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Jackson Mac Low

Poetry as Art

Jackson Mac Low, who died on December 8, 2004, at the age of eighty-two, had two children. His son, Mordecai-Mark, is a computational astrophysicist working at the Museum of Natural History, and his daughter, Clarinda, is a dancer and choreographer who often performs in downtown Manhattan. The two paths his children have chosen exemplify Mac Low's own contribution to poetry: his profound understanding of the physics of language and his exuberant articulation of the sounds of words in unpredictable motions.

Mac Low is probably the most controversial of the many great poets of the legendary "New American Poetry" generation, literary artists born in the 1920s and weighted with such names as Beat and Projective, New York School and San Francisco Renaissance. Of the group, Mac Low has been the hardest to assimilate into the predominantly humanist, self-expressive orientation of postwar American poetry. Seen from the point of view of the visual and performing arts, Mac Low's work may appear less abrasive; and yet there is no visual or performing or conceptual artist—not even among his many Fluxus associates or his longtime comrade and instructor in the art of chance, John Cage—who has created word works that approach the complexity, ingenuity, and density of Mac Low's. It is not that his work is better than his contemporaries'—Mac Low himself rejected such forms of evaluation—but that his work's significance for the development of poetry and for our understanding of verbal language is without parallel. He mined deep and rich veins for poetry that had previously gone largely untapped.

Mac Low was a superb performer, bringing a musician's ear for tempo and pitch to a preternatural precision in the enunciation of even the most far-flung vocabulary. The experience of reading his work on the page pales in comparison to the experience of hearing him perform live or on recordings. He was a performance artist of the highest order and a performance poet *avant la lettre*. His texts are scores for performance—by the poet but also for the reader. Indeed, a text of his was performed by Julian Beck and

Judith Malina's Living Theater in 1962, and one of his signal works, *The Pronouns: A Collection of Forty Dances for the Dancers* (Barrytown, NY: Station Hill, 1979) emerged from his engagement, in the 1960s, with Simone Forti, Meredith Monk, Trisha Brown, and other dancers associated with the Judson Memorial Church in Greenwich Village. Mac Low's readings often involved active creative participation by a small group from the audience in the realization of such works as "Simultaneities," in which the text is read not in unison but through a practice of active listening. Throughout the last two decades of his life, Mac Low often performed stunning duets with his wife and fellow artist, Anne Tardos.

Over his long career, Mac Low wrote many types of poem. His first works, such as "HUNGER STRIKE wh at doe S lifemean," were composed when he was a teenager in the late 1930s. He went on to become one of the most prolific American poets of the twentieth century, though much of his work remains unpublished, a good deal untyped. Mac Low continued to create poetry, including sound and visual poems and musical compositions, right up until the time of his death, with many of his most powerful and original works—and the majority of his published work—written after 1980, including *From Pearl Harbor Day to FDR's Birthday* (College Park, MD: Sun & Moon, 1982), *Words and Ends from Ez* (Bolinias, CA: Avenue B, 1989), *Twenties: 100 Poems* (New York: Roof Books, 1991), *Pieces o' Six: Thirty-Three Poems in Prose* (Los Angeles: Sun & Moon, 1992), and *42 Merzgedichte in Memoriam Kurt Schwitters* (Barrytown, NY: Station Hill, 1994). Much of Mac Low's most compelling work in his later period echoes qualities of his aleatoric poems, while being freely composed. This is also true of the work of a number of the poets associated with *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E*, many of whom, myself included, felt a close kinship with Mac Low and with whom, it could be said, he found one of his aesthetic homes as an elder and fellow traveler, after his important founding participation in Fluxus, and alongside his close association with a circle of poets that included David Antin, Jerome Rothenberg, Armand Schwerner, and Hannah Weiner.

The multiplicity of Mac Low's forms and his rejection of any hierarchy among the forms of poetry (objective and subjective, expository or non-representational, lyric and epic), along with his refusal to identify poetic composition with a characteristic "voice" of the poet, are among the most radical aspects of his poetics. But Mac Low's radicalism went beyond his art practice: he was a lifelong anarchist and pacifist, engaged in decades of antiwar, civil rights, and social justice activism. Mac Low, who grew up in suburban Chicago in a Jewish household, moved to New York after graduating from the University of Chicago in 1941 and quickly became involved in political dissent. At the same time, he was part of the new

wave of Americans to come under the influence of Buddhism, through the teaching of D. T. Suzuki, in the 1950s.

Despite the great variety of Mac Low's output and the significance of his political commitments, he is most frequently associated with a compositional practice he began in the 1950s: the use of predetermined structures—procedures or algorithms—for generating poems. This was the kind of work that he included in his best-known early publication, the 1963 Fluxus collection *An Anthology*, on which he worked with La Monte Young, and also in his two groundbreaking collections of works from 1960, *Stanzas for Iris Lezak* (Barton, VT: Something Else, 1972) and *Asymmetries 1-260* (New York: Printed Editions, 1980). In later years, Mac Low preferred to call such works “quasi-intentional,” rejecting the designation “chance-generated.”

If Mac Low realized an alternative to the personally expressive poem, it was not through a rejection of intentionality but through a realization of the hyperspace of aesthetic motivation, which takes into account the social trajectory of a work and the aesthetic choices made, as well as any specific content. Mac Low's work reflects intention writ large, along with a ferocious commitment to precision and documentation. Intention in Mac Low is not found in any one poem or structure but rather in the interconnection among works, or perhaps in the burning space between, as Edmond Jabés once suggested. *Representative Works: 1938-1985* (New York: Roof Books, 1986) provides the only single-volume map, so far, of the exemplary pluriformity of his work.

As anyone who knew Mac Low or worked closely with him was aware, he did not countenance accident or carelessness or typographic error, even in works whose word order was determined by a systematic process. His aim was to fully articulate the possibilities of form forging meaning. Given this, the means he employed in creating his compositions were never off-hand or mysterious.

Consider, for example, Mac Low's characteristically long, detailed, and sometimes exasperating introductions to his work—not only documenting the rules for text generation and the dates of composition, but also often stipulating exactly how the works were to be performed, down to the number of seconds to pause between phrases. Mac Low sought a kind of total aesthetic control more often associated with contemporary composers of complex music than with poets. To achieve his intention, all the identifiable material conditions involved in the fabrication of the work were acknowledged upfront. In Mac Low's poetics, the motivation for the poem is not to convey a predetermined meaning or set of marked associations but rather to maximize semantic potential within the bounds of stipulated constraints. As a result, the difficulty of reading his work is of a

different order from that associated with much modernist poetry. In Mac Low it is never a question of deciphering, since there is nothing hidden, obscure, or purposefully ambiguous: the difficulty is not like that of figuring out a puzzle or interpreting a dream but of responding to the virtually unassimilated, the nearly unfamiliar, and the initially unrecognizable.

Reading Mac Low provides a rigorous but exhilarating exercise in aesthetic projection and determination, in the dawning of aspects and the indispensability of frames. Meaning is not handed over but discovered, just as value is not preordained but wrested from the materials at hand. This is a profoundly secular and democratic exercise. There is plenty of pleasure to be had, but passivity is not rewarded. Collective response, just like group performance, is fomented.

What could make a sharper political contrast than the imaginary of a Mac Low composition and a reality in which so many of the rules that manipulate social meaning and choice are deliberately hidden. In contrast to core values manufactured by unstated or disguised objectives, Mac Low provides no effects but only principles. Our greatest poet of the manipulated poem is also our greatest poet of negative dialectics—of the total rejection of hidden manipulation in the pursuit of expressive engagement. As such, Mac Low's work embodies an ethics of sincerity and responsibility.

But of course all the objectification in the world will never explain how the poems take flight or the resonance they shore against an ever-darkening night. It turns out that far from emptying the poem of emotion or interiority, Mac Low was a Zen Jewish alchemist: converting words into quarks and sparks. His magnificent and multidimensional poems open vast expanses for the imagination to inhabit.

Among Jackson's most beautiful works is *Light Poems*. The "32nd Light Poem" (1971) is an elegy for Paul Blackburn, but I now I think of my companion, guide, and light in so many things seen and unseen, heard and misheard, hoped and lost:

Let me choose the kinds of light
to light the passing of my friend

.....

If there were a kind of black light
that suddenly cd reveal to us
each other's inwardness

.....

but the black light of absence
not ultraviolet light
revealing hidden colors

but revelatory light that is *no* light
the unending light of the realization
that no light will ever light your bodily presence again

Now your poems' light is all
The unending light of your presence
in the living light of your voice¹

1. Jackson Mac Low, *The Complete Light Poems*, ed. Anne Tardos and Michael O'Driscoll (Victoria, TX: Chax, 2015), 182–84.