

Poverty and Abundance: How the Birth of Language Shaped the Boundaries and Absences of Poetry

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Abstract. The advent of language marked both a catastrophic rupture from immediate experience and the foundation of human civilization, creating an inherent tension between linguistic limitation and expressive aspiration. This study examines how the fundamental poverty of language — its symbolic arbitrariness, linear constraints, and social regulation — paradoxically becomes the generative source of poetic abundance and aesthetic transcendence. Through theoretical analysis drawing on semiotics, phenomenology, and literary criticism, this research investigates the mechanisms by which poets transform linguistic deficiency into creative opportunity, examining works by Hai Zi, Zang Di, Emily Dickinson, and others alongside theoretical frameworks from Adorno, Saussure, and Foucault. The analysis reveals that poetry's power emerges precisely from language's failures: metaphorical displacement breaks logical chains, silence and blank space activate reader co-construction of meaning, rhythmic disruption transcends linear temporality, and grammatical reconstruction liberates semantic potential. Poetry exists not as a supplement to language but as its productive contradiction—a continuous refutation of linguistic fatalism that explores the depths of human consciousness at the boundaries where language encounters its own impossibility, suggesting new possibilities for poetic expression in the digital age.

1 Introduction

Before language was invented, the world was silent, devoid of articulable love and hate, gods and men. As George Steiner observed, "The advent of language was a catastrophe and the beginning of civilization." Poetry, the earliest self-stripper of language, constantly seeks cracks in this catastrophe and attempts to traverse them. Language was never whole from the beginning—it emerged fractured, symbolized, constituting an eternal delay of real experience. When human beings created the first words for reference, they simultaneously created the fatalistic phenomenon of "misunderstanding." Literary language, as Michael Lane points out, breaks "mechanized modes of perception" by destroying the direct indicative use of language and making reality peculiar.

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Understanding the relationship between linguistic poverty and poetic abundance is crucial for comprehending the fundamental nature of literary creation and human expression. This investigation contributes to literary theory by illuminating how apparent limitations become generative forces, offering insights into the mechanisms of aesthetic transcendence and meaning-making processes that extend beyond traditional linguistic analysis. This study examines how the poverty of language becomes the starting point of poetry, investigating the transformation of linguistic constraints into poetic possibilities. The research specifically addresses how poets employ paradox, heterogeneity, silence, metaphor, and rhythm to convert the defects of language into poetic advantages. Two core concepts frame this investigation: the "poverty of language," referring to its finiteness as a symbolic system, the constraints of its linear logical structure, and its continuous simplification by social statutes; and the "fullness of poetry," reflected in its transcendence through metaphorical meaning-creation, tension-bearing silence, and sensory rhythm.

This study employs theoretical analysis as its primary methodology, drawing on semiotics, phenomenology, and literary criticism to examine the mechanisms of poetic transformation. The analytical framework incorporates close textual analysis of works by contemporary poets including Hai Zi, Zang Di, and Emily Dickinson, alongside theoretical perspectives from Adorno, Saussure, Foucault, and other critical theorists. This interdisciplinary approach enables comprehensive examination of both the structural properties of language and the creative strategies poets employ to transcend these limitations. The methodology's strength lies in its ability to bridge theoretical abstraction with concrete textual evidence, facilitating nuanced understanding of the dialectical relationship between linguistic constraint and poetic freedom.

The ultimate goal of this research is to demonstrate that poetry exists not as a supplement to language but as its productive contradiction—a continuous refutation of linguistic fatalism that explores the depths of human consciousness at the boundaries where language encounters its own impossibility. To achieve this objective, the study systematically analyzes the mechanisms of linguistic impoverishment, examines poetic strategies for transcending these limitations, and investigates how absence and failure become sources of aesthetic tension and creative opportunity. The research aims to contribute to contemporary understanding of poetic language while suggesting new possibilities for literary expression in the digital age. This paper proceeds through five main sections: first, an examination of the mechanisms underlying language's expressive poverty; second, an analysis of how poetry achieves enrichment through symbols, rhythms, and grammatical reconstruction; third, an investigation of how poets transform linguistic "lack" into creative opportunity and aesthetic tension; fourth, a discussion of absence as poetry's generative principle; and finally, a conclusion exploring the ontological relationship between poetry and language, addressing how linguistic duality determines poetry's mode of existence and anticipating future developments in the digital age.

2 The poverty of language

The fundamental limitation of language as a tool for human expression constitutes its essential characteristic rather than a secondary feature. From an ontological perspective, poetry emerges from language's inherent constraints rather than from its expressive abundance. The concept of "poverty of language" refers not to a temporary difficulty but to its original predicament as a symbolic system—a structural limitation upon which all literature and poetry necessarily depend.

2.1 The limitations of symbolic expression

Language is first and foremost a system of signs, but this system has never been equated with reality. Saussure points out the arbitrariness of language, i.e., the connection between energy and reference is not a natural fit, but an institutional arrangement of conventions. This perpetuates the fissures in language when it comes to expressing experience. For example, the concept of “love,” which in a logical context seems to be described as a collection of mental states, is often degraded in poetry into a nameless symbol of emotion. Language cannot directly name experience, but only indirectly constructs its contours. This shortcoming is fully realized and reversed into an opportunity in poetry - the poet reshapes the meaning by means of metaphor, fragmentation, and jumping, making the ineffability of “love” the source of its infinite possibilities.

As Hai Zi says in *I Request: Rain*, “I request: rain / to wash away my bones.” Rain cannot wash the bones, nor are bones a carrier of feelings. This paradoxical expression highlights the fact that language cannot exhaust the truth of subjective feelings, but therefore provides extreme emotional tension [1]. Hai Zi's “paradoxical language” is the weapon that transforms the illogicality of symbols from a weakness to a poetic one.

2.2 The limits of linear expression

Language lays out meaning in the dimension of time, and in writing, it unfolds sequentially, one word after another, constituting a chain of narration. But human experience, especially emotional experience, is often non-linear and multi-point resonant. Poetry favors the presentation of a co-temporal state of consciousness, whereas language is naturally inclined toward an ephemeral structure. This contradiction makes poets have to deconstruct the language to find a breakthrough of “non-linear expression”. Adorno believed that true lyric poetry is the groaning of language in resistance to norms, an attempt to retrieve the “echoes of nature” in the midst of the alienation of modernity. It is because language is unable to synchronize the surge of consciousness that poets choose to simulate the multidirectionality of the stream of consciousness by means of broken syntax, blank lines, prose structure, and phonetic repetition, thereby transcending the time frame of language. For example, Emily Dickinson's use of dashes and ellipses is a kind of dismantling of linear syntax, attempting to embed diachronic pauses and gaps in her utterances [2].

3 The repression of social statutes

Language is not only a system of expression, but also a part of the social structure. Language as “public property” is a form of expression determined by social norms. This regulated language bears traces of the will to power, which compresses the complexity of individual experience and reduces unique inner perceptions to acceptable discursive categories [3]. Foucault once said, “It is not man who speaks, it is words that speak of man.” The insidious domination of the linguistic system, which prevents one from breaking away from the socially set trajectory of meaning, is particularly notable in modern poetry. As noted in *The Construction of the Poetic Symbiosis*, “Contemporary poets are confronted not only with the barrenness of linguistic tools, but also with the stifling of self-consciousness by linguistic norms.” [4]. Therefore, poetry is not only a language game, but also a kind of “language rebellion”, which challenges the expressive power of the language by changing the collocation structure of words and the rhythm of sound. In ancient Greek tragedy, we see that poets often use oracles to avoid logical inference and use paradox to convey a sense of transcendence. Modern poetry inherits this strategy, collapsing reality with dreamlike statements and escaping the discipline of public language on experience. For example,

Xichuan writes, “While I am breathing/stones are falling from my mouth,” a non-logical construction of images that clearly breaks away from the manipulation of normative language and goes straight to the obscure core of individual experience [5]. Thus, the “poverty of language” is not only a structural defect of natural language, but also a manifestation of the control mechanism of language in society. The poet does not come to fill the blanks of language, but to point out the cracks in this poverty, so that language can realize its inaccessibility within itself, and thus call out the possibilities beyond the meaning. The poverty of language does not constitute the end; it is the premise of poetry - like gravel is the premise of pearls. In this essentially empty, structurally distorted language desert, poetry is born as a contradiction: it knows that language cannot reach the truth of things, but it still uses language as a raft to sail to those unspeakable places. Poetry extracts light from the fissures of language, and by means of metaphors, rhythms, silences, misspellings, and semantic alienation, it allows language to generate its own weight and depth of meaning, as if it were able to speak to the soul [6].

3.1 Metaphors and symbols: blossoming meaning out of logical failure

If the language of science is an inventory of concepts, the language of poetry is a ripper of boundaries. If the language of science is the inventor of concepts, the language of poetry is the ripper of boundaries. Poetry does not make things clear, but rather messes up clarity, making people realize that “clarity” was an illusion from the beginning [7]. As Johnson once said, “Metaphor is the last struggle of language in the face of silence.” The essence of metaphor lies in displacement, which breaks the logical chain of “ontology-property” and juxtaposes irrelevant things, thus activating the unformed meanings deep in the language. For example, “Time is a well” or “Bones hear the wind” defy logic but release a new sense of being-a sense of reality, as if language itself has finally become part of the world rather than its own. as if language itself has finally become a part of the world rather than a spectator of it. In “The Interpretation Path of Multiple Imagery in Poetry from the Perspective of Semiotics,” Yang Jie points out, “The echoing relationship between poetic imagery creates a network of composite meanings, enabling a single linguistic node to activate cultural memory and emotional dimensions.” [8]. This network is not a mechanical connection, but the fluidity of a symbolic system, an illusory topography created by the poet's language. Xin Qiji's “The east wind releases thousands of flowers at night, and even blows down stars like rain” constitutes a surreal dream logic of “east wind” and “rain of stars,” thus hiding the metaphorical resonance of the passage of time and grief in the festive scene. Thus, the metaphorical resonance of time passing and sorrow is hidden in the festive scene.

3.2 Blankness and silence: the dark energy of language

The real energy of poetry is often hidden in the unwritten. Mallarmé says, “Poetry exists through the silence between words.” It is these seemingly empty pauses, breaks, and white spaces that make the voice of language echo in the silence. Classical Chinese landscape poetry emphasizes “counting white as black,” that is, using the blank space to stimulate the reader's self-experience of supplementation and reconstruction; Mallarmé even builds the whole poem on the “order of silence,” allowing the reader to generate wholeness in the midst of incompleteness, through the gaps in the paper, the interruptions of punctuation, and the moderation in the use of false words. This mechanism is essentially the “order of silence” of language.

This mechanism is essentially the ability of language to “conceal itself”. Language not only speaks, but also “says what it cannot say”. And when it pauses, omits, flashes back, and keeps to itself, it gets closer to those “places where language cannot enter”. As Xiang

Haoyuan points out, “True lyric poetry is ‘redemptive’ because it allows nature - that is, non-verbal experience - to be visualized in language to manifest itself.” [9].

This technique of blankness is common in Hai Zi's poems, and what he creates in his “From tomorrow onwards, be a happy person” is not a real context, but an excision of the context, which makes “happiness” an isolated word out of context, and stimulates a completely different semantic meaning in the reader's mind. The sound and rhythm: beyond the meaning.

3.3 Sound and rhythm: the remnants of the body beyond meaning

Poetry is the body of language “speaking,” and it is also the breath left behind when language is spoken. Before language became a symbol, it was the fluctuation of the air, the first touch between human beings and the world. Poetry, through rhythm, rhyme, repetition, and rupture, is a physical means of making language expressive as well as “manifest”.

Sound is not merely an accessory, but a trigger for the generation of meaning. As Chen Guoping points out in *The Construction of Poetry's Synchronicity*, “Poetry is, in its original form, the art of sound and rhythm, creating an impact of meaning through the structure of sound.” Dickinson's dashes, Zang's syntactic jumps, and Baudelaire's rhymes and repetitions all show that poetry is a strategy of fighting linear logic with “auditory order” [10].

The “echo structure” in Hai Zi's poems creates layers of rhythmic fluctuations outside of semantics, making the poetic meaning as elusive as the echo of the abyss, but continuously reverberating. For example, “The night gave me black eyes, but I use them to find light.” Not only is the syntax symmetrical, but also the rhythmic counterpoint of the speech creates a “sense of abstraction in the recitation,” causing the meaning itself to float.

3.4 Grammatical reconstruction: reconstructing meaning in the midst of linguistic disorder

Grammar is originally designed to harmonize communication and compress dissimilarity, but the poet disassembles, destroys, and reassembles it, returning the language to a state of “strangeness”. As Miao K. says in “Language Rhetoric and the Birth of Classicality,” “The grammatical dislocations and syntactic ruptures of Guma's poems are not blunders, but a means of activating the wandering of meanings through the disruption of structures.”

Dickinson's dash is the quintessential grammatical disruptor - it is neither a pause nor a link, but a visual symbol of “meaning interruption”. It pulls each word out of its grammatical orbit and leaves it in a state of suspension. Zang Di's poem, “You are waving, but not to the wind”, and the reverse dismantling of the idiom “waving to the wind”, is precisely the operation of this “semantic explosion”.

In these “grammatically reconstructed” writings, language no longer carries the responsibility of transmitting meaning, but becomes the generator of meaning itself. As Li Lijuan points out, “Zang Di's poems, through the fracture and reconstruction of words, search for sparks of meaning in the collage of contingent language, but also expose the dilemma of semantic dilution.”. But even so, this formal linguistic strategy shows poetry's courage and ability to recreate meaning after the collapse of logic.

4 How absence makes poetry

The most powerful aspect of language often resides not in what it articulates, but in what it fails to express. Poetry achieves its impact through the failure, fracture, and silence inherent in language. The greater the linguistic constraints, the more generative potential poetry

possesses—a principle analogous to architectural foundations that enable vertical construction through their structural limitations. As Wittgenstein observed, "Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent." However, poetry does not embrace silence; instead, it flourishes within the spaces where silence emerges, transforming linguistic absence into creative opportunity.

4.1 Restrictions inspire innovation: the cage of rules is also the scaffolding for ascension

Every poetic form is a tightening of language. In the fourteen lines of a sonnet, the poet must compress, condense, and cut his self-experience so that he can complete his emotional leap in the shortest breath. Restrictions become blades, forcing the poet to seek light in the gaps.

This creative structure of "finding freedom in restrictions" is just like Adorno's dialectic of negation: the more one denies oneself, the closer one can get to the truth. In *Let Language Speak for Itself*, Xiang Haoyuan points out that Adorno regarded true poetry as "an art that blossoms in the opposite direction from the suppression of content by form" and emphasized that "the liberation of language is achieved through structural oppression".

Similarly, in "The Construction of Poetry's Symbiotic Body," Chen Guoping talks about how "the rhythm and structure of poetry is like a dance in a cage, and it is precisely because it is trapped in the linearity of time and the logic of language that it constructs a nonlinear, simultaneous sensory impact." [9]. This shows that the form of the poem is not a constraint, but a pull, a prerequisite for the poet to build a boat against the current. Zang Di's linguistic technique of "cicadas shedding their shells" is also an experiment in linguistic evolution under structural constraints.

4.2 The aesthetic sublimity of the "unspeakable"

How poetry can approach nothingness without falling into it "No words" is not a loss of words, but a higher language. As Zen says, "No words, no teaching." When poetry reaches the limit of language, it must turn to absence, using the form of "emptiness" to evoke the reader's spiritual echo. Wu Zetian's "Monument without Words" is a symbol of the ultimate in Chinese aesthetics, declaring that all words attempting to speak of achievement are limitations. True greatness can only be presented through white space. This is echoed in the Zen poetry of "stopping words" and "meaning beyond words," which points to the "unspeakable" with the "unspeakable. The poetic nature of poetry is hidden in this kind of "unspeakable" and "extra-linguistic". Poetry is hidden in this absurd and fractured "failure of speech". Hai Zi's poems repeatedly create the sublime with silence: "I don't know in which direction the wind is blowing - I am in a dream, migrating in the light waves of a dream." He uses the rhythm of silence to create echoes of nothingness, as the Institute of Poetry and Linguistics says: "Hai Zi guides the generation of poetic meaning with the emptiness of language, and his words and phrases are like the remnants of light, always incomplete."

"The poem does not try to say anything; it tries to evoke a certain spiritual tension." This view also echoes Yang Jie's semiotic analysis, "The polysemy of poetic imagery does not stem from the richness of language, but from the ambiguity of symbols."

4.3 The reader's co-construction of meaning: linguistic white space makes poetry an act of negotiation

Unlike a propositional statement, poetry is a negotiation, an invitation. The meaning of a poem lies not within the text, but in the bridging zone between the text and the reader.

Heidegger called this “the tension between presence and absence,” and the poem is a linguistic project to make this tension palpable.

For example, the poetic nature of *Dream of the Red Chamber* lies not only in the beauty of its verses, but also in the openness of the text itself. Cao Xueqin's expressions such as “when it is true, it is false” and “a good wind sends me up to the blue clouds” have provided an endless variety of interpretations for later generations of Red Studies researchers. As a result, the poem is no longer a completed body, but an ever-open generative body.

As Sun Xiaofang puts it, “The new construction of language in poetry is often based on ambiguity and ambiguity, thus activating the reader's reinterpretation mechanism, making the reader no longer a passive receiver but a co-constructor of meaning.”

This process of building meaning together also allows poetry to truly reach the “self-transcendence of language”. Because of its poverty, the language is left blank, but the blankness constitutes the possibility of resonance - the readers fill in the gaps of the poem through their own experience, and this “act of sewing” is another construction of poetic nature.

As argued in *The Spatial Logic of Poetry*, “The boundary place of poetic language is not an end, but a beginning. At this place of boundary, the reader becomes the inheritor of what language has not yet exhausted.”

5 Conclusion

This study's research results demonstrate that the poverty of language—characterized by its symbolic arbitrariness, linear constraints, and social regulation—paradoxically becomes the generative foundation of poetic creation. Through systematic analysis of metaphorical displacement, silence and absence, rhythmic disruption, and grammatical reconstruction, the investigation reveals that poets consistently transform linguistic limitations into creative opportunities. The research findings indicate that poetry achieves its aesthetic impact precisely through language's failures rather than its successes, utilizing paradox, heterogeneity, and semantic gaps to construct meaning beyond conventional linguistic boundaries. The study thus concludes that poetry exists not as a supplement to language but as its productive contradiction—a continuous refutation of linguistic fatalism that explores human consciousness at the boundaries where language encounters its own impossibility.

This research provides valuable reference significance for future investigations in literary theory and linguistic philosophy, primarily influencing understanding of the dialectical relationship between constraint and creativity in artistic expression. The findings contribute to broader comprehension of how aesthetic transcendence emerges from structural limitations, offering insights applicable to various forms of creative practice beyond poetry. The investigation's interdisciplinary approach, combining semiotics, phenomenology, and literary criticism, establishes a methodological framework for examining the generative potential of apparent deficiencies in symbolic systems. Additionally, the study's analysis of contemporary poets alongside classical theoretical perspectives bridges traditional literary criticism with modern poetic practices, providing a foundation for understanding evolving relationships between language and creativity.

Future research should focus more intensively on examining how digital technologies and multimodal communication reshape the boundaries between linguistic poverty and poetic abundance. The emergence of algorithmic language generation, artificial intelligence in creative writing, and cross-media artistic expression presents new challenges to traditional understanding of poetic creation. Investigations should explore how poets adapt their strategies of transforming linguistic constraints when confronting machine-generated language and automated rhetorical processes. Furthermore, research should examine the evolution of poetic language in digital environments where image, sound, and text converge,

potentially creating new forms of "absence" and "presence" that require updated theoretical frameworks. The growing intersection between human and artificial creativity demands deeper exploration of what constitutes authentically human poetic expression in an age where machines can simulate linguistic creativity, suggesting that future poetic value may reside not in technical linguistic manipulation but in the irreducible human capacity for spiritual questioning at the margins of expressibility.

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