: 403). They also briefly comment on the relation between processing times and stylistic differences:

> in the Mansfield story, for example, the grammatical and semantic features tend to co-occur, whereas in the Woolf it is the phonetic and semantic. Such differences are partly responsible for differences in the style and tone of one writer compared with another. (Miall and Kuiken 1994: 403)

Nonetheless, the quote above is the only direct mention of style variation throughout their whole paper – no study, to date, had offered a qualitative and empirically informed survey of linguistic features associated with a single overarching effect.

Despite these encouraging outcomes, limitations are worth stressing too. The first concerns the incremental manner in which texts where presented. Readers had the chance to re-read previous lines, which may have influenced to a certain extent the reading speed for each line. In the

future, it may be worth having the same poems read according to different modes of presentation (e.g. the whole text; in chunks; line-by-line, but not incrementally) to find out which represents the closest approximation to natural reading. Another limitation is that lines were presented sequentially without the left blank space which graphically marks them off as lines. This choice has the merit of foregrounding the structural and semantic properties of each line over the time required to spatially move down to the next line, however it downplays the effect of enjambments documented by Jagt et al. (2014) and partly the feeling of reading poetry, despite the instructions being clear in this respect. Another drawback is that the E-Prime does not incorporate the graphic accents used in the Hill stanza nor it allows representing the long blank space in the last line of Prynne's poem, so this aspect of graphological foregrounding could not be captured. Modifications to the software are needed if experimental poetry is to be tested more rigorously in the future. Finally, the sample of readers is representative only of a specific and gender-biased population, so it will be useful to replicate the study with a group more balanced across genders and sampled from a population different in terms of age, culture, and reading habits.

These limitations partly derive from the lack of any directly comparable study, which would have offered a strong design as a starting point, and partly from my only recent foray into empirical studies. While in the social sciences there is a wealth of manuals on methodology and experiment design, the only manual available for the humanities is very recent (van Peer et al. 2012). Even so, the current study makes a genuine contribution to the fields of empirical studies, stylistics and poetics, opening up innovative paths of research for the future. The final chapter takes a more encompassing look at difficulty through a stylistic survey of a larger corpus.

6 The various manifestations of difficulty

Chapters 3 to 5 have shown how a detailed conceptualisation of difficulty (Chapters 1-2) is instantiated in a small set of poems. The qualitative slant of these chapters has led to the identification and discussion of several linguistic and readerly facets of difficulty, thus supporting the descriptive and explanatory adequacy of the model. The intuition at the basis of this approach is that difficulty is best conceived as an aggregate of interacting components that give rise to a wide range of textual effects. My analyses have focused on the linguistic indicators within the context of each poem, since it is this context that constrains or enhances their effects. In the current chapter, I want to do full justice to 'the plurality of difficulty' (see 1.4.2) by surveying in a flexible way a corpus of poems and poetic extracts considered difficult by critics. In doing so, I show that a selective focus on a few prominent indicators per poem can satisfactorily account for its difficulty. What is more, by discussing and cross-comparing a number of poetic extracts in quick succession, the various manifestations of difficulty emerge more distinctly than in the systematic analyses carried out in Chapter 3. This surveying operation is further justified by the assumption that the strength of a model also depends on the variety of data it sheds light on. Riffaterre's semiotic model, for instance, has been criticised for its inadequacy to account for experimental poetry (Bäckström 2010: 926).

This chapter also aims to make a contribution to critical studies of difficulty. It does so by engaging with previous close readings by critics, and by applying those high-level components of the model – theme and formal symbolism – that are arguably of more direct interest to a literary audience. Finally, it fulfils Yaron's proposal (2008; see 1.3.1) that studies on difficulty should be based on a larger corpus than has usually been the case. Technically speaking, a corpus is 'a collection of texts which has been

designed for linguistic research, in order to represent some aspects of language' (Stubbs 2001: 25). Except for studies aimed at providing a survey of features rather than an account of full texts (e.g. Adamson 1999, San 2005, and Nahajec 2009), stylisticians working on poetry tend to focus on single case studies (e.g. Toolan 1986, 1993; Freeman 2005; Burke 2007; Butt 2010) or, exceptionally, on two parallel case studies (e.g. Semino 1995; Jeffries 2008). Although still a small corpus, the six poems analysed throughout the central body of the thesis (Chapter 3 to 5) are a first step in the direction envisioned by Yaron. The nine extracts surveyed in this chapter are a further step in this direction. It must be stressed, however, that the need to perform a qualitative analysis has prevented the corpus from growing further.

The chapter is structured as follows. The next section (6.1) introduces the corpus, explaining the choice of authors and texts from a literary perspective. The stylistic survey is carried out in section 6.2, following the order of presentation in 6.1. Finally, the conclusion (6.3) summarises and evaluates key points emerging from the survey, as well as relating them to findings from previous chapters.

6.1 The corpus

Identifying a pool of poets felt as difficult by critics is an essential step towards establishing a corpus of relevant poems – this method of selection also underpinned the corpus analysed in Chapter 3. The authors identified are introduced below. They are ordered chronologically, following the year of their birth, and their names are in bold on each first mention for ease of reference.

Gertrude Stein 'assaults clarity' according to Quartermain (1992:21). Neel, analysing an excerpt from her 'Patriarchal Poetry' uses the word 'difficulty' twice (Neel 1999: 90, 95). **T. S. Eliot** is possibly the paradigmatic difficult poet: as a critic, he defended the need for poets to be difficult in an influential essay (Eliot 1999 [1921]; see 1.4.4); the adjective 'difficult' repeatedly qualifies the reception of *The Waste Land* (Sell 1993; Diepeveen 2003). **E.E. Cummings's** 'nonsense strings' are linguistically analysed by Fowler (Bateson and Fowler 1971: 239-246; see 2.2.3), while his 'semantic deviations' are examined by Leech (1969: 48) and Burke (2007: 149-150). Finally, two of his poems are tested by Yaron (2002, 2003), who mainly relies on them for her definition of the difficult poem (see 1.3.1). **Hart Crane** is discussed in relation to difficulty by Grossman (2007) and Diepeveen, who reports an opinion of a critic of the time, Mark van Doren, on this poet's difficulty (2003: 108). **Charles Olson** is contextualised in the hermetic tradition by Mellors (2005) and his overuse of parentheticals can strike readers as 'a perversely difficult form of communication' (Adamson 1999: 597). As Diepeveen attests (2003: 192), **Dylan Thomas** was 'chastised for his obscurity' by his reviewers, and Yaron 2010 uses one of his poems as a case study on difficulty. **John Ashbery** is discussed, among others, by Perloff (1991: 181-185), who points out the difficulty of reference identification in his poetry. Finally, also **Charles Bernstein** is extensively discussed by Perloff (1991: 185-192). In particular, she points out that Bernstein's word-play is taken 'almost to the point of unintelligibility' (1991: 216).

As can be seen, most critics do not discuss these poets to illustrate difficulty as an abstract concept; rather, their remarks verbalise their own readerly experience of the phenomenon. This seems a valid starting point, as it approximates the intuition-based basis of the phenomenon (see 1.5).

Crucially, it also gives the corpus an intersubjective basis nowhere to be found in the accounts reviewed in Chapter 1.

The selection of the poems themselves could not be intersubjective to the same degree, however, for critics tend to discuss authors holistically and not necessarily back up their claims with textual samples. I am therefore responsible for selecting a few of the poems introduced in Table 1 below. I have relied on my own judgment as an informed reader, choosing a poem when my personal response to it felt compatible with the definition proposed in 1.5: confusion, unattained comprehension, bafflement. Importantly, the selection is theory-free because the model outlined in 2.3 was developed long after the final corpus was established. The corpus, presented in Table 17 below, comprises nine poetic texts, all of which have been closely read in a preliminary stage[14].

Table 17 The corpus of poems surveyed: an overview

	Author		**Poem title**	**Year**
1	G. Stein (1874-1946)	1	'A box'	1914
		2	from 'Patriarchal Poetry'	1927
2	T.S. Eliot (1888-1965)	3	from *The Waste Land*	1922
3	E. E. Cummings (1894-1962)	4	from 'what a proud dreamhorse…'	1935
4	H. Crane (1899-1932)	5	from 'At Melville's Tomb'	1926
5	C. Olson (1910-1970)	6	from 'For Cy Twombly Faced with His First Chicago & N.Y. Shows'	1951
6	D. Thomas (1914-1953)	7	from 'When once the twilight locks no longer…'	1934
7	J. Ashbery (1928 -)	8	from 'Leaving the Atocha Station'	1962
8	C. Bernstein (1951 -)	9	from 'Safe Methods of Business'	1987

[14] The corpus was initially more extensive (19 texts), but it has been then reduced to accommodate the level of detail required by a stylistic approach, even when this takes the form of a survey. This narrowing down also has the advantage of discarding poems for which I have not been able to find enough critical commentaries verging on difficulty.

The corpus spans several decades, from the first wave of modernism to the renewal of formal experimentation taking place in the second half of the century and subverting the modes of narrative naturalism and biographical confessional poetry (Perloff 1991; Tuma 1998). The starting date acknowledges that the notion of difficulty underwent a social and aesthetic shift from modernism onwards (Eliot 1999 [1921]; Adams 1991; Diepeveen 2003; and Bernstein 2011). The magnitude of the shift is emphasised by Adams:

> in modernism and postmodernism difficulty has been perceived in new ways that challenge earlier assumptions of, among other things, the linguistic stability upon which earlier notions of difficulty had been based. (Adams 1991: 23)

These temporal boundaries that I have set led to a neglect of Anglo-American poets predating this renewed notion of difficulty (e.g. Donne, Hopkins). To broaden the investigation to such precursors (as well as to poets writing in other languages) can be the subject of future research (but see 4.1 for a cursory application of my model to a seventeenth century poem by Marvell).

Each poet is represented by one poem, except for Stein, represented by two texts. This imbalance can be explained as follows. I have included an excerpt from 'A box' as an instance of early avant-garde writing whose publication date is close to 'the outbreak of 1912, one of the best-know epidemics of difficult poetry' (Bernstein 2011: 3). I have also included the later 'Patriarchal Poetry' because it has been discussed as difficult by Neel (1999), and its avoidance of content words makes it sharply different from the clause-based semantic deviations employed in 'A box'.

Eliot is represented by an excerpt from one of his best known long works, *The Waste Land*, which is usually considered one of the epitomes of modernist difficulty (e.g. Sell 1993, Diepeveen 2003). 'What a proud dreamhorse' by Cummings has been tested by Yaron (2002; see 1.3.1), which justifies its inclusion here. Because these two modernists have already received in-depth attention by stylisticians, one poem or excerpt for each was deemed sufficient for the surveying purpose of the chapter. Crane is exemplified by a quatrain from 'At Melville's Tomb', singled out by Perloff (1991:186) for its linguistic innovations, after arguing against the difficulty of another quatrain from 'The Broken Tower', discussed by Grossman (2007). I have selected Olson's 'For Cy Twombly Faced with His First Chicago & N.Y. Shows' by Olson after a careful reading of his *Collected Poems*. Thomas's 'When once the twilight locks no longer' is charged with 'extreme obscurity' according to Yaron (2010), who analyses it at length. Ashbery's work is exemplified by 'Leaving the Atocha Station', a long poem that McHale (2000: 587) singles out for its disjointedness. Its length and prominence within its hosting collection (*The Tennis Court Oath*) make its inclusion here a particularly meaningful one. Finally, Bernstein's poem 'The sleepy impertinence of winsome actuarial' has been selected based on Perloff's repeated remarks about its difficulty (1991: 187-197). In the next section I survey the linguistic indicators that feature most prominently in the corpus, while also occasionally drawing on the higher-level constructs introduced in Chapter 2.

6.2 A stylistic survey of difficulty

A useful point of access into Gertrude Stein's *Tender Buttons* (1914) – the collection that includes the poem included in my corpus, 'A box' – is offered by Quartermain:

> Stein's writing assaults clarity by suggesting that clarity is itself an assault upon and hence a violation of the sheer complexity and richness of a sensory world whose "chaotic plenitude" (Jayne Waker's phrase) cannot be verbally articulated or mapped. (1992: 21-22)

The critic draws a connection between difficulty (i.e. lack of clarity) and the richness of a complex 'sensory world', thus endorsing the iconic arguments of Eliot and Prynne (see 1.4.4). The idea that this complexity exceeds language, for it 'cannot be verbally articulated or mapped', provides an ontological justification for Stein's violation of linguistic expectations, which Quartermain elucidates in a close reading of selected passages. In particular, he notices Stein's metalinguistic play on definite articles (e.g. 'the which is an article') and the constantly shifting reference of the pronoun *it* in the text below:

> Book was there, it was there. Book was there. Stop it, stop it, it was a cleaner, a wet cleaner and it was not where it was wet, it was not high, it was directly placed back, not back again, back it was returned, it was needless, it put a bank, a bank when, a bank care.

(G. Stein, 'Book', from *Tender Buttons*, 1914)

While on its first mention *it* unequivocally refers to *book*, on its second mention ('stop it') the referent is not the book anymore, and two baffling possibilities open instead: a) *it* is exophoric and hence irretrievable (the command 'stop it' is used in dialogic exchanges where *it* stands for an action carried out by the addressee which the speaker finds annoying or inappropriate); or b) *it* is endophoric and hence nonsensical (the existential process 'book was there' cannot be ordered to stop, for it lacks consciousness and volition). In light of this, it is hard to disagree with Quartermain when he argues that 'the energy of this writing comes from

the ways in which the tension between referentiality and its lack becomes a structural principle' (1992: 26).

A similar referential opacity, but this time combined with a wider range of linguistic indicators, can be observed in Stein's 'A box', the first text of my corpus:

> [1] Out of kindness comes redness and out of rudeness comes rapid same question, out of an eye comes research, out of selection comes painful cattle. So then the order is that a white way of being round is something suggesting a pin and is it disappointing, it is not, it is so rudimentary to be analysed and see a fine substance strangely, it is so earnest to have a green point not to red but to point again.

(G. Stein, 'A box', from *Tender Buttons*, 1914)

In the second clause, the adjective *same* presupposes an antecedent that is not in the text. What is more, the text gives no clues on how to interpret *same question* exophorically. Supposing a metalinguistic play whereby the text comments on its own style, as in Hill (see 3.3), *same question* might anticipate 'is it disappointing' – the only clause in the text with an interrogative structure. This is however a specialised inference and it does not solve the referential opacity of *same question*. A further complication is the fact that in 'is it disappointing' the pronoun *it* could refer endophorically to *pin* or exophorically to a (disappointing) situation that is never mentioned in the text.

Although these instances of referential opacity create some confusion, the difficulty of [1] mainly stems from other, and more prominent, indicators. Overall, [1] combines overt semantic deviance at clausal level with traces of cohesion (i.e. the causal conjunction *so then*) and of tight rhetorical structure (i.e. the syntactic parallelism in the first four clauses, the repetition of 'it is so' at the end of the text). The resulting tension between nonsensicality and the illusion of reasoning stringency is

manifest in the first sentence. On the one hand, the 'out of X comes Y' template presupposes meaningfulness (especially when X and Y are abstract nouns) because it echoes, through the present tense, generic sentences stating a permanent state-of-affairs. On the other, the semantically unrelated nouns inserted by Stein into each X and Y slot undermine any possibility of linguistic meaningfulness. Likewise, the fourfold repetition of the syntactic template pushes readers to interpret the clauses as related in meaning, since this is a function of parallelism (Leech 2010: 114). Yet, the statements are so unusual in their own right that readerly integration at inter-clausal level is highly unlikely to take place.

For all its semantic deviance, [1] still gives access to world entities arranged in a cohesive – if incoherent – structure. The next extract from Stein's 'Patriarchal Poetry' [2], by contrast, overtly dismisses all pretences of discursive structure and ideational anchoring:

[2] Never which when where to be sent to be sent to be sent to be never which when where never to be sent to be sent to be sent never which when where to be sent never to be sent never to be sent never which when where to be sent never to be sent never to be sent which when where never to be sent which when where never which when where never which to be sent never which when where to be sent never which when where to be sent which when where to be sent never to be sent never which when where to be sent never which when which when where to be sent never which when where never which when where which when where never to be sent which when where

(G. Stein, from 'Patriarchal Poetry', 1927)

[2] is an unpunctuated, asyntactic string that consists of two impersonal forms (i.e. *to be sent*, *to be*) variously repeated and combined with wh-words and the adverb *never*. It is then no surprise that it was found 'unreadable' even by 'Stein's more agile readers' (Neel 1999: 38). Neel tries to explain the difficulty of [2] at various points in his analysis. He

begins by arguing that 'the difficulty of "Patriarchal Poetry" stems, in part, from the fact that it demands our relationship with an almost overwhelming degree of confusion, discomfort, and fatigue in the act of reading itself' (1999: 90). Here Neel constructs an ideal reader for [2] and emphasises the reception side of difficulty by listing the intended readerly reactions to [2] ('confusion', 'discomfort', 'fatigue'). Incidentally, this list echoes Diepeveen's point about the strong emotional reactions provoked by difficulty (2003: 45). Later he proposes that 'Patriarchal Poetry' is 'difficult to read' because it 'unleashes a semiotic tide of language and sound that stages an alternative to patriarchal poetry's demands for legibility and symbolic correspondence' (1999: 95). This second claim locates the difficulty of [2] in the challenges it poses to symbolic reading modes. As argued in 3.7.1, symbolic readings are possible whenever a theme can be stated. However, and differently from [1], the total absence of nouns in [2] does not allow for theme identification nor for the construction of a situation model. What is more, the impersonal form of the two verbs makes it impossible to infer an agent, human or otherwise. The third claim builds on the second, proposing an interpretation based on an antithetic relation between title and text structure:

> The difficulty of "Patriarchal poetry" lies in its linguistic innovations as not simply a demonstration of an alternative to the language and law of the father, but as a call to participate in that alternative. (1999: 95)

Although Neel explicitly mentions the relationship between difficulty and the 'linguistic innovations' of [2], he does not quite pinpoint where

difficulty is linguistically instantiated[15]. What emerges from his claim, though, is that [2] can be accessed only through its formal symbolism, one of three higher meaning components (situation model, theme, formal symbolism; see 2.1.2).

Before moving onto the third extract, one last observation is in order. Although most subjective markers in [2] are absent (there are no pronouns, no evaluative adjectives, and no stance adverbs), the obsessively repeated wh-words should evoke, by virtue of their typical function in discourse, an interrogative intonation throughout. This interpersonal aspect should help recover, at least in part, the speaker's emotional stance (say, her questioning anxiety). In addition, the speaker's bitterness can be inferred from the negative *semantic prosody* ('an aura of meaning with which a word or phrase is imbued by its collocates', Milojkovic 2013) of the adverb *never*. According to the model proposed in this thesis, this element of subjectivity – if sensed at all – should slightly reduce the difficulty of [2].

Differently from Stein's foregrounding of semantic deviance in [1] and syntactic incompleteness in [2], T.S. Eliot 'tends to write whole passages which, with the exception of a few lines or phrases here and there, seem to hang together fairly well' (Sell 1993: 139). Sell's premise paves the way for a pragmatic analysis of *The Waste Land* (see 1.2) that addresses 'higher levels of coherence' (139) such as 'the abruptness with which the voices are introduced' (144). The critic illustrates the point through section II of the poem, 'A Game of Chess', an extract of which is reported below:

[15] This looks surprising, even more so because Neel's paper has been published in the journal *Style*.

[3] Under the firelight, under the brush, her hair
Spread out in fiery points
Lowed into words, then would be savagely still.
'My nerves are bad to-night. Yes, bad. Stay with me.
Speak to me. Why do you never speak. Speak.
What are you thinking of? What thinking? What?
I never know what you are thinking. Think.'

I think we are in rats' alley
Where the dead men lost their bones.

(T.S. Eliot, from 'A Game of Chess', *The Waste Land*, 1921, ll. 108-116)

[3] features the transition from 'a setting with some claims (or pretensions) to elegance' (Sell 1993: 138) to the first turn of a dialogue that is set 'in a pub at closing time' (1993: 138). The shift affects the discourse mode as well: descriptive, formal and filtered through the narrator's eyes in the first three lines of [3]; interactional, informal and staging an unnamed character from the fourth to the seventh line. The direct speech in the fourth line appears abrupt because it features no Sayer and no reporting verb, in contrast to the Pound extract analysed in 3.4. The utterance foregrounds, through the imperative mood, an addressee unspecified and nowhere hinted at earlier. Problems with addressee identification contribute to difficulty at an interpretive level, as seen in the Hill stanza (which nevertheless involved a different, more complex dynamics of addressee attribution – see 3.3).

There is then a new shift (eighth and ninth line) that conflates the addressee's response and the narrator's comment. The response hypothesis rests on the repetition of *think*, which increases the cohesiveness of the passage. The comment hypothesis rests functionally on the incongruity of its content, and formally on the lack of quotation marks. As a consequence, the referent of *I* in the eighth line is ambiguous, which tallies with Jeffries's claim that 'perhaps the most difficult thread to work out in the poem is the referent of I' (Jeffries 1993: 122). All in all, [3]

exhibits lack of explicit coherence at inter-clausal level but displays no other linguistic indicators. Whereas the difficulty of [1] and [2] impairs lower level processing operations such as construal and parsing, in [3] it challenges integration at strategic points.

Although readers may fail to sense the socio-psychological implications of [3], they would still be able to paraphrase its content. By contrast, readers of Cummings's 'what a proud dreamhorse…' could hardly perform this operation, as demonstrated by Yaron (2002; see 1.3.1). The poem is a rich inventory of linguistic indicators of difficulty, as exemplified by the extract below:

[4] what a proud dreamhorse pulling (smoothloomingly) through
(stepp) this (ing)crazily seething of this
raving city screamingly street wonderful

flowers And o the Light thrown by Them opens

sharp holes in dark places paints eyes touches hands with new-
ness and these startled whats are a (piercing clothes thoughts kiss
-ing wishes bodies) squirm-of-frightened shy are whichs small
Its hungry of Is for Love Spring thirsty for happens
only and beautiful
there is a ragged beside the two limps

(E.E. Cummings, from 'what a proud dreamhorse…', from *No Thanks*, 1935)

One of the indicators more systematically deployed in [4] is the misuse of grammatical classes. This phenomenon is called *functional conversion* by Leech (1969: 43) and it is an instance of ill-formed syntax. Adverbs can be used as adjectives (e.g. *screamingly*); as in *(ing)crazily*, they can be oddly modified by the inflectional morpheme **–**ing that is moved from a suffix to a prefix position; adjectives can modify verbs, thus acting as adverbs ('happens / only and <u>beautiful</u>') or can be preceded by articles and hence

turned into nouns (e.g. 'are a […] squirm-of-frightened shy'; 'there is a ragged'); the pronouns 'what' and 'which' are turned into count nouns as in such expressions like 'the whats, whys and hows' or 'the hows and whys'; verbs can occupy a noun position ('hungry of Is').

Once these functional conversions are detected, there is still the parsing problem of identifying clause boundaries. First, punctuation is renounced throughout; second, the use of capital letters not only does not conform to orthographic conventions, but it does not appear guided by lexical considerations either, since it equally affects content nouns with symbolic potential (*Light*, *Love*, *Spring*) and function words (*And*, *Its*, *Them*). Moreover, it is sometimes hard to keep track of grammatical subjects – for instance, while *paints* has *Light* as its subject, *wishes* in the parenthetical has more probably *thoughts kiss/ing* as its subject. This loosening of syntactic rules recalls Howe's assault on constituency in 3.5 and – as argued there – it promotes a reading mode based on the processing operation of word activation to the detriment of parsing and integration. This explains why Yaron's subjects were unable to paraphrase the poem and yet vividly retained small segments of it in their memory.

The notable difficulty of [4] is likely to be slightly lessened by the personifying effect of emotive adjectives in unusual collocations (*proud*, *raving*, *startled*, *frightened, shy*). These adjectives work together with the proximal demonstratives (*this* x 2, *these*), action verbs (e.g. *pulling*, *paints*, *touches*…) and concrete lexis (e.g. *city*, *street*, *flowers*, *hands*…) to favour a feeling of empathy and familiarity that compensates for the effort invested in terms of parsing and integration. It seems to me that such a payoff is denied both in [1] and [2], where Stein's linguistic violations – rather than exalting a dream-like yet sensory world as in [4] – have a more severe critical function, which can be inferred in the titles.

The extracts analysed so far make us aware that difficulty has been attributed by critics both to poems that blatantly violate linguistic norms – such as Stein's and Cummings's – and to poems that are more cohesive and perhaps subtle in their linguistic innovations, such as Eliot's. The poetry of Hart Crane belongs to this second group for its refusal to play havoc with grammar and its reliance on traditional form – pentameters arranged in regular stanzas, sometimes rhymed. A poem such as 'The Broken Tower', whose first quatrain is reported below, is discussed by Grossman to defend the idea – challenged throughout the thesis – that 'the difficulty is not stylistic' (2007: 156):

> The bell-rope that gathers God at dawn
> Dispatches me as though I dropped down the knell
> Of a spent day - to wander the cathedral lawn
> From pit to crucifix, feet chill on steps from hell.

This quatrain seems indeed to pose problems for the model proposed in this thesis: except for a mildly complex syntax (restrictive relative *that*-clause, *as though* clause, non-finite clause: 'to wander…') and the estranging immediacy obtained by introducing new entities as known through the definite article, I can find no linguistic indicator. While the modest unfamiliarity of the schema evoked may partly explain the 'non-representational logic of ecstasy' of the poem (Grossman 2007: 156; on representation and difficulty, see 1.4.1), Grossman's irrational take on difficulty is misguided – witness the critic's paradoxical claim that '[the poem] is difficult only and if it is understood' (2007: 153) despite all evidence to the contrary (see Chapter 2). The quatrain above may contain obscurity in the sense of 'semiotic defence' (White 1981: 4; see 1.5); it hardly exhibits difficulty, however.

A better candidate in this respect is the first quatrain of Crane's 'At Melville's Tomb', singled out by Perloff (1991: 186) as a precursor of Ashbery's and Bernstein's linguistic innovations:

[5] Often beneath the wave, wide from this ledge
The dice of drowned men's bones he saw bequeath
An embassy. Their numbers as he watched,
Beat on the dusty shore and were obscured.

(H. Crane, 'At Melville's Tomb', from *White Buildings*, 1926)

The first challenge to a representational understanding of the quatrain lies in the fact that *the dice of drowned men's bones* (l.2) are conferred agency: they can 'bequeath an embassy'. In this latter expression, the verb-noun collocation is unusual, thus generating a local semantic deviance: embassies can be entered or attacked; they cannot be bequeathed. Another deviant noun-verb collocation is in lines 3-4: 'their numbers as he watched / beat on the dusty shore'. This collocation is ideationally deviant because physical dice should be beaten, rather than the numbers drawn on them beating. The effect of this collocation is that of making the abstract concrete while animating it through a verb of action (*beat*). Rather than situationally, the choice of *dice* makes sense from a symbolic standpoint, where it may work as a simple replacement metaphor (Brooke-Rose 1958: 26) embodying the abstract concept of 'risk' or 'chance'. The interconnection between this latter concept and the death cued by *drowned men's bones* is, once unveiled, an intuitive one. Finally, one could notice the poetic use of *wide* (l.1) as an adverb (source: *OED*), which may cause some confusion for readers unaware of this usage ('wide from this ledge' = 'far from this ledge').

This 'non-representational logic' sought by Crane (Grossman 2007: 156) shapes the work of another major modernist, Charles Olson, as observed by Mellors:

> his [Olson's] projective poetic shares with other twentieth-century artistic movements the desire to break down the *logical* grammatical structure of language in order to shake the rational belief in linguistic (and representational) order. Specifically, syntax is thought to hamper the production of pure, unalloyed semantemes. (2005: 102; emphasis is the author's)

Granted that there are various strategies through which poets challenge such a 'linguistic (and representational) order', one of the aims of a stylistic approach is that of showing how similar strategies in terms of poetics can give rise to altogether different forms of textuality. Let us take the following excerpt from Olson to illustrate the point:

> [6] Paint heats, or is caused to flow
> in his hands, causes
> what is, which is who
> he is, how dwelleth
> where the two forever are
> who in their meeting make
> what is, and so, what was
>
> form,
> &,
> what the A hides, the abstract of
> what each of us bends
> the eye around

(C. Olson, 'For Cy Twombly Faced with His First Chicago & N.Y. Shows', 1951, published in *The collected poems of Charles Olson: excluding the Maximus poems*, 1987)

To begin with, the clauses are not arranged according to narrative or descriptive progression; instead, they appear generated by the purely formal requirement that each should begin with a wh-word. The resulting overcrowding of relative pronouns with no obvious antecedent leads to a level of representational abstraction that seems appropriate for a poem dedicated to the abstract painter Cy Twombly – not to mention the very thematisation of abstraction ('the abstract of / what of each of us bends'). While *his* arguably refers to Cy Twombly, the referent of *what* in the third line is not made explicit: in the following clause we just learn that *what* is equated with Cy Twombly ('which is who he is'), thus alluding to the motif of the artist totally absorbed in his creation – a point reinstated in 'the two forever are' and 'their meeting'.

Olson's repeated refusal to give *what* a definite referent can be taken as a sign of the poet's scepticism regarding the adequacy of language as a representational means (see Mellors's quotation above), especially if this is to compete with visual art. According to this interpretation, the difficulty of [6] is the side-effect of a poetic credo. In terms of global meaning components, a theme or matrix can be inferred (i.e. 'the perfect identification of the artist in his art') in spite of a sketchy situation model. There is also formal symbolism, given that the word *flow* in the first line is iconically mirrored in the heavily enjambed lines, placing emphasis on continuous movement and dynamicity (witness also the material verbs *heats*, *flows*, *make*, *bends*).

The linguistic choices discussed above are semantic in nature, and are bound to have an impact on offline difficulty. However, [6] is difficult from an online perspective too, due to its use of structural ambiguity. In line 5, *are* can be interpreted either in terms of location, as a main verb (in which case the line is syntactically self-contained), or as a copula linking to the relative pronoun *who* used as a subject in the next line. The same

ambiguity is found again in line 7: in *what is*, the verb 'to be' can be interpreted either in existential terms (what is → what exists) or as a copula (what is […] form). On a different level, 'the abstract of / what each of us bends' can be read either appositionally (i.e. 'what the A hides' = 'the abstract of what / each of us bends') or as in a list (i.e. 'what the A hides' + 'the abstract of what each of us bends'), thus exhibiting the same phenomenon analysed in the Stevens poem (see 3.2.2). Overall, structural and syntactic ambiguities add to the heavily enjambed lines to promote a sense of reading instability not unlike that seen in Howe's poem (see 3.5).

It is now time to turn to Dylan Thomas's 'When once the twilight locks no longer', a poem that contains 'extreme obscurity' according to Yaron (2010). Given the length and the stylistic homogeneity of the poem, it will suffice to report its first two stanzas to see how – and to what extent – difficulty is instantiated in them:

[7] When once the twilight locks no longer
Locked in the long worm of my finger
Nor damned the sea that sped about my fist,
The mouth of time sucked, like a sponge,
The milky acid on each hinge,
And swallowed dry the waters of the breast.

When the galactic sea was sucked
And all the dry seabed unlocked,
I sent my creature scouting on the globe,
That globe itself of hair and bone
That, sewn to me by nerve and brain,
Had stringed my flask of matter to his rib.

(D. Thomas, from 'When once the twilight locks no longer', from *Eighteen Poems*, 1934)

Yaron begins by assuming 'that anyone reading these lines will have encountered problems in comprehending the poem' (2010), and argues that metaphorical phrases such as *worm of my finger* or *the milky acid on each*

hinge result 'in a failure to process them' (2010). In the model proposed here, these phrases inhibit a construal based on norms of verisimilitude, just as happens in Stevens (see 3.2.1). For all their ideational novelty, however, some of these phrases can be interpreted through simple analogical reasoning (e.g. *worm of my finger* plays on the visual affinity between the source *finger* and the target *worm*).

Apart from novel metaphors, some of the difficulty of [7] can be linked back to a fairly complex, hypotactic syntax. The subordinate temporal clause in the first stanza spans three lines and is itself formed of two coordinated clauses ('no longer locked […] nor damned the sea'). In turn, the second of these clauses features a restrictive relative clause ('that sped about my fist'). Length of sentence and length of stanza coincide, and the same holds true for the second stanza, whose syntactic complexity is situated in the main clause rather than in the dependent one. *Globe* (l. 9) is followed by an appositional phrase that elaborates on the entity ('that globe itself of hair and bone') and then by a relative clause interrupted by the non-finite clause 'sewn to me by nerve and brain'.

In spite of its novel metaphors and complex syntax, it is my contention that Yaron somehow overstates the difficulty of [7] – even more so since she conceives of obscurity as of an intensification of difficulty (Yaron 2002; see 1.3.1). First, the experiencing *I* and the past tense verbs give the poem a trace of narrativity which allows interpreting it as a sort of dream report. Second, the syntax – although difficult to disentangle – is well-formed, and as a result cohesion is never threatened. Finally, there are recognisable semantic fields (e.g. body parts, liquids, associates of 'door' such as *locks*, *unlocked* and *hinge*) that act as a centripetal force in holding the text together, in contrast to Stein's [1] or Olson's [6].

Olson's disjunctive textuality also characterises Ashbery, who had words of praise for him (Herd 2000: 35). Ashbery holds a central position

for the establishment of a lineage of difficulty: on the one hand, critics have pointed out the influence of precursors such as Stevens (Bloom 1973: 142-144; Herd 2000: 41) and Crane (Perloff 1991: 186); on the other, Ashbery himself is claimed to have influenced later generations of poets, especially the Language Poets (McHale 2000: 563; Herd 2000: 73), among which Howe (see 3.5) and Bernstein (see more ahead). My case study is the opening of 'Leaving the Atocha Station', mentioned by McHale (2000: 587) for its disjunctive nature:

> [8] The arctic honey blabbed over the report causing darkness
> And pulling us out of there experiencing it
> he meanwhile... And the fried bats they sell there
> dropping from sticks, so that the menace of your prayer folds...
> Other people... flash
> the garden are you boning
> and defunct covering ... Blind dog expressed royalties…
> comfort of your perfect tar grams nuclear world bank tulip
> Favorable to near the night pin
> loading formaldehyde.

(J. Ashbery, from 'Leaving the Atocha Station', from *The Tennis Oath Court*, 1962)

[8] looks like a confused, puzzling report by a witness of some nightmarish, almost untellable event. From the beginning, a baffling use of deictic reference conveys a feeling of estranging situatedness. This is realised by presenting as known unlikely elements through the definite article (*the arctic honey*, *the report, the fried bats, the night pin*), thus intensifying a stylistic habit already noticed in Stevens (see 3.2.1) and Thomas: like Stevens's *the vaultiest phrase*, Ashbery's *the arctic honey* is an utterly unusual collocation. Another unusual collocation is that between the verb *expressed* and the object *royalties*, not to mention the unlikely agent *blind dogs*. The long, hard-to-parse noun phrase 'your perfect tar

grams nuclear world bank tulip' (l. 10) exhibits a clash of semantically disparate elements – although Riffaterre's semiotic model might justify the odd occurrence of *tulip* after *nuclear world bank* as an intertextual variation on the binomial 'tulips and chimneys' which titles a 1923 collection by Cummings. There is also a suspended sentence missing the verb ('he meanwhile…') and an incomplete phrase (*favorable to*). Finally, cause-effect relations are stated and simultaneously emptied of any plausibility, thus resulting in logical fallacies: it is paradoxical that a shiny entity such as 'arctic honey' may cause darkness; and the causal relation, cued by *so that*, between 'fried bats' and the folding of 'the menace of your prayers' remains impenetrable to reason.

As this survey has shown, no line is exempt from one or more linguistic indicators of difficulty, thus making their density exceptional. On a more global level, the continuous shifts of personal pronouns and verbal tenses of [8] witness the fragmentation of narrative in Ashbery mentioned by McHale (2004: 5). Both aspects are central to Ashbery's style, to the point that the following remark by Adamson on other lines by Ashbery perfectly applies to this extract as well:

> the oscillation of tense – *holds / asked, is / was* – frustrates attempts to construct a coherent narrative sequence for events or a coherent location for their narrator. (1999: 674)

As in the lines analysed by Adamson, tenses in [8] shift suddenly: past tense (*blabbed*) to present (*sell*, *folds*) to past again (*expressed*). Many other verbal forms are non-finite (*causing*, *pulling*, *dropping, loading*…), so they can either be ascribed to a past or a present temporal dimension. Equally noticeable is the shift of pronouns whose referents remain unidentified: *us* (l. 1), *he* (l. 3), *they* (l.3), *your* (l.4). In this respect, the

poet's own comment on this stylistic habit is revealing in terms of his artistic purpose:

> The personal pronouns in my work very often seem to be like variables in an equation. "You" can be myself or it can be another person… and my point is also that it doesn't matter very much, that we are somehow all aspects of consciousness giving rise to the poem […] I guess I don't have a very strong sense of my own identity and I find it very easy to move from one person in the sense of a pronoun to another and this again helps produce a kind of polyphony in my poetry which I again feel is a means toward greater naturalism. (Ashbery; cited in Altieri 1984: 138)

In pursuing a 'greater naturalism' for poetry, Ashbery endorses Eliot's iconic argument that poetry needs to mirror the multiplicity of the world (see 1.4.4). I would however disagree with Ashbery on the polyphony of [8], given that the fleeting referents of the pronouns do not seem to achieve the ontological status of conscious characters.

My survey concludes with Bernstein, experimental poet and theorist of difficulty (see 1.3). The first stanza of 'Safe Methods of Business' reported below [9] is singled out by Perloff as displaying 'a difficulty I don't want to minimize' (1991: 189):

> [9] The Sleepy impertinence of winsome actuarial
> Lambs me to accrue mixed beltings – or,
> Surreptitiously apodictic, impedes erstwhile.
> Pumice, for instance, has bowdlerized the steam
> As amulets of oddments cedar coatfins
> Or rake about shoals. The pig is stabbed
> Through the belly (horse grippings are not essences).
> *For choice is rivulets*. The chase of
> Carolinas cries in the gorge – not so
> Much ranting as astringent. And therefore
> I have mailed the teas and come, an
> Old man with a wet mouth, when invited.

(C. Bernstein, from 'Safe Methods of Business', from *The Sophist*, 1987)

Perloff's extensive analysis of [9] reveals Bernstein's intertextual references to Yeats's 'Sailing to Byzantium' ('and therefore I have sailed the seas and come') and to Eliot's 'Gerontion' ('an old man in a dry month'), along with Whitman's influence on the enigmatic statement 'for choice is rivulets'. The critic further comments on noticeable indicators such as the unusual collocations and specialised vocabulary influenced by 'the media discourse (legalese, Wall Street-speak, *National Enquirer* gossip, and so on)' (1991: 197). It appears clear that [9] intends to be comically nonsensical in a way that is reminiscent of Stein's [1]. The identifying relational clauses in the middle of the text ('horse grippings are not essences' and 'for choice is rivulets') and, more generally, the present tense and declarative mood of [9], give the poem an 'apodictic' slant (to borrow from the poem a word that glosses its own style) similar to Stein's in [1].

What is particularly interesting from a stylistic perspective is the fact that both texts exhibit a surface argumentative tone but undermine it through semantic oddities. The misuse of connectives in [9] contributes to this aesthetic tension, which is perhaps the only noteworthy element of the poem overlooked by Perloff. The correlative conjunction *or* (l. 2), foregrounded by its end-line, stress-carrying position, creates a fictitious link between the first and the second clause. Even assuming that some sense can be made of each statement, it is unclear how the abstract personification 'Sleepy impertinence' either 'lambs' (i.e. gives birth to) the speaker or 'impedes', and what (contrary to grammatical requirements, Bernstein makes the verb intransitive). Given its immediate co-text, the exemplificatory phrase *for instance* in l. 4 is baffling in its pretence to

clarify the preceding discourse. The causal conjunction *for* in l. 8 appears slightly less arbitrary, since a weak inference can be made between the stabbing of the pig and the ensuing 'rivulets' (of blood?). Yet no-one could anticipate the theme of 'choice' from the preceding lines. Finally, the disparate events of ll. 1 to 10 – ranging from geological information (i.e. the effect of pumice) to insurance ('actuarial') and butchery ('the pig is stabbed') – inexplicably form the basis for the resolution, marked by a causal conjunction and by a suddenly introduced lyric I ('and <u>therefore</u> I have mailed the teas and come'). All in all, [9] definitely seems a textual realisation of Bernstein's contention that 'facts in poetry are primarily factitious' (1992: 9).

6.3 Conclusion

The stylistic survey confirms the bond between the verifiable presence of linguistic indicators of difficulty and most attributions of difficulty by professional readers (i.e. critics). It also disproves or rectifies some such attributions: Grossman's and Yaron's on a poem by Crane and one by Thomas, respectively. What is more, the validity of the indicators is enhanced by the fact that the poems were selected, as mentioned at the beginning of the chapter, before the list of indicators and the overall model outlined in Chapter 2 were developed. This is a crucial point, because it prevents the model from behaving like a tautological confirmation of the data it selects.

The survey has also fruitfully drawn on the constructs of situation model, theme and formal symbolism (see 2.1). For instance, Stein's [1] and [2] are both meaningful in terms of formal symbolism: the 'out of X comes Y' syntactic template of [1] mirrors the extraction process from a magic box; the assault on syntactic constituency and textual cohesion in

[2] reverses the hierarchical implications of the title ('Patriarchal Poetry'), that in turn derive from the link, established by Feminist thought, between order and male domination: indeed, as Lopez writes, 'Stein's anti-patriarchal cubism' is opposed to 'masculine control over form' (2006: 14). [1] and [2] differ in terms of readerly import with regard to the other two components, however. [1] allows for a succession of ideational fragments (thus, situational models in the mind) to be construed during reading, while [2] does not. In addition, [1] can be attributed a theme via the maxim-like statement 'it is so rudimentary to be analysed', while [2] cannot. All this implies that [2] is more radical than [1] in its pursuit of difficulty. In future research, situation model, theme and formal symbolism (together with the most interpretive of the indicators: lack of subjectivity and of narrativity) could be more explicitly incorporated as high-level variables to assess the difficulty of poems on a multidimensional level.

In terms of contribution to critical studies, analysing less overtly deviant extracts, as Eliot's [3] and Thomas's [7], has contributed to shed light on the divide between difficulty and obscurity. My proposal in this respect is that poems that are deemed difficult and yet display a narrow range or low density of linguistic indicators may still be challenging on an inferential/interpretive level. As a consequence, they should qualify as 'obscure' rather than 'difficult', according to the distinction proposed in 1.5 – difficulty should be reserved to textual resistance and lack of immediate understanding, obscurity to the feeling that there are areas in the poem's significance that remain elusive. Of course, both phenomena can be found in the same text: Bernstein's [9], for instance, is made difficult by its juxtaposition of unrelated clauses and specialised vocabulary, but it is obscure from the standpoint of the poetic persona's resolution to mail 'the teas'.

The survey has also made justice to some indicators that were little represented in the corpus analysed in Chapter 3. These are: (a) the complex, hypotactic syntax of Thomas [7]; (b) the functional misuse of connectives in Stein [1] and Bernstein [9]; (c) the shift of tenses and pronouns in Ashbery [8]; the word class manipulations of Cummings [4]; the plurality of voices in Eliot [3]; and the logical fallacies or false cause-effect relations of Stein [1], Ashbery [8] and Bernstein [9], that are similar to those in Hill ('BLOOD-IN-URINE SAMPLES / RUIN EURO-CULTURE') analysed in 3.3. As a result, the chapter has further refined the list of indicators by introducing new sub-categories: for instance, Cummings's misuse of word class and Ashbery's incomplete clauses are two instances of the 'ill-formed syntax' indicator, alongside Howe's blurred constituency boundaries. Future research might diagram the most typical instantiations of each indicator, alongside speculating on (and, when possible, testing) their varying effects on readers and the processing components they are most likely to affect.

What has been achieved, overall, is a fuller – or rather, a less incomplete – picture of the various manifestations of difficulty. This variability is intrinsically linked to the probabilistic nature of language in use (Halliday and Matthiessen 1999: 72), allowing for potentially endless combinations out of a limited set of features. It retrospectively justifies the amount of scholarly effort made to elucidate the phenomenon (Chapter 1) and, at the same time, it exposes their inadequacy – an inadequacy that extends to the model proposed here too. Even so, this variability is not at odds with the structuralist enterprise of developing a typology of difficulty centred on typical co-occurrences of the indicators and on the extent to which high-level constructs can be posited for each poem.

The general conclusions that follow pull the main threads of the project together, highlighting its contribution against the backdrop of previous studies and providing indications for further research.

7 General conclusions

This project has been motivated by a desire to establish conceptual and procedural foundations for the study of difficulty in poetry while also embracing the complexity of the concept. This conclusion summarises the significance of the findings (7.1) and outlines future research prospects that seem particularly worth pursuing (7.2).

7.1 The significance of the findings

This thesis has sought to shed light on the phenomenon of difficulty in poetry by eclectically combining linguistic analysis and evidence from reader response data. Applying both approaches to the same set of poems (Chapters 3 to 5) has allowed connecting specific stylistic observations with remarks by readers in a two-way process: response data have supported the psychological plausibility of the linguistic analyses; conversely, the linguistic analyses have explained readerly behaviours. What has been achieved overall is a better overview of the mechanisms that create difficulty at the text-reader interface level, an area that had rarely been submitted to a satisfactory systematic scrutiny. Moreover, while previous research has elucidated individual facets of poetic difficulty, this work is a fully-fledged attempt to accommodate such a proliferation of insights into an overarching framework. These global achievements have implications for stylistics, text comprehension studies, and literary theory. In what follows I review such implications by stressing the key findings and proposals that have emerged throughout the thesis.

While some well-established literary notions (e.g. intertextuality, intentionality, defamiliarisation, metaphor…) have received considerable attention in stylistics, difficulty has been addressed more incidentally. The

present thesis has filled this research gap in two ways: first, it has established a linguistic basis for difficulty through a list of twenty-four indicators affecting all linguistic levels (graphology, syntax, lexis, semantics, and text structure) and claimed to hamper comprehension and/or to increase processing effort; second, based on this checklist, it has developed a new and principled stylistic method to analyse difficulty. Its main steps are the following:

1. Identification of the linguistic indicators of difficulty in a given poem;
2. Qualitative description of their instantiations in the given poem;
3. Use of this linguistic evidence to support/disprove the possibility, for the given poem, of deriving higher-level constructs (i.e. situation model, theme, formal symbolism) that are relevant to difficulty.

While the presence of a set of indicators (step 1) should alert the analyst to possible difficulty effects, only a description of their instantiations (step 2) can allow assessing the plausibility of a difficulty hypothesis. When performing this latter operation, the contrasting effects of indicators of processing ease, such as narrativity, should not be underestimated. Step 3 finally allows for gauging what consequences the linguistic choices analysed in steps 1 and 2 may have for comprehension.

This method allows for more flexibility than may be inferred from this stepwise description. This is because each poem, through its unique stylistic configuration, dictates how the model needs to be applied. Moreover, the analyst's individual skills remain paramount: while step 1 involves little more than a mechanical mapping of features onto texts, steps 2 and 3 require sensitiveness and intuition on the analyst's part,

giving rise to insights that could have hardly been foreseen in the first analytic stage. Indeed, the stylistic analyses have contributed to shedding light on difficulty in different ways: by adding new indicators or sub-indicators to the checklist (e.g. the analyses of Hill, Howe, Prynne, Cummings); by showing how critical controversies on difficulty can be solved (Pound); by integrating previous readings by critics (e.g. Stein, Bernstein); and by addressing the tenuous divide between difficulty and obscurity (Crane, Thomas). In the case of Thomas' 'When once the twilight locks no longer', it has been proposed that the gap between the situation model evoked and the theme to be inferred is not illustrative of difficulty but, rather, of obscurity.

The benefits of this method can further be appreciated by comparing it with Dillon's (1978), whose work is perhaps the most sustained and ambitious attempt at explaining difficulty from a linguistic perspective. Dillon's overall aim and framework are similar to the one adopted in this thesis (see 1.2 and 2.1.1). However, his approach when discussing sources of processing difficulty in literature appears, for all its remarkable rigour, quite static and 'over-grammaticalised'. Dillon uses selected extracts to illustrate pairings of processing-linguistic levels (e.g. phrases-parsing; reference-comprehension; coherence-interpretation). As a result, his analytical practice understates the holistic nature of difficulty. Although my analyses have discussed each indicator in turn, as if they were independent from each other, a genuine attempt has been made to tease out their individual contributions to difficulty. For instance, the Latinate vocabulary and ambiguous status of the addressee in Hill's stanza (see 3.3.2 and 3.3.3, respectively) affect different comprehension levels: the former poses greater challenges for the processing operation of activation, and hence for decoding; the latter poses greater challenges for the accuracy of the situation model to be construed, and hence for inferencing. In detailing

these and other cognitive operations typical of difficult poems (see 2.3), this thesis has also replied to Sutherland's question of whether 'there is really anything cognitively distinct about the experience of radical art' (2010: 769). Difficult poems are likely to hamper basic processing operations (e.g. parsing, construal, integration) and to favour higher level processing operation (e.g. inferential activity, comprehension monitoring).

Since the notion of comprehension at various levels is central to difficulty, this thesis has also advanced proposals that are relevant to research in text comprehension. Following psychological studies, basic comprehension rests on the construction of a situation model – an evoked scene in primarily visual terms. Following literary theory, deep comprehension rests on literary meaning, involving the more abstract constructs of theme (i.e. a general truth communicated by the text) and formal symbolism (i.e. the extent to which formal choices mirror either situation model or theme of the poem). This bipartite solution is in the tradition of Steiner (1978: 27), who distinguishes between empirical understanding and genuine comprehension. At the same time it goes one step further, since it allows anchoring comprehension levels onto constructs that can be derived from the language of the text. Another important theoretical distinction that has been introduced is that between offline and online difficulty. The former captures the post-reading degree of comprehension attained by readers. The latter refers to the processing effort experienced during the actual reading. This distinction, empirically tested in Chapters 4 and 5, has helped explain the conflicting views on Pound's difficulty (see 3.4) in terms of the critics' emphasis on one dimension at the expense of the other.

The offline/online difficulty distinction has informed the empirical tests carried out in Chapters 4 and 5. The open, non-experimental design of these tests provides a more ecologically viable alternative to Yaron's

studies (2002, 2003; see 1.3.1). Yaron's general reliance on comprehension models has been retained, but her view of comprehension has been questioned for being reduced to psychological research only, with little room for higher inferential levels that are crucial in poetry reading. In order to redress the balance, in Chapter 4 attention has been given to the participants' inferential processes as revealed by their comments. More specifically, it has been shown that poems prompt different kind of inferences depending on the linguistic features that they foreground. The other key finding of this chapter is that poems felt as extremely difficult (as cued by self-comprehension scores) are those impairing basic comprehension, as shown in low to null intersubjective agreement on topic identification.

Chapter 5 replies to Yaron's dismissal of reading times as a meaningful measure for poetic difficulty (2002: 134) by showing how reading times provide insights into difficulty beyond the sentence level that is standard in psycholinguistics. The central finding of this chapter is that the texts by Strand, Pound and Ballard, characterised by narrative elements to different degrees, were read more quickly than the non-narrative poems by Stevens, Hill, Prynne and Howe. Hence, it has been proved that narrativity – whether elliptical or prototypical – boosts processing ease. Interestingly, narrativity does not need to be fully instantiated in a text in order to boost processing ease: it is sufficient for readers to recognise traces of a narrative schema in order to read the text more fluently. At the opposite end, the poem by Howe was read the slowest. This finding problematises the psycholinguistic assumption that punctuation slows down reading (e.g. Steinhauer and Friederici 2001: 269), since Howe's poem is unpunctuated. The stylistic explanation is that the blurring of constituency in this poem makes its lines almost impossible

to parse. As a consequence, the reader's processing is thwarted even more than for the extreme semantic deviances of the poem by Prynne.

Finally, the thesis has substantially contributed to literary theory by reviving a tradition of studies whose central concern is the sort of 'definitional project' envisaged by Vincent (2003: 12) but abandoned in practice since Steiner (1978). My definition of difficulty takes into account both its interactional and language-driven sides, and locates this phenomenon at the interface between linguistic deviance and impeded understanding at various levels of comprehension (see 1.5). This definition overlaps with Steiner's tactical difficulty, but at the same time advances our understanding of Steiner's category by detailing how stylistic devices contribute to the perception of difficulty. Steiner's contingent difficulty is reinterpreted in terms of the cognitive process of word access and activation on the readerly side, and in terms of rare lexis and proper nouns imbued with encyclopaedic content on the linguistic side. Since rare lexis and proper nouns can be used as stylistic devices, it is argued that the distinction between contingent and tactical difficulty is too neat in Steiner, and therefore it should be revised. Modal difficulty is bound to occur whenever literary meaning is unattained – that is, when neither theme nor formal symbolism are constructed by readers. Ontological difficulty is necessarily out of the remit of a thesis that offers explanations based on evidence and observation. This difficulty level is thus dismissed as a post-hoc construct that eludes the response- and language-based nature of difficulty.

Another core issue in literary theory, the plurality of difficulty, has been addressed by opposing the relativist trend of the last decades (see 1.3). While scholars in this trend have often emphasised the multiple nature of difficulty, their analytical treatment has often been more one-sided than their premises would have allowed for. This has surfaced in the

tendency to argue for the difficulty of poems beforehand, rather than weighing the evidence supporting or falsifying one's intuition. The approach taken in this thesis is somehow the opposite: the driving factor has been to narrow down the phenomenon by assigning an operational definition to it (see 1.5). Yet as the thesis progressed, this seemingly restrictive definition has accommodated an increasingly complex and multifaceted picture. The plurality of difficulty has been endorsed in practice by establishing the corpora in Chapters 3 and 6 based on assessment of difficulty by a number of critics. This is an advantage compared to previous accounts in which the assessment of difficulty depended on one analyst only, and it was thus more prone to idiosyncratic biases.

Despite its innovations in terms of analytic practice and global conceptualisation of difficulty, the model proposed substantially draws on previous approaches in a drive towards interaction which I hope will prevail over 'the territorialism and competitiveness of linguistic schools' (Austin 1994: 136). A similarly unifying effort can be seen in Baicchi (2012), who bridges the gap between functional linguistics, cognitive linguistics and speech act theory. This is not to endorse a relativistic 'everything goes' standpoint, but rather it is to limit one's intellectual positioning pro or contra a specific camp only whenever its claims or assumptions are provably incompatible with those from another camp.

7.2 Future directions

It would be absurd to claim that the model proposed is *the* ultimate model, or that it settles once and for all the debate surrounding difficulty. To the contrary, my structuralist drive towards a systematic account of difficulty has only shown how much more work is yet to be carried out if our

understanding of this phenomenon is to advance. I envision two parallel ways in which research on difficulty could develop: (a) thematically, by exploring areas only cursorily addressed in this thesis; and (b) methodologically, by integrating an even wider array of conceptual tools into the model. In what follows, suggestions are made in both respects.

When facing a poem of medium difficulty, some participants expressed a desire for re-reading (see 4.5) that is worth further investigation. Because this thesis has minutely investigated the initial impact of difficulty (see 1.5), it has not been possible to explore how the experience of difficulty changes over time. A 're-reading paradigm' (Dixon et al. 1993: 17) could be adopted in which participants keep a diary over a few months and annotate their impressions whenever they return to a poem that they deemed difficult in the first place. This research path is one rich in pedagogical implications, given that poetry is considered the most challenging genre for students (Salvatori and Donahue 2005). In addition, a more controlled experiment could test the assumption (see 3.3.4, 3.5.5, 3.6.4) that certain phenomena (e.g. complex addressee attribution, the associative range of register-mixing and unusual collocations) should become salient on re-reading. Testing this assumption would advance our knowledge on the relationship between foregrounding and literary reading.

Although the notion of symbolic meaning has been accorded a central role in this thesis (see 2.1.2 and 3.7.1), the idea that extremely difficult poems resist the construction of symbolic meaning is also in want of empirical support. Expert readers (e.g. literary scholars, reviewers for literary magazines) could be asked to read and interpret two sets of poem, one of which displays several indicators of difficulty. Their interpretations could then be examined focusing on the amount of sentences elaborating on themes, and on how these have been inferred in each set of poems. When interpreting poems like Prynne's (see 3.6), themes are likely to be

inferred from formal symbolism rather than from a situation model. By contrast, when interpreting Stevens's poem (see 3.2) or Hill's (see 3.3), themes are likely to be inferred from both situation model and formal symbolism.

Another research area that this thesis has addressed only cursorily is the relation between authorial intention and difficulty (see 3.7.2). Although difficulty is primarily a response phenomenon, the fact that attributions of intentionality are often made by common readers as well as by critics cannot be ignored. Moreover, poets' self-reflective comments on their writing, if they are to be trusted, point to the possibility that difficulty can be either intentional or unintentional: Zanzotto's analogy between difficulty and electricity cues a motivated pursuit of difficulty; Ashbery's surprise at his own difficulty, on the contrary, suggests that the achievement of this effect was outside the poet's purpose (see 1.4.4). The study of authorial variants (or 'filologia d'autore' ['authorial philology'], a well-established field in Italy) can shed light on this nexus. Within British stylistics, a reference point is Sotirova (2014), examining Woolf's manuscripts and the stylistic changes occurring in them.

This thesis would also benefit from an even more eclectic reliance on frameworks and conceptual tools that are likely to prove valuable when analysing difficulty in poetry. Relevance Theory (Sperber and Wilson [1986] 1995) and the notion of *semantic prosodies* (Louw and Milojkovic 2014) seem particularly promising in this regard. Relevance Theory, which has only been cursorily mentioned in this thesis, is guided by the assumption that 'human cognitive processes […] are geared to achieving the greatest possible cognitive effect for the smallest possible processing effort' (1995: vii). If this assumption holds for literary reading as well, which seems to be the case (see Furlong 1996, Pilkington 2000, Clark 2014), difficult poetry is a privileged testbed for Relevance Theory. Difficult

poetry is demanding from a processing standpoint, and yet its cognitive rewards for readers are often not apparent. While Bernstein (2011: 3-4) claims that difficult poems affect our imagination more deeply than easy-to-understand poems, an extremely difficult poem like 'Lobster-orange, shag in parvo…' by Prynne has given rise to a very small number of elaborative comments compared to Strand's 'The Late Hour'. Relevance Theory could help explain the nature of the trade-off between readers' investment of effort and the gains promised by difficult poems.

The notion of semantic prosody refers to the 'understanding [of] the primary meanings and subtle associations of a word' (Louw and Milojkovic 2014: 263) through a corpus-based analysis of its collocations. A study of the semantic prosodies in poems would therefore allow for a better modelling of literary meaning, especially the elusive concepts of *meaning potential* and *significance* introduced in 2.1.2. While typical co-texts of words in unusual associations have been occasionally pointed out in the stylistic analyses (see 3.2.1), a fully-fledged account of implied meanings based on semantic prosodies would be beneficial. Indeed, Louw and Milojkovic do use a poem (Yeat's 'The Circus Animals' Desertion') to show how their method works in practice. Crucially, this method is equipped to deal with grammatical strings, which Louw and Milojkovic call *quasi-propositional-variables* (e.g. 'what can I but*', 2014: 271). When inserted in a corpus, these strings deliver contexts that are lexically (that is, semantically) analysable. The potential of this method if applied to difficult poems featuring syntactic incompleteness (e.g. Howe's, Stein's) should not be underestimated.

In conclusion, the scope for further research allowed for difficulty is as vast, stimulating and challenging as difficulty itself. It calls for a collective, interdisciplinary enterprise that is necessarily, and perhaps fortunately, beyond the expertise and efforts of any single researcher.

Appendix A

Consent form for research study

Processing of poems: reading times

- In the test you will be reading seven short poems on a screen, pressing the space bar button after each line you will have read. This will allow me to get to so far underexplored insights on the way literary texts are read.

- Finally, you will be given a short personal questionnaire enquiring about your age, gender, chosen course of study and familiarity with literary reading. The total length of the task (the two tests plus the questionnaire) will be of approximately one hour.

If you want to take part in this study, please tick 'yes' in the boxes below. Remember that you are free to choose whether to participate or not to this specific study without giving any reason and without consequence.

YES ☐ NO ☐ I confirm that the purpose of the study has been explained and that I have understood it.

YES ☐ NO ☐ I have had the opportunity to ask questions and they have been successfully answered.

YES ☐ NO ☐ I understand that all data are anonymous and that there will not be any connection between the personal information provided and the data.

YES ☐ NO ☐ I confirm that I have read and understood the above information and that I agree to participate in this study.

Participant's Name AND Signature

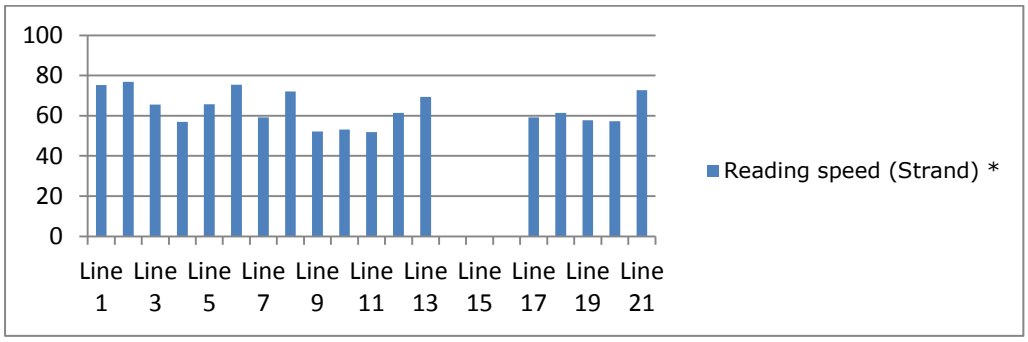
Researcher's Signature

Date

Appendix B

Processing profiles for the poems by Strand, Stevens, Hill, Howe, and Prynne

Figure 16 Processing profile for the Strand poem



* Regrettably, reading speed data concerning lines 14 to 16 are missing due to an input error

Figure 17 Processing profile for the Stevens poem

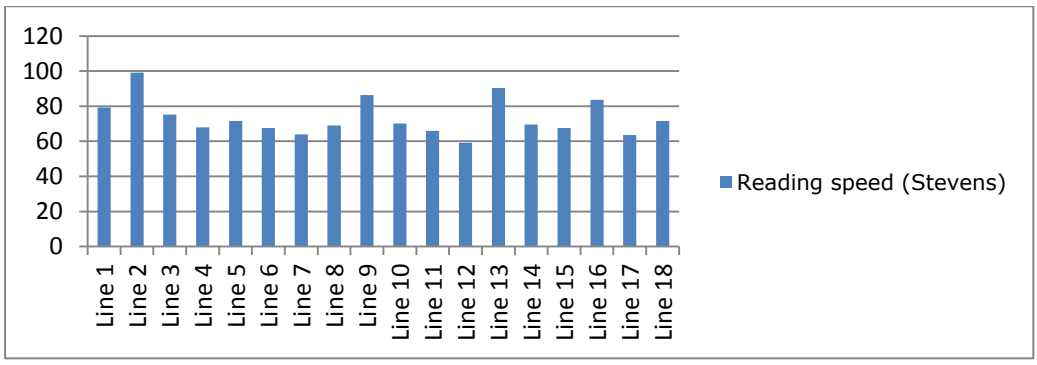


Figure 18 Processing profile for the Hill poem

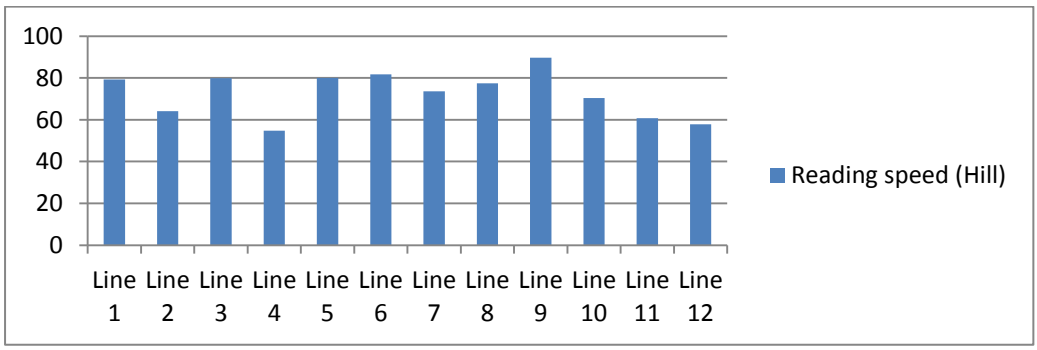
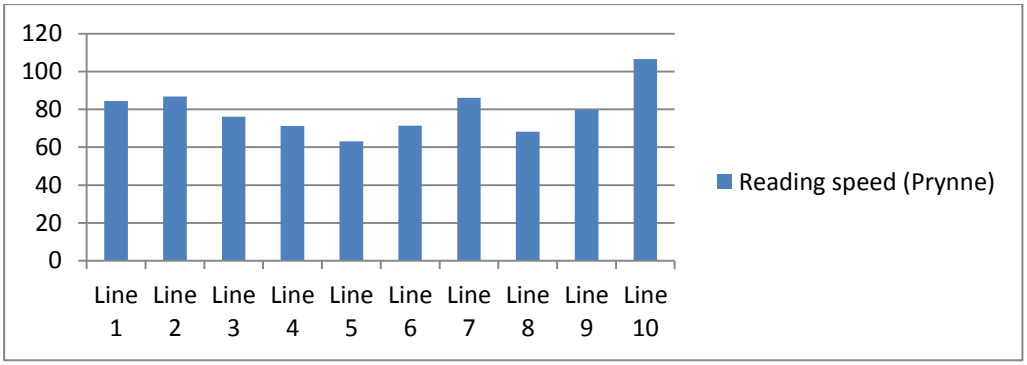


Figure 19 Processing profile for the Prynne poem



References

Abrams, M. H. and Greenblatt S. (eds) (2000) *The Norton Anthology of English Literature: 20th Century*. New York; London: Norton.

Adams, H. (1991) 'The Difficulty of Difficulty', in C.A. Purves (ed.), *The Idea of Difficulty in Literature*, pp. 23–50. New York: State University of New York.

Adamson, S. (1998) 'The Literary Language', in R. Lass (ed.), *The Cambridge History of the English Language, 3, 1476-1776*, pp. 539–653. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Adamson, S. (1999) 'The Literary Language', in S. Romaine (ed.), *The Cambridge History of the English Language, 4, 1776-the present day*, pp. 589–692. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Adamson, S. (2006) 'Deixis and the Reinassance Art of Self-Construction', *Sederi*, 16, 5-29.

Adorno, T. (2005[1951]) *Minima Moralia: Reflections from Damaged Life*. London: Verso.

Allington, D. (2005) 'Re-reading the Script: a Discursive Appraisal of the Use of the "Schema" in Cognitive Poetics', *Working with English*, *2*, 1–9.

Alonso, P. (2014) 'The Role of Cognitive Coherence in Non-expert Processes of Literary Discourse Reception', *Journal of Literary Semantics*, *43*(1), 1–24.

Altieri, C. (1984) *Self and Sensibility in Contemporary American Poetry*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Altieri, C. (1989) *Painterly Abstraction in Modernist American Poetry: The Contemporaneity of Modernism*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Altieri, C. (1999[1978]) 'The Objectivist tradition', in R. Blau DuPlessis and P. Quartermain (eds), *The Objectivist Nexus: Essays in Cultural Poetics*, pp. 25–36. Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press.

Anderson, C. R. and Davison A. (1988) 'Conceptual and Empirical Bases of Readability Formulas', in Davison. A and Green G. M (eds), *Linguistic Complexity and Text Comprehension: Readability Issues Reconsidered,* pp. 23-53. Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.

Anderson, P. (1998) *The Origins of Postmodernism*. London; New York: Verso.

Ashbery, J. (1962) *The Tennis Oath Court*. Middletown: Wesleyan University Press.

Attridge, D. (1987) 'Closing Statement: Linguistics and Poetics in Retrospect', in N. Fabb, D. Attridge, A. Durant, and C. McCabe (eds), *The Linguistics of Writing: Arguments between Language and Literature*, pp. 15–32. Manchester: Manchester University Press.

Austin, T. R. (1986) '(In)transitives. Some Thoughts on Ambiguity in Poetic Texts', *Journal of Literary Semantics*, *15*(1), 23–38.

Austin, T. R. (1994) *Poetic Voices*. Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press.

Bäckström, P. (2010) 'Forgive Us, o Life! the Sin of Death: a Critical Reading of Michael Riffaterre's Semiotics of Poetry', *Textual Practice*, *25*(5), 913–939.

Baker, A. (2002) 'Review of "Speech! Speech!" by Geoffrey Hill', *Poetry Nottingham International*, *56*(3), 34.

Bakhtin, M. M. (1981[1934-35]) 'Discourse in the Novel', in Bakhtin, M. *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, translated by Emerson, C. and Holquist, M; edited by Holquist, M., pp. 258-422. Austin: University of Texas Press.

Baicchi, A. (2012) *On Acting and Thinking: Studies Bridging Between Speech Acts and Cognition*. Pisa: Edizioni ETS.

Ballard, J. G. (1962) *The Drowned World*. London: Berkley Books.

Bates, M. (2011) 'Stevens and Modernist Narrative', *Wallace Stevens Journal*, *35*(2), 160–173.

Bernstein, C. (1987) *The Sophist*. Los Angeles: Sun and Moon Press.

Bernstein, C. (1992) *A Poetics*. Harvard University Press.

Bernstein, C. (2011) 'The Difficult Poem', in Bernstein, C. *Attack of the Difficult Poems,* pp. 1–6. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Biber, D. and Conrad, S. (2009) *Register, Genre, and Style*. Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press.

Biber, D., Finegan, E., Johansson, S., Conrad, S., and Leech, G. (2002) *Longman Grammar of Spoken and Written English*. Harlow: Longman.

Bloom, H. (1973) *The Anxiety of Influence: a Theory of Poetry*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Bowie, M. (1978) *Mallarmé and the Art of Being Difficult*. Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press.

Bromwich, D. (2001) 'Muse of Brimstone', *The New York Times*, 11 March.

Brooke-Rose, C. (1958) *A Grammar of Metaphor*. London: Secker and Walburg.

Brooke-Rose, C. (1976) *A Structural Analysis of Pound's "Usura Canto". Jakobson's Method Extended and Applied to Free Verse*. The Hague: Mouton.

Broom, S. (2006) *Contemporary British and Irish Poetry*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Burke, M. (2007) '"Progress is a Comfortable Disease": Cognition in a Stylistic Analysis of e.e. cummings', in M. Lambrou and P. Stockwell (eds), *Contemporary stylistics*, pp. 144–155. London: Continuum.

Butt, D. (2010) 'Thought Experiments in Verbal Art: examples from Modernism', in D. Miller and M. Turci (eds), *Language and Verbal Art Revisited: Linguistic Approaches to the Study of Literature*, pp. 68-96. London; Oakville, Connecticut: Equinox.

Caink, A. (2012) 'Experiencing Meanings in Spark's *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*', *Journal of Literary Semantics*, 41(2), 121-138.

Caink, A. (2016) 'Generative Grammar and Stylistics', in V. Sotirova (ed.), *The Bloomsbury Companion to Stylistics*, pp. 37-56. London; New York: Bloomsbury.

Carminati, M., N., Stabler, J., Roberts, A. M. and Fischer, M. H. (2006) 'Readers' Responses to Sub-genre and Rhyme Scheme in Poetry', *Poetics*, *34*(3), 204–218.

Carney, J. (2008) "Unweaving the Rainbow": the Semantic Organization of the Lyric', *Journal of Literary Semantics*, *37*, 33–53.

Carter, R. (1998 [1987]) *Vocabulary*. London: Routledge.

Castiglione, D. (2013) 'The Semantics of Difficult Poems: Deriving a Checklist of Linguistic Phenomena', *Journal of Literary Semantics*, *42*(1), 115–140.

Chafe, W. (1991) 'Sources of Difficulty in the Processing of Written Language', in A. C. Purves (ed.), *The Idea of Difficulty in Literature*, pp. 7–22. New York: State University of New York.

Ching, M., K., Haley, M. C. and Lunsford, R. F. (1980) 'The Theoretical Relation between Linguistics and Literary Studies: an Introduction by the Editors', in Ching, M. K., Haley, M. C. and Lunsford, R. F. (eds), *Linguistic Perspectives on* Literature, pp. 3-36. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.

Clark, B. (2014) 'Pragmatics and Inference', in P. Stockwell and S. Whiteley (eds), *The Cambridge Handbook of Stylistics*, pp. 300-314. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Claus, B. and Kelter, S. (2006) 'Comprehending Narratives Containing Flashbacks: Evidence for Temporally Organized Representations', *Journal of Experimental Psychology: Learning, Memory, and Cognition*, *32*(5), 1031–1044.

Conklin, K. and Schmitt, N. (2012) 'The Processing of Formulaic Language', *Annual Review of Applied Linguistics*, *32*, 45–61.

Crane, H. (1972[1926]) *White Buildings*. Boni and Liveright.

Cremer, M. and Schoonen, R. (2013) 'The Role of Accessibility of Semantic Word Knowledge in Monolingual and Bilingual Fifth-grade Reading', *Applied Psycholinguistics*, *34*(6), 1195–1217.

Croft, W. and Cruse, D. A. (2004) *Cognitive Linguistics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Culler, J. (ed.). (1988) *On Puns: the Foundations of Letters*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.

Culler, J. (2002[1975]) *Structuralist Poetics: Structuralism, Linguistics, and the Study of Literature*. London: Routledge.

Cummings, E. E. (1998 [1935]) *No Thanks*. New York: Liveright.

De Beaugrande, R. A. and Dressler, W. (1981) *Introduction to Text Linguistics*, London: Longman.

Derrida, J. (1992) *Acts of Literature*. (D. Attridge, ed.). New York: Routledge.

Diepeveen, L. (2003) *The Difficulties of Modernism*. New York; London: Routledge.

van Dijk, T. (1985) 'Semantic Discourse Analysis', in T. van Dijk (ed.) *Handbook of Discourse Analysis, Vol 2*, pp. 103–112. London: Academic Press.

van Dijk, T., and Kintsch, W. (1983) *Strategies of Discourse Comprehension*. New York; London: Academic Press.

Dillon, G. L. (1978) *Language Processing and the Reading of Literature*. Bloomington and London: Indiana University Press.

Dixon, P., Bortolussi, M., Twilley, L. C. and Leung, A. (1993) 'Literary Processing and Interpretation: Towards Empirical Foundations, *Poetics*, *22*, 5–33.

Dörnyei, Z. (2007) *Research Methods in Applied Linguistics: Quantitative, Qualitative, and Mixed Mehodologies*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Douthwaite, J. (2000) *Towards a Linguistic Theory of Foregrounding*. Alessandria: Edizioni dell'Orso.

Du, P., Liu D., Li Zhang, Li, Hitchman G. and Lin C. (2014) 'The Processing of Contradictory and Noncontradictory Negative Sentences', *Journal of Cognitive Psychology 26*(4), 461-472.

Eco, U. (1979) *A Theory of Semiotics*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Eliot, T. S. (1939) *Old Possum's Book of Practical Cats*. London: Faber.

Eliot, T. S. (1941) 'Difficult Poetry', in T.S. Eliot, *Points of View*, pp. 50-52. London: Faber and Faber.

Eliot, T. S. (1999 [1921]) 'The Metaphysical Poets', in T.S. Eliot (ed.) *Selected Essays*, pp. 281-291. London: Faber.

Eliot, T. S. (1972[1922]) *The Waste Land, and Other Poems*. London: Faber and Faber.

Emmott, C. (1997) *Narrative Comprehension: a Discourse Perspective*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Emmott, C., Sanford, A. J. and Morrow, L. I. (2006) 'Capturing the Attention of Readers? Stylistic and Psychological Perspectives on the Use and Effect of Text Fragmentation in Narratives', *Journal of Literary Semantics*, *35*, 1–30.

Empson, W. (1930) *Seven Types of Ambiguity*. London: Chatto and Windus.

Evans, V. (2009) *How Words Mean: Lexical Concepts, Cognitive Models, and Meaning Construction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Eva-Wood, A. (2004) 'Thinking and Feeling Poetry: Exploring Meanings Aloud', *Journal of Educational Psychology*, *96*(1), 182–191.

Fabb, N. (1995) 'The Density of Response: a Problem for Literary Criticism', in J. Payne (ed.), *Linguistic Approaches to Literature: Papers in Literary Stylistics*, pp. 143–157. Birmingham: English Language Research.

Fabb, N. (1999) 'Verse Constituency and the Locality of Alliteration', *Lingua*, *108*(4), 223–245.

Fabb, N. (2002) *Language and Literary Structure*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Fabb, N. (2010) 'Is Literary Language a Development of Ordinary Language?', *Lingua*, *120*, 1219–1232.

Fabb, N. (2012) 'Poetic Form as Meaning in Walt Whitman's "Leaves of Grass."', *Journal of Literary Semantics*, *41*(2).

Fabb, N. (2013) 'There is No Psychological Limit on the Duration of Metrical Lines in Performance: Against Turner and Pöppel', *International Journal of Literary Linguistics*, *2*(1), 1–29.

Fabb, N. (2014) 'The Verse-line as a Whole Unit in Working Memory, Ease of Processing, and the Aesthetic Effects of Form', *Philosophy Supplement Volume*, *74*.

Fabb, N. and Durant, A. (1987) 'Introduction: The Linguistics of Writing: Retrospect and Prospect after Twenty-five Years', in D. Attridge, N. Fabb, A. Durant and C. McCabe (eds), *The Linguistics of Writing: Arguments between Language and Literature*, pp. 1–14. Manchester: Manchester University Press.

Fairley, I. (1980) 'Syntactic Deviation and Cohesion', in M. K. L. Ching, M. C. Haley and R. F. Lunsford (eds), *Linguistic Perspectives on Literature*, pp. 242–256. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.

Faust, M. and Mashal, N. (2007) 'The Role of the Right Cerebral Hemisphere in Processing Novel Metaphorical Expressions Taken from Poetry: a Divided Field Visual Study', *Neuropsychologia*, *45*, 860–870.

Fink, T. and Halden-Sullivan, J. (2013) 'Introduction', in T. Fink and J. Halden-Sullivan (eds), *Reading the Difficulties. Dialogues with Contemporary American Innovative Poetry*, pp. 5–14. Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press.

Fish, S. (1980) *Is there a Text in this Class? The Authority of Interpretive Communities*. Cambridge; London: Harvard University Press.

Fois-Kaschel, G. (2002) *Analyse Linguistique de l'Hermetisme et des Libertés Poétiques dans Hölderlin, Trakl et Celan*. Paris: Harmattan.

Fowler, R. (1971) *The Languages of Literature. Some Linguistic Contributions to Criticism*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.

Fowler, R. (1986) *Linguistic Criticism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Frazier, L. (1988) 'The Study of Linguistic Complexity', in A. Davison and G. M. Green (eds), *Linguistic Complexity and Text Comprehension : Readability Issues Reconsidered*, pp. 193–221. Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.

Freeman, M. (2005) 'Poetry as Power: the Dynamics of Cognitive Poetics as a Scientific and Literary Paradigm', in H. Veivo, B. Petterson and M. Polvinen (eds), *Cognition and Literary Interpretation in Practice*, pp. 31–57. Helsinki: Helsinki University Press.

Furlong, A. (1995) *Relevance Theory and Literary Interpretation*. Unpublished Ph.D. thesis, University of College London.

Garavelli, M. B. (2010[1988]) *Manuale di Retorica*. Milan: Bompiani.

Gavins, J. (2013) *Reading the Absurd*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

Genette, G. (1980) *Narrative Discourse: an Essay in Method*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

Giora, R. (1997) 'Discourse Coherence and Theory of Relevance: Stumbling Blocks in Search of a Unified Theory', *Journal of Pragmatics*, *27*, 17–34.

Goatly, A. (1997) *The Language of Metaphors*. London: Routledge.

Goodblatt, C. and Glickson, J. (2010) 'Conversations with I.A. Richards: the Renaissance in Cognitive Literary Studies', *Poetics Today*, *31*(3), 387–431.

Graesser, A. C., Pomeroy, V. J. and Craig, S. D. (2002) 'Psychological and Computational Research on Theme Comprehension', in M. Louwerse and W. van Peer (eds), *Thematics. Interdisciplinary Studies*, pp. 19–34. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.

Grice, H. P. (1975) 'Logic and Conversation', in P. Cole and J. L. Morgan (eds), *Syntax and Semantics 3: Speech Acts*, pp. 41–58. New York: Academic Press.

Grossman, A. (2007) 'On Communicative Difficulty in General and "Difficult" Poetry in Particular: the Example of Hart Crane's "The broken Tower', *Chicago Review*, *53*(2-3), 140–161.

Hakemulder, F. and van Peer, W. (2016) 'Empirical Stylistics', in V. Sotirova (ed.) *The Bloomsbury Companion to Stylistics*, pp. 189-207. London; New York: Bloomsbury.

Halliday, M. A. K. (1971) 'Linguistic Function and Literary Style: an Inquiry into William Golding's *The Inheritors*', in S. Chatman (ed.), *Literary Style: A* Symposium, pp. 362–400. New York: Oxford University Press.

Halliday, M. A. K. (2004) *An Introduction to Functional Grammar* (3rd ed.), revised by Matthiessen, C. M. I. M. London: Arnold.

Halliday, M. A. K. and Hasan, R. (1976) *Cohesion in English*. London: Longman.

Halliday, M. A. K. and Matthiessen, C. M. I. M. (1999) *Construing Experience through Meaning*. *A Language-Based Approach to Cognition*. London; New York: Continuum.

Hanauer, D. (1997) 'Poetic Text Processing', *Journal of Literary Semantics*, *26*(3), 157–172.

Hanauer, D. (1998a) 'The Effects of Three Literary Educational Methods on the Development of Genre Knowledge', *Journal of Literary Semantics*, *27*, 43–57.

Hanauer, D. (1998b) 'The Genre-Specific Hypothesis of Reading: Reading Poetry and Encyclopedic Items', *Poetics*, *26*, 63–80.

Hanauer, D. (2001) 'The Task of Poetry Reading and Second Language Learning', *Applied Linguistics*, *22*(3), 295–323.

Hansson, G. (1991) 'Kinds of Understanding, Kinds of Difficulties in the Reading of Literature', in A. Purves (ed.), *The Idea of Difficulty in Literature*, pp. 93–116. New York: State University of New York.

Harker, J. W. (1994) "Plain Sense" and "Poetic Significance": Tenth-grade Readers Reading Two Poems', *Poetics*, *22*, 199–218.

Harley, T. A. (2008) *The Psychology of Language* (3rd ed.). London: Psychology Press.

Hasan, R. (1985) *Linguistics, Language, and Verbal Art*. Victoria: Deakin University.

Heidegger, M. (2008[1927]). *Being and Time*. New York; London: HarperPerennial Modern Thought.

Herd, D. (2000) *John Ashbery and American Poetry*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.

Herman, D. (1994) 'Textual 'You' and Double Deixis in Edna O'Brien's *A Pagan Place*', *Style, 28*(3), 378-411.

Hidalgo-Downing, L. (2000) *Negation, Text Worlds, and Discourse: the Pragmatics of Fiction*. Stamford, Conn: Ablex.

Hill, G. (2001) *Speech! Speech!* London: Penguin Books.

Hogan, P. C. (2014) 'Intertextuality and Allusion', in P. Stockwell and Whiteley S. (eds), *The Cambridge Handbook of Stylistics*, pp. 117-131. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Howe, S. (2001) *Bed Hangings*. With pictures by Susan Bee. New York: Granary Press.

Hurley D. M. (2007) 'The Pragmatics of Prosody', *Style*, *41*(1), 53-74.

Hühn, P. (2005) 'Plotting the Lyric: Forms of Narration in Poetry', in E. M. Zettelmann and M. Rubik (eds), *Theory into Poetry: New Approaches to the Lyric*, pp. 147–172. Amsterdam: Rodopi.

Hynds, S. (1991) 'Questions of Difficulty in Literary Reading', in A. Purves (ed.), *The Idea of Difficulty in Literature*, pp. 117–140. New York: State University of New York.

Irvin, S. (2006) 'Authors, Intentions and Literary Meaning', *Philosophy Compass 1*(2), 114-128.

Jacobs, A. (2014) 'Towards a Neurocognitive Poetics Model of Literary Reading', in Willems R. (ed.), *Cognitive Neuroscience of Natural Language Use*, pp. 135-195. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Jagt, R. K., Hoeks, J.C. J., Dorleijn G. and Hendriks P. (2014) 'Look Before You Leap. How Enjambment Affects the Processing of Poetry', *Scientific Study of Literature 4*(1), 3-24.

Jakobson, R. (1960) 'Closing Statement: Linguistics and Poetics', in T. A. Sebeok (ed.), *Style in Language*. Cambridge: M.I.T. Press.

Jeffries, L. (1993) *The Language of Twentieth Century Poetry*. Palgrave Macmillan.

Jeffries, L. (2008) 'The Role of Style in Reader-Involvement: Deictic Shifting in Contemporary Poems', *Journal of Literary Semantics*, *37*(1), 69–85.

Jeffries, L. (2010) 'The Unprofessional: Syntactic Iconicity and Reader Interpretation in Contemporary Poems', in D. McIntyre and B. Busse (eds), *Language and Style*, pp. 95–113. Palgrave Macmillan.

Jeffries, L. (2014) 'Interpretation', in P. Stockwell and S. Whiteley (eds), *The Cambridge Handbook of Stylistics*, pp. 469–486. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Kane, J. (2004) 'Poetry as Right-Hemispheric Language', *Journal of Consciousness Studies, 11*(5-6), 21-59.

Keyser, S. J. (1980[1976]) 'Wallace Stevens: Form and Meaning in Four Poems', in Ching, M. K., Haley, M. C. and Lunsford, R. F. (eds), *Linguistic Perspectives on Literature,* pp. 257-282. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.

Kintsch, W. (1998) *Comprehension: a Paradigm for Cognition*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Labov, W. (1972) *Sociolinguistic Patterns*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

Lamarque, P. (2009) 'The Elusiveness of Poetic Meaning', *Ratio (new Series)*, *27*(4), 398–420.

Langacker, R. (2008) *Cognitive Grammar: a Basic Introduction*. New York; Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Lattig, S. (2007) 'Perception and the Lyric: the Emerging Mind of the Poem', in M. Lambrou and P. Stockwell (eds), *Contemporary Stylistics*, pp. 168–179. London: Continuum.

Lazer, H. (2013) 'Of Course Poetry Is Difficult/Poetry Is not Difficult', in T. Fink & J. Halden-Sullivan (eds), *Reading the Difficulties. Dialogues with Contemporary American Innovative Poetry*, pp. 28–39. Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press.

Leech, G. (1969) *A Linguistic Guide to English Poetry*. Harlow: Longman.

Leech, G. (2010) *Language in Literature. Style and Foregrounding*. Pearson Longman.

Leech, G. and Short, M. (2007[1981]) *Style in Fiction*. London; New York: Longman.

Leggett, B. J. (2007) 'Stevens' Late Poetry', in J. Serio (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Wallace Stevens*, pp. 62–75. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Levin, S. R. (1971). The Conventions of Poetry. In S. Chatman (Ed.), *Literary Style: A Symposium*, pp. 177-196. New York: Oxford University Press.

Levin, S. R. (1977) *The Semantics of Metaphor*. Baltimore; London: John Hopkins University Press.

Lopez, T. (2006) *Meaning Performance: Essays on Poetry*. Cambridge: Salt.

Louw, W. E. and Milojkovic, M. (2014) 'Semantic Prosody', in P. Stockwell and S. Whiteley (eds), *The Cambridge Handbook of Stylistics*, pp. 263-280. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Lyons, J. (1977) *Semantics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Magliano, J. P., Baggett, W.B and Graesser, A. C. (1996) 'A Taxonomy of Inference Categories That May Be Generated During the Comprehension of Literary Texts', in R. J. Kreuz and M. S. MacNealy (eds), *Empirical Approaches to Literature and Aesthetics*, pp. 201-220. New Jersey: Ablex.

Mahlberg, M., Conklin K. and Bisson, M. (2014) 'Reading Dickens's Characters: Employing Psycholinguistic Methods to Investigate the Psychological Reality of Patterns in Text', *Language and Literature*, *23*(4), 369-388.

Martel, Y. (2002) *Life of Pi: a Novel*. Edinburgh: Canongate.

McHale, B. (2000) 'How (not) to Read Postmodernist Long Poems: the Case of Ashbery's "The Skaters."', *Poetics Today*, *21*(3), 561–590.

McHale, B. (2004) *The Obligation Toward the Difficult Whole: Postmodernist Long Poems*. Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press.

McHale, B. (2009) 'Beginning to Think about Narrative in Poetry', *Narrative*, *17*(1), 11-27.

Mellors, A. (2005) *Late Modernist Poetics: from Pound to Prynne*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.

Miall, S. D. and Kuiken D. (1994) 'Foregrounding, defamiliarization, and affect: Response to literary stories', *Poetics 22*, 389-407.

Middleton, P. (2010) 'Open Oppen: Linguistic Fragmentation and the Poetic Proposition', *Textual Practice*, *24*(4), 623–648.

Milojkovic, M. (2013) 'Is Corpus Linguistics Bent on Self-Improvement? The Role of Reference Corpora 20 Years After the Advent of Semantic Prosody', *Journal of Literary Semantics 42*(1), 59-78.

Moen H. S. (2010) '*Chi È Questa?* – 'Who is She?' Transformation, Displacement, and Narrative Refraction as Structural Procedures in *The Cantos of Ezra Pound*', *Textual Practice 24*(2), 287-312.

Mutter, M. (2011) 'Wallace Stevens, Analogy and Tautology: the Problem of a Secular Poetics', *ELH 78*, 741-768.

Nadel, I. B. (2007) *The Cambridge Introduction to Ezra Pound*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Nahajec, L. (2009) 'Negation and the Creation of Extra Meaning in Poetry', *Language and Literature*, *18*(2), 109–127.

Neel, E. (1999) 'The Talking Being Listening: Gertrude Stein's "Patriarchal Poetry" and the Sound of Reading', *Style*, *33*(1), 88–106.

Noel-Tod, J. (2009) 'A History of Difficulty: on Cambridge Poetry', *Cambridge Literary Review 1*(1), 97–102.

Nowottny, W. (1962) *The Language Poets Use*. London: Athlone Press.

Olson, C. (1987) *The Collected Poems of Charles Olson: Excluding the Maximus Poems*, G. F. Butterick (ed.). Berkeley; London: University of California Press.

Päivärinta, A. (2014) 'Foregrounding the Foregrounded: the Literalness of Dylan Thomas's 'After the Funeral'', in C. Harrison, L. Nuttall, P. Stockwell and W. Yuan (eds) *Cognitive Grammar in Literature*, pp. 133-144. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.

Panagiotidou, M. E. (2012) 'An Introduction to the Semantics of Intertextuality', *Journal of Literary Semantics*, *41*(1), 47–65.

van Peer, W. (1986) *Stylistics and Psychology: Investigations of Foregrounding*. London: Croom Helm.

van Peer, W. (2002) 'Where do Literary Themes Come From?', in M. Louwerse and W. van Peer (eds), *Thematics. Interdisciplinary Studies*, pp. 253–263. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.

van Peer, W., Hakemulder, F., and Zyngier, S. (2012). *Scientific Methods for the Humanities*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.

Perloff, M. (1981) *The Poetics of Indeterminacy*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Perloff, M. (1985) *The Dance of the Intellect: Studies in the Poetry of the Pound Tradition*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Perloff, M. (1991) *Radical Artifice: Writing Poetry in the Age of Media*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Perloff, M. (2003) 'Review of *Bed Hangings* by Susan Howe', *Common Knowledge 9*(2), 341-42.

Peskin, J. (1998) 'Constructing Meaning When Reading Poetry: an Expert-Novice Study', *Cognition and Instruction*, *16*(3), 235–263.

Peskin, J. and Wells-Jopling, R. (2012) 'Fostering Symbolic Interpretation during Adolescence', *Journal of Applied Developmental Psychology*, *33*, 13–23.

Pilkington, A. (2000) *Poetic Effects. A Relevance Theory Perspective*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.

Pope, A. (1749[1711]) *An Essay on Criticism*. London: printed for Henry Lintot.

Popper, K. (1994[1979]) *Objective Knowledge: an Evolutionary Approach*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Pound, E. (1954) *The Cantos of Ezra Pound*. London: Faber and Faber.

Press, J. (1963) *The Chequer'd Shade. Reflections on Obscurity in Poetry*. London: Oxford University Press.

Prynne, J. H. (2005). *Poems*. Tarset: Bloodaxe Books.

Prynne, J. H. (2010a) 'Difficulties in the Translation of "Difficult" Poems, *Cambridge Literary Review*, *1*(3), 151–166.

Prynne, J. H. (2010b) 'Poetic Thought', *Textual Practice 24*(4), 595-606.

Quartermain, P. (1992) *Disjunctive Poetics: from Gertrude Stein and Louis Zukofsky to Susan Howe*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Reber, R., Schwarz, N. and Winkielman, P. (2004) 'Processing Fluency and Aesthetic Pleasure: is Beauty in the Perceiver's Processing Experience?', *Personality and Social Psychology Review*, *8*(4), 364–382.

Richards, I. A. (1929) *Practical Criticism*. London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner.

Riffaterre, M. (1971) *Essais de Stylistique Structurale*. Paris: Flammarion.

Riffaterre, M. (1973) 'Interpretation and Descriptive Poetry: a Reading of Wordsworth's "Yew-Trees."', *New Literary History*, *4*(2), 229–256.

Riffaterre, M. (1984[1978]) *Semiotics of Poetry*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Rimmon-Kenan, S. (2002[1983]) *Narrative Fiction: Contemporary Poetics*. London: Routledge.

Rives, R. (2012) *Modernist Impersonalities*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Rodger, T. (1971) 'The Concept of Linguistic Difficulty', *Working Papers in Linguistics*, *3*(4), 109–120.

Romero, E., and Soria, B. (2013) 'Anomaly in Novel Metaphor and Experimental Tests', *Journal of Literary Semantics*, *42*(1), 31–57.

Rosenblatt, L. M. (1994) *The Reader, the Text, the Poem: the Transactional Theory of the Literary Work*. Southern Illinois University Press.

Salvatori, M. R. and Donahue P. (2005) *The Elements (and Pleasures) of Difficulty*. New York: Pearson Longman.

San, D. (2005) 'Hiatus of Subject and Verb in Poetic Language', *Style*, *39*(2), 137–152.

Sanford, A. J. and Emmott C. (2012) *Mind, Brain and Narrative*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Sell, R. D. (1993) 'The Difficult Style of "The Waste Land": a Literary-Pragmatic Perspective on Modernist Poetry', in P. Verdonk (ed), *Stylistic Criticism of Twentieth-Century Poetry: from Text to Context*, pp. 135–158. Florence, KY, USA: Routledge.

Semino, E. (1995) Schema Theory and the Analysis of Text Worlds in Poetry, *Language and Literature*, *4*(2), 79–108.

Semino, E. (2002) Stylistics and Linguistic Variation in Poetry, *Journal of English Linguistics*, *30*(1), 28–50.

Serio, J. (2007) 'Introduction', in J. Serio (ed.) *The Cambridge Companion to Wallace Stevens*, pp. 1–7. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Shen, Y. (2007) 'Foregrounding in Poetic Discourse: between Deviance and Cognitive Constraints', *Language and Literature*, *16*(2), 169–181.

Shen, Y., and Giora, R. (1994) 'Degrees of Narrativity and Strategies of Semantic Reduction', *Poetics*, *22*, 447–458.

Shklovsky, V. (1998[1917]) 'Art as Technique', in J. Rivkin and M. Ryan (eds), *Literary Theory: an Anthology*, pp. 15–21. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing.

Short, M. (1996) *Exploring the Language of Poems, Plays, and Prose*. London: Longman.

Sinding, M. (2008) 'Lapsed Latin: Etymology, Image Schemas, and Multilingual Wordplay in Stevens's "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction."', *Wallace Stevens Journal*, *32*(1), 108–126.

Smith, C. (1988) 'Factors of Linguistic Complexity and Performance', in A. Davison and G. M. Green (eds), *Linguistic Complexity and Text Comprehension: Readability Issues Reconsidered*, pp. 247–279. Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.

Sotirova, V. (2013) *Consciousness in Modernist Fiction: a Stylistic Study*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Sotirova, V. (2014) 'Production and Intentionality', in P. Stockwell and S. Whiteley (eds), *The Cambridge Handbook of Stylistics*, pp. 132–148. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Sperber D. and Wilson, D. (1995) *Relevance: Communication and Cognition* (2nd ed). Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell.

Spiro, J. (2011) 'Reader Response and the Formulation of Literary Judgment', in J. Swann, Pope R, and R. Carter (eds) *Creativity in Language and Literature – The State of the Art*, pp. 231–243. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Staub, A., and Rayner, K. (2007) 'Eye Movements and On-Line Comprehension Processes', in G. Gaskell (ed), *The Oxford Handbook of Psycholinguistics*, pp. 327–342. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Stein, G. (1914) *Tender Buttons: Objects, Food, Rooms*. New York: Claire Marie.

Stein, G. (1980[1927]) 'Patriarchal Poetry', in *The Yale Gertrude Stein*, pp. 106-146. New Haven: Yale University Press.

Steiner, G. (1978) 'On Difficulty', in G. Steiner, *On Difficulty and Other Essays*, pp. 18-47. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Steinhauer, K. and Friederici, A. D. (2001) 'Prosodic Boundaries, Comma Rules, and Brain Responses: the Closure Positive Shift in ERPs as a Universal Marker for Prosodic Phrasing in Listeners and Readers', *Journal of Psycholinguistic Research, 30*(3), 267-295.

Stevens, W. (1950) *The Auroras of Autumn*. New York: Knopf.

Stockwell, P. (1992) 'The Metaphorics of Literary Reading', *Liverpool Papers in Language and Discourse*, *2*, 18–39.

Stockwell, P. (2002a) *Cognitive Poetics: an Introduction*. London: Routledge.

Stockwell, P. (2002b) 'Miltonic Texture and the Feeling of Reading', in E. Semino and J. Culpeper (eds), *Cognitive Stylistics. Language and Cognition in Text* Analysis, pp. 73–94. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.

Stockwell, P. (2009) *Texture – a Cognitive Aesthetics of Reading*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

Strand, M. (1978) *The Late Hour*. New York: Atheneum.

Stubbs, M. (2001) *Word and Phrases: Corpus Studies of Lexical Semantics*. Oxford: Blackwell.

Styles, E. A. (2006) *The Psychology of Attention*. Hove and New York: Psychology Press

Sutherland, K. (2010) 'Wrong Poetry', *Textual Practice*, *24*(4), 765–782.

Svensson, C. (1987) 'The Construction of Poetic Meaning. A Developmental Study of Symbolic and Non-Symbolic Strategies in the Interpretation of Contemporary Poetry', *Poetics*, *16*(2), 471–503.

Tartakovsky, R. (2009) 'E.E. Cummings's Parentheses: Punctuation as Poetic Device', *Style*, *43*(2), 215–247.

Tate, A. (2008 [1994]) 'Bakhtin, Addressivity, and the Poetics of Objectivity', in R. Carter and P. Stockwell (eds) *The Language and Literature Reader*, pp. 137–146. London: Routledge.

Testa, E. (1983) *Il Libro di Poesia*. Genoa: Il Melangolo.

Testa, E. (1999) *Per Interposta Persona. Lingua e Poesia nel Secondo Novecento*. Rome: Bulzoni.

Thomas, D. (1988 [1934]) *Collected Poems 1934-1953*. London: J.M. Dent and Sons.

Thoms, G. (2008) *The Syntax of Experimental Literature: a Literary Linguistic Investigation*. Unpublished MA thesis, University of Strathclyde.

Toolan, M. (1993) 'Approaching Hill's "Of Commerce and Society" Through Lexis', in P. Verdonk (ed.), *Stylistic Criticism of Twentieth-Century Poetry: from Text to Context*, pp. 32–45. Florence, KY, USA: Routledge.

Toolan, M. (1996) *Total Speech: an Integrational Linguistic Approach to Language*. Durham; London: Duke University Press.

Toolan, M. (2001[1988]) *Narrative: a Critical Linguistic Introduction*. London: Routledge.

Toolan, M. (2008[1986]) 'Poem, Reader, Response: Making Sense with Skunk Hour', in R. Carter and P. Stockwell (eds), *The Language and Literature Reader*, pp. 85–95. London: Routledge.

Toolan, M. (2014) 'The Theory and Philosophy of Stylistics' in P. Stockwell and S. Whiteley (eds) *The Cambridge Handbook of Stylistics*, pp. 13–31. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Touponce, W. (1991) 'The Theory of the Text' in A. Purves (Ed.), *The Idea of Difficulty in Literature*, pp. 51–69. New York: State University of New York.

Tsur, R. (2008) *Towards a Theory of Cognitive Poetics*. Brighton and Portland: Sussex Academic Press.

Tsur, R. (2010) 'Poetic Conventions as Cognitive Fossils', *Style*, *44*(4), 496–523.

Tsur, R. (2011) 'The Rhythmical Performance of Milton's "On His Blindness". Problems and Solutions', in *Formal Methods in Poetics. A Collection of Scholarly Works Dedicated to the Memory of Professor M.A. Krasnoperova*, pp. 202–223. Lüdenscheid: Ram-Verlag.

Tuma, K. (1998) *Fishing by Obstinate Isles: Modern and Postmodern British Poetry and American Readers*. Evanston: Northwestern University Press.

Vendler, H. (2007) 'Stevens and the Lyric Speaker', in J. Serio (ed), *The Cambridge Companion to Wallace Stevens*, pp. 133–148. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Vendler, H. (2010) 'Looking at the Worst: Wallace Stevens's *The Rock*', in *Last Looks, Last Books: Stevens, Plath, Lowell, Bishop, Merrill*, pp. 25–46. Princeton: Princenton University Press.

Vincent, J. E. (2003) *Queer Lyrics: Difficulty and Closure in American Poetry*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Wales, K. (2011[1990]) *A Dictionary of Stylistics* (3rd ed.). Harlow: Longman.

Walker, K. (1995) 'How Coherent is Cohesion?', in J. Payne (ed.) *Linguistic Approaches to Literature: Papers in Literary Stylistics*, pp. 102–116. Birmingham: English Language Research.

Wallot, S., O' Brien, B., Haussmann, A., Kloos, H., and Lyby M. (2014) 'The Role of Reading Time Complexity and Reading Speed in Text Comprehension', *Journal of Experimental Psychology: Learning, Memory, and Cognition*, 40(6), 1745-1765.

White, A. (1981) *The Uses of Obscurity: the Fiction of Early Modernism*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.

Wilkinson, J. (2007) *The Lyric Touch: Essays on the Poetry of Excess*. Cambridge: Salt.

Wilkinson, J. (2010) 'Glossing Gloss and its Undertow', *Textual Practice*, *24*(4), 749–764.

Wimsatt, W. K. (1954) *The Verbal Icon: Studies in the Meaning of Poetry*. Lexington: University of Kentucky Press.

Winters, I. (1947 [1943]) 'The Anatomy of Nonsense', in I. Winters, *In Defense of Reason*, pp. 359-574. New York, Swallow Press: University of Denver.

Wolfreys, J. (1998) *Deconstruction. Derrida*. Basingstoke: Macmillan.

Woods, N. (2006) *Describing Discourse: a Practical Guide to Discourse Analysis*. London; New York: Routledge.

Yang, X. Y., Chen, L. and Yang, Y. (2014) 'The Effect of Discourse Structure on Depth of Semantic Integration in Reading', *Memory and Cognition*, *42*, 325–339.

Yaron, I. (2002) 'Processing of Obscure Poetic Texts: Mechanisms of Selection', *Journal of Literary Semantics*, *31*(2), 133–170.

Yaron, I. (2003) 'Mechanisms of Combination in the Processing of Obscure Poems', *Journal of Literary Semantics*, *32*(2), 151–166.

Yaron, I. (2008) 'What is a "Difficult" Poem? Towards a Definition', *Journal of Literary Semantics*, *37*(2), 129–150.

Yaron, I. (2010) 'Obscurity and Dylan Thomas's Early Poetry'. Retrieved from http://cle.ens-lyon.fr/anglais/obscurity-and-dylan-thomas-s-early-poetry-106097.kjsp

Zanzotto, A. (1999) *Poesie e Prose Scelte*, S. Dal Bianco and G. Villalta (eds). Milan: Mondadori.

Zwaan, R. (1993) *Aspects of Literary Comprehension*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.

Zwaan, R. (1996) 'Processing Narrative Time Shifts', *Journal of Experimental Psychology: Learning, Memory and Cognition*, *22*(5), 1196–1207.

Zwaan, R. (2004) 'The Immersed Experiencer: Toward an Embodied Theory of Language Comprehension', *The Psychology of Learning and Motivation*, *44*, 35–62.

Zyngier, S., van Peer, W., and Hakemulder, F. (2007) 'Complexity and Foregrounding: in the Eye of the Beholder?', *Poetics Today*, *28*(4), 653–682.