On Jim Rosenberg's *Word Space Multiplicities*

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Jim Rosenberg's website, *Inframergence*, provokes from its URL onward. Inframergence is a word that did not appear anywhere else online, or in any dictionary, until the site was posted—a fact refracting conceptual dimensions for Rosenberg's work on a grander scale, indicating the rarity of his *oeuvre* in comparison to the vast sea other poets. His revelatory book, *Word Space Multiplicities, Openings, Andings: Collected Essays and Papers in Digital Poetics, Hypertext, and New Media*, does not at all discuss or theorize about a concept of inframergence, leaving visitors to the site or anyone who becomes informed of his work to uncover the neologism's designation on their own. Rosenberg's site does feature examples of digital and other works composed across four decades, including "Word Installations", "Poetry for simultaneous voices", and Diagram Poems of a design pursued by no one else, as in this example from the 1970s (for more examples see *Inframergence*):
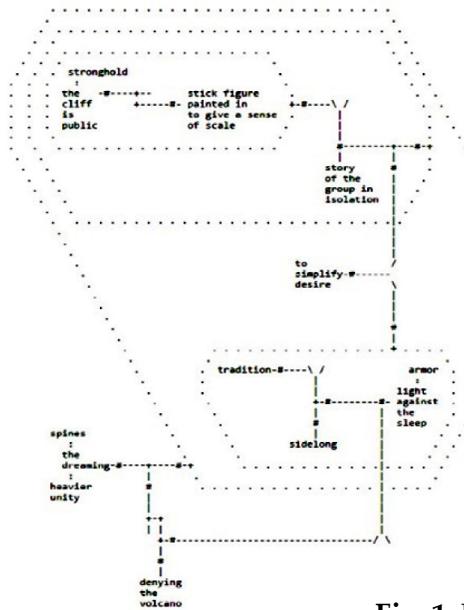

Fig. 1. Diagram 3.11 (121)

In the end, someone willing to make an effort to engage and explore Rosenberg's versatile poetry will come to see it, formally—from this early point onward—as directed merging(s), in language, within a variety of visual and verbal frames or framework/framing devices.

Interactive versions of Rosenberg's "diagram" poems, *Intergrams*, produced in 1988 and published on diskette in in 1993 (Eastgate Systems), forever mark him as one of the world's pioneering digital poets. In itself, not necessarily an extraordinary fact—scientists, artists, and other weirdoes with computers have been experimenting and making interesting artifacts with what is now known as digital media for well over a half-century. However, Rosenberg's thinking on the subject and approach to artistic composition, extending to present and captured in *Word Space Multiplicities*, are utterly erudite. His efforts as poet and observer of form are vibrant, vital touchstones for anyone interested in considering expressive possibilities for meshing and interconnecting language in layers with syntactic symbols. As poet, Rosenberg's combination of atypical, fragmented language and an original approach to verbal construction effectively blurs the distinction between author and reader; as a critic, his explanatory articulations guide the reader along his active verbal path.

Rosenberg's primary concerns in using language, outlined in the "Personal Notes on Poetics" contained in *Word Space Multiplicities*' first chapter "Openings: The Connection Direct", include: "Openness", "Energy Transaction", "Non-possessiveness", "Non-linearity", "Juxtaposition (=Structural Zero)", "Syntax with all Slots Open", "Vocabularies", and "Precomposition". While some of these terms may ostensibly pertain to poetic activity, and conceivably have been used by others (e.g., Robert Duncan and Ted Nelson's use of "Opening"), certainly a refreshing originality emerges when taken as a whole, as it often does in the field of innovative poetics. Readers particularly see how through "word clusters"—layered verbal passages connected by diagrammatic notations—Rosenberg manages to embrace these interests in a wide ranging poetic investigation chronicled throughout the pages of his book.

Essentially Rosenberg, as a poet, using unique "precomposition" processes and word "reservoirs", crafts language to create an atmosphere in which the viewer's senses are uniquely transformed by the accumulation of nonlinear juxtapositions used to engineer narrative. The overall impact of the expanse of language becomes more important than systematic reading, a design demanding that a reader's concentration and memory derive meaning by fusing their interaction (construction) and experience (response) with the text. Multiplicities and inventions in his work require if not demand explanation, and *Word Space Multiplicities* generously offers full illumination, sometimes by way of dialog with others. In "A Conversation with Jim Rosenberg" organized by Judy Malloy (with participation by Anna Couey and Douglas Cohen) in 1996, Rosenberg explains his methods and their significance, how his reservoirs are built from innumerable sources and laboriously processed to establish vocabulary for what

is, essentially, a visual database that becomes poetry. A 2003 "Interview on Poetics", conducted by Sandy Baldwin, editor of *Word Space Multiplicities*, enables Rosenberg the opportunity to make clarifications about process, offer opinion about various contemporary technologies, and elaborate further on the makeup of his poetics. The interview begins with a discussion on the inadequacy of digital writing tools and includes thoughtful critique of Flash. Later in the interview, Rosenberg ruminates on "energy transaction" (poetry as fuel) and discusses responsibility in hypertext writing as well as the potential relationships readers can have with texts, including the possibility of "null choice" (35, 38).

Throughout Rosenberg's ongoing Diagram Series, discussed in "The Interactive Diagram Sentence: Hypertext as a Medium for Thought", hypertext design does not impart one-to-one associations between disparate documents, but rather serves, in conjunction with the externalization of syntax, "to carry the infrastructures of language itself" (134). Since the platform of expression is computer-based, the reader experiences grammar and language in an unprecedented way. Thus, Rosenberg writes, "To understand the network one *becomes* the network" (127). An alternative and fascinating corollary to this idea, paraphrasing Rosenberg, is that to understand the poem the reader must *become* the poem. His visual approach and aesthetic aspirations can be likened to creating chords with phrases instead of notes with words. Authorial notation indicates we must read (or hear) these chords *within* the context of other chords (or fused structures) to experience the poetry fully. Essentially, as readers, we must consider each of his diagrams as a whole unit, tuned together. Reading poems devised using such a scheme becomes an enormous cognitive challenge, in part because verbal fusions created by the notation are not always clear, because fragments must be simultaneously absorbed, considered, recalled and conjoined, without the expectation of establishing linear intent.

Word Space Multiplicities. Hearing the phrase in connection to writing, often already a complex form to transmit and receive, is both exciting and daunting. Who wouldn't expect to be confused by the confrontation, want to discuss with others its difficulties, and ideally have a guide to lead them through it, at least at first? In *Word Space Multiplicities*, we have a poet and critic who leads readers into such multiplicities via his practice, then guides them though it vis- à-vis his poetics, mirroring the intricate processes his work entails. Rosenberg's efforts are precious and unique among digital poetry productions. Technically, they are nonlinear hypertexts, though they do not link *to* anything; the link instead reveals different layers of veiled language within the poem. Readers cull verbal content while negotiating visual information using syntactical, "conjunctive" formations the author contrives and explores in "*And* And: Conjunctive Hypertext and the Structure Acteme Juncture". Approaching composition on this register, writes Rosenberg, "presents activities as elements to be *combined* into a whole effect". Rosenberg layers his poems so that the activation of different layers depends on the cursor's screen placement. However, all of Rosenberg's

verbal components are always present, as illustrated in Fig. 2 below. Technical and aesthetic (visual) structures built by Rosenberg employ interactivity for the reader on every screen, with every movement, even if not following links. "Conjunctive hypertext", writes Rosenberg, "refers to constructions where the relationship between a component and its elements is 'and' rather than 'or'" (149). Readers begin to see the screen texts as pieces of a puzzle. Instead of changing focus and paths while traversing the poem, the reader experiences conceptualized, co-existing, co-operative advancement in the conjunction of all poetic passages contained in the diagram. "It all interacts", concludes Rosenberg in "The Interactive Diagram Sentence" (129). Rosenberg presents his Diagrams as simultaneities, as textual events that happen all at once. They demand that readers absorb a lot of abstract information, insist that intertextual and personal connections or associations are made, and associate words and written messages together in entirely new ways.
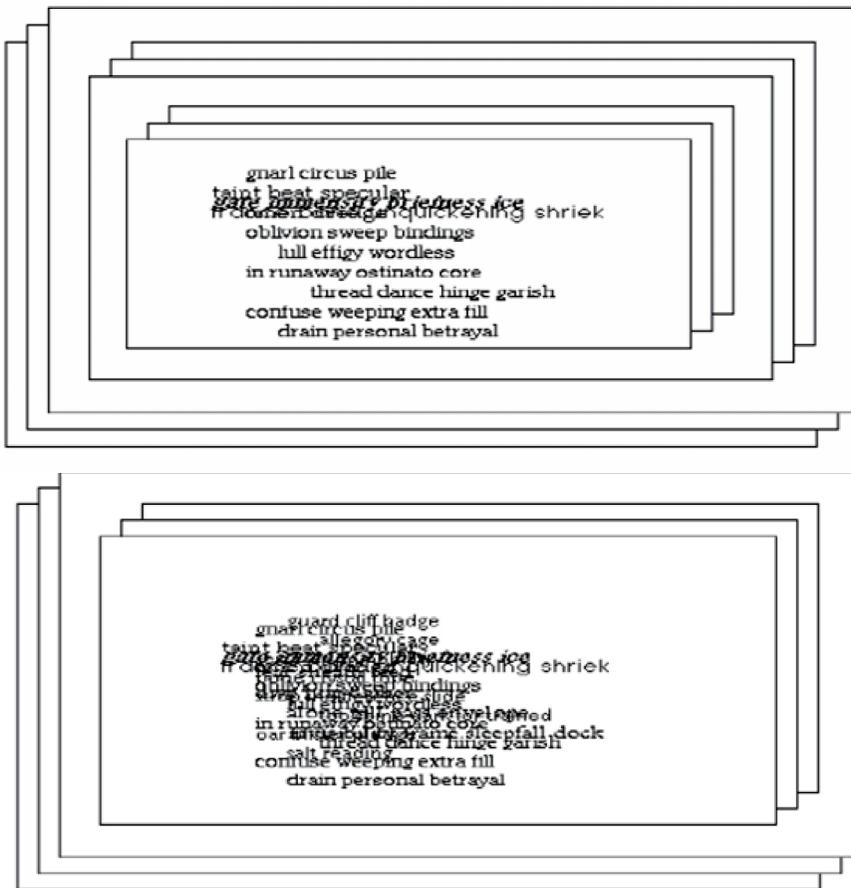

Fig. 2. Open and Closed simultaneities, *Diffractions through: Thirst weep ransack (frailty) veer tide elegy* (151)

Material included in *Word Space Multiplicities* covers many years of research and practice, charting sustained and historic attention to practice and the field of digital writing. Studying the influence of computers on the practice of poetry in the mid-1990s, I had very little to work with. Rosenberg's essays on digital poetics, scattered about the pre-Web Internet and conference proceedings, were among the earliest essays on the subject, cornerstones as deep investigations into expressive possibilities enabled by digital media. To have them compiled in one place, dialled into focus through Baldwin's curation and editorial framework, is a blessing for scholars and writers engaged with creative writing in the network era. More recent essays track the ongoing technical and conceptual dimensions of Rosenberg's practice. Essays such as "Hypertext in the Open Air: A Systemless Approach to Hypertext" and "Reflections on Spatial Writing in Place" introduce and explore his developing senses of "feral structures", "Morphic behaviors", and "spatial writing", as well as reflections on use of tools he has created (e.g., "The Frame Stack Project", a personal authoring environment) and the "cognitive load" his work entails. The visual effects, so much a part of his verbal output, are skillfully emphasized by Baldwin in a Foreword that knowingly summarizes the density of textual connectivity transpiring in Rosenberg's work.

Rosenberg is a serious and supremely ornate poet, though entirely unknown beyond a relatively small literary subculture that follows or participates in developing digital poetics and research transpiring in electronic literature. Obscurity unfortunately remains a given for most authors toiling away in practice of programming computers; complexity, evidently, presents a large impediment. Someone who might be interested in accessing Rosenberg's compositions, in particular, is required to make significant effort on both technical and very demanding cognitive registers. Someone looking for new forms of poetry to be presented as something vaguely challenging or as an instantly illuminating or digestible configuration requiring minor engagement with, and investigation of, unique structural effects (in form and content) will not be able traverse extremely expansive possibilities for expression and experience poetry that embraces and is superiorly rich with sophistication of process and product. Poetry's enmeshing with digital media need not be a banal, corporately dictated endeavor.

To have such an active practitioner who directly criticizes and questions hypertext dynamics on multiple registers, as reflected in "Notes Toward a Non-linear Prosody of Space", "Poetics and Hypertext: Where Are the Hypertext Poets?", "Openings" and "A Conversation with Jim Rosenberg", is crucial to aesthetic growth within this particular discipline and, additionally, to broadening an overall understanding of what poetry can be. A disclaimer on his website efficiently makes distinct the character of his compositions: "These works may be considered hypertexts — in the broad sense of the word, as investigated over many years by the hypertext research community (spatial hypertext in particular); though they are certainly not simply "nodes and links"— the primitive concept many people think is all there is to hypertext" (http://

www.inframergence.org/jr/inter_works.shtml). Clearly, Rosenberg sets out to establish and follow his own elaborate literary pathway, and succeeds in doing so. *Word Space Multiplicities* guides us through it. I like to imagine digital poets of the future—whose textual conglomerations themselves may not be the work of a single individual but rather a team of associated artists—persons who understand and implement "morphemic" textuality to serve as an "association structure for thought" (31, 126). It is easy to project that their form of "Direct Access Communication" will aspire to further Rosenberg's (13). Their post-Dreamweaver, non-mouse, notebook or keyboard senses of "precomposition" (16), becoming the network, "diagrammatic syntax" (14, 91), "reservoirs" (57), "simultaneity" (79), and "externalization" (129), where textuality is signifiers in motion, will inevitably desire to include midi- (or digital acoustic) soundtracks, and who knows what other kinds of layered graphology will emerge.

Concluding his Foreword to the book, Baldwin compares Rosenberg to Walt Whitman, and perhaps the connection is true—though Rosenberg's work would represent a different type of heroism: that of being an original cyborg poet. Not simply some space-age technopoet without grounding in earthly contemplation. Tucked in amongst the book's twenty-two pieces, an essay titled "Bios / The Logosphere / The Finite-Made Evolver Space" establishes a deep framework for his practice(s) with language, the way he builds things in conjunction within a greater whole, and his sense of text as living entity. His syntax is an active syntax, or, rather, as he frequently remarks, an "external" syntax that allows his word objects to carry interactivity deep inside the sentence not merely used as a navigational device. The publisher's blurb for *Word Space Multiplicities* claims the book, "will change your understanding of digital writing"; this is not hyperbole. Anyone engaging with it —scholars working in the field of electronic literature, or someone outside it seeking an introduction to refined work—will benefit by doing so. Since the language of Rosenberg's poetry is active with inframergence, perhaps beyond the point of precise determinacy, a collection of essays by a true innovator in and of poetic form, curated by an expert on the subject, show us how we may begin to absorb and approach encounters with extremely sophisticated digital writing.

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Works Cited

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