The actual, the possible and the hypothetical: The significance of the 2nd conditional for the creation of multidimensional worlds in Bruce Boston’s speculative poems

ABSTRACT. Speculative poetry, which has only recently gained critical recognition, deals with presenting novel viewpoints that both speculate about alternative futures and reflect on the present. One of its most acclaimed representatives is Boston, the author of “what if?” poems (e.g., “Gray People,” “Chess People,” or “Parchment People”). On the one hand, Boston’s poems are imbued with utopianism; but on the other, by touching on such subjects as communal memory, inequality within society, ageing and climate change, they serve as a social critique of the reality as we know it. What is less obvious is the very function of the 2nd conditional clauses in creating poetic worlds, which becomes clear when the poems are read in light of cognitive poetics and Text World Theory: the use of 2nd conditional clauses generates three main and interconnected mental spaces: (1) spaces of the real world (implied metaphorically), (2) projected spaces and (3) hypothetical spaces (speculative extensions). Such a space blending combines the actual, the possible, and the impossible in one. As a result, by providing multidimensional alternate construals, speculative poetry enables the reader to look at the actual world from at least three different cognitive perspectives. What is also characteristic of the “what if?” poems is the absence of a base text-world; thus, the deictic projection occurs directly from the discourse world to the wish/epistemic world, preventing readers from finding the initial textual context to which they could refer in the course of reading. Likewise, because of this lack of a base text-world, it remains unclear whether Boston, when using the pronoun “we” in the apodosis part of conditional clauses, addresses humanity in general or rather some elitist group of people. Debatable is also whether the apodosis part results in generating material processes (either intention or supervention processes) or mental processes. In this presentation I discuss in detail the application of the above-mentioned theoretical categories to Boston’s poems and compare the selected texts to his other two poems: “Last Alchemist,” in which 1st conditional clauses appear, and “Dystopian Dusk,” in which 3rd conditional clauses are present. I argue that although from the grammatical point of view the 1st and 2nd conditionals enable the expression of either a more probable future or a past which cannot be changed, it is the 2nd conditional that makes the “what if” poems epistemologically closest to the discourse world.

In most student books designed to teach English grammar, suffice it to mention Virginia Evans’ CPE Use of English 1 for the Revised Cambridge Proficiency Examination (2002) or Raymond Murphy’s English Grammar in Use Intermediate (1994 /1985/), the 2nd conditional is reduced to a structure referring to advice or imaginary situations in the present and future alike, which are unlikely to occur. Audrey Jean Thomson and Agnes V. Martinet, in their hand-
book *A Practical English Grammar* (2008 /1960/: 198–199), provide a more detailed definition, by pointing out that type 2 conditional is used “when the supposition is contrary to known facts” and “we don’t expect the action in the if-clause to take place.” Whereas the two just presented traditional viewpoints put emphasis on the interpretative aspect, the cognitive point of view (Dancygier & Sweetser 2005; Gavins 2007) dissects the discussed conditional construction into the protasis (the if-clause) and apodosis (the main clause) parts, with the former “setting up a theoretical situation and marking it as remote from actuality” (Gavins 2007: 120) and the latter being a linguistic realization of an action consequent on a prior condition. As the analysis that follows has been conducted on the basis of two cognitive frameworks, namely cognitive poetics (Stockwell 2002; Carter & Stockwell 2008; Brône & Vandaele 2009) and Text World Theory (Werth 1999; Gavins 2007), it is consistently the analytically-oriented cognitive definition of the 2nd conditional that is taken advantage here. Also, for the sake of clarity, it is essential to briefly explicate some key notions appearing throughout the paper.

Of crucial significance is the discourse world, understood by Peter Stockwell (2002: 94, 136) as both common ideological ground that the participants (e.g., the reader, the author and characters) in a specific discourse happen to share and “the mediating domain for reality as well as projected fictions,” which underlies a number of possible text-worlds. Such a multitude of text-worlds constitutes a network of “mental representations” (Gavins 2007: 10) that are constructed of a discourse in the reader’s mind. This mental network stems from the base text-world, functioning as a central point of reference of every text-world structure. Through certain world switches (also called space builders), such as the subordinating conjunction *if*, the reader may, on the conceptual level, access new text-worlds. Dependently on the linguistic expression used, these newly created mental representations, or mental spaces, instantiate, *ipso facto*, different alternative worlds generated by literary characters. For instance,

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1 The term is my own invention. I have employed it for the sake of clarity. Usually the base text-world can be easily identified, since it becomes frequently reiterated and reinforced in a text through linguistic references to “the zero reference point of subjectivity” (Gavins 2007: 36) or Karl Bühler’s (1990 [1934]: 117) *origo*, positioning itself with the phrase *I am now here*. It may be then inferred that the base text-world should be predominantly associated with sections within a text deploying present-tense and first-person narration.


3 Notwithstanding that the construct of mental spaces (Fauconnier 1994 /1985/) traditionally ascribes to the studies of metaphor (see Gavins 2007: 146–164), Text World Theory makes no clear distinction between mental spaces and the category of text-worlds. Thus, in this paper both notions are used interchangeably.

4 In his *Cognitive Poetics: An Introduction* (2002: 94–95), Stockwell distinguishes six types of alternatives: “epistemical worlds (knowledge worlds, beliefs), speculative extensions (anticipations, hypotheses), intention worlds (plans for change), wish worlds (wishes), obligation
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the above mentioned conjunction if alone gives birth to a speculative extension (Stockwell 2002), a category encompassing hypotheses and anticipations. Each textual entity within a text-world structure, in turn, contains either material or mental processes. If the former, signaled in text-world diagrams in the form of vertical arrows, refer to “any type of action or event in discourse” and include “some kind of Actor” (Gavins 2007: 56), the latter, represented graphically by horizontal arrows, entail “activities in the mind rather than physical actions of the body” (Gavins 2007: 62) and imply the role of the participant as that of Sensor. In other words, while material processes find their linguistic realizations in verbs expressing action (e.g., kick off, exploded, fell over), mental processes are described by means of verbs of perception (e.g., listen, see, feel), cognition (e.g., think, remember), existence (e.g., be) or reaction (e.g., like, hate). Equipped with these terms, this paper explores the significance of the 2nd conditional for the creation of multidimensional worlds in Bruce Boston’s speculative poems and elucidates on how the scrutinized grammatical construction affects the interpretative task of the analyzed texts.

Yet, before the presentation of the analysis results ensues, it is still essential to expound what hides under the speculative poetry label and who Boston is. It was not until 1978 and the foundation of Science Fiction Poetry Association that the term speculative poetry officially came into common use. Just like other related genres, to mention science fiction poetry above all, it both speculates on “the nature of reality, perception, language and the future” (Vanderhooft 2007) and, as aiming to bombard readers with novelties, “conveys a sense of wonder” (Dutcher 2004). However, unlike science fiction poetry, speculative poetry refrains from the scientific legacy and rather than to the future, turns its attention to “the present apparent reality” (Gavins 2007: 42). In an attempt to portray the actual world in a figurative way, speculative authors make extensive use of projection, by means of which we not only “imagine ourselves viewing from other perspectives than our own,” but we also become “another being” (Dutcher 2004). This is also the case in the works of Boston, one of the most acclaimed representatives of speculative poetry—and the author of a ground-breaking essay entitled “The Failure of Genre Poetry.” His bibliography embraces more than forty books and chapbooks, suffice it to mention Dark Matters (2010a), North Left of Earth (2009b), Double Visions (2009a) or Quanta (2001). With his works published in countless magazines (e.g., Strange Horizons, The Pedestal) and numerous awards received,6 Boston should be viewed as a prolific poet in

5 The list of American speculative poets also includes Robert Frazier, Andrew Joron, Mike Allen, and John Grey.
6 Only recently has Boston’s Dark Matters (2010) received the 2010 Bram Stoker Award.
the first place. Yet, his portfolio also includes novels, like *Stained Glass Rain* (1993). In this paper, the poet’s “what if?” poems, such as “Gray People” (2004b), “Parchment People” (2006) or “Surreal People” (2009k), are taken under examination. Although in a modest number of 15 they constitute only a small part of Boston’s work, they, nonetheless, serve as the most conspicuous examples of speculative poetry, since they represent the fullest exemplification of the statement that the discussed genre is an elaboration of “what if?” in verse. Beginning with the short, 1- or 2-line, hypothetical if-clauses, all of them elaborate in the lengthy apodosis parts on what could happen if a condition contained in the protasis part were fulfilled.\(^7\)

The analysis has indicated that the 2nd conditional construction, and, more specifically, both of its constituents – the protasis and apodosis parts, in each of the examined works generates the three following spaces: (1) spaces of the real world, (2) projected spaces and (3) hypothetical spaces (speculative extensions). To illustrate this, take, for instance, the first two lines from “Asteroid People” (2009c): “If asteroid people / were the world.” It is through references to “people” and “the world” that the space of the real world is conceived. Only then, with mere “people” turning into their “asteroid” incarnations, does the projection occur. To add the space builder if results, in the final outcome, in the creation of a speculative extension. Such a space blending offers three different cognitive perspectives, which, in turn, gives the reader an opportunity to discern the hypothetical, the actual and the possible versions of the world as we know it.

In Boston’s “what if?” poems, the hypothetical dimension emerges when the texts are interpreted literally. In other words, from the examined works in their entirety emanates the impossible. Reading that as “Gray People” (2004b) “we would wait for others to colorize” or coming to realize that being “Parchment People” (2006) “we would yellow with age,” one takes the portrayed scenes as pure speculation. In like manner when in “Assassin People” (2010b) Boston humorously depicts a world which would be inhabited by “connoisseurs / in the art of murder, / poisoners extraordinaire” (derived from the apodosis part) or puts forward a risky claim that in the role of “Dream People” (2008) “we would inhabit a singular / consciousness that would / be pulled through one inexplicable scenario,” it becomes evident that neither of the visions is likely to come true.

If construed symbolically, from the “what if?” poems can be additionally elicited the actual and the possible dimensions. While the former enables the

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For example, “Surreal People” (2009j) is composed of a 1-line protasis section („If surreal people were the world”) followed by a 27-line apodosis section. In the last stanza of the poem, the line „If surreal people were the world” recurs to be immediately followed by the final remark contained in the apodosis part – „the wonders and horrors of existence / would forever begin anew.”
reader to make interpretations with social-critical overtones, the latter opens a space of discussion for predictions concerning the future of the current world.8

Drawing a portrait of the actual world, Boston deliberately uses only dark tones. In “Ghost People” (2004a) or “Parchment People” (2006), the poet’s critical remarks on environmental issues and the human negligence can be found. Depicted are disturbing, but also familiar, scenes “we would watch” of “the fine artifice of man … collapsing … into rubble” and “the / toxins in the atmosphere / and the poisonous elements / in our own composition.” In “Rat People” (2010c), it is also politicians who come in for a scathing criticism: Boston likens them to “fat and whiskered” rodents. However clichéd, the examined works do not evade universal and timeless motifs, such as social inequality or human helplessness in the presence of God (“Puppet People,” 2009g).

That the hierarchical ladder appears an inherent attribute of humanity becomes manifest in “Marble People” (2009d) and “Chess People” (2009e), where allusions are made either to people who “would strike others with great force” or a society consisting of “some women” who “would be queens, … certain men in highly repose” and “pawns, immersed in the fray.” Nonetheless, the “what if?” poems, in a great majority, take under scrutiny the flaws of the current society, of Zygmunt Bauman’s (2005) Liquid People. The titles themselves imply that aspersions are cast on commonplace selfishness (“Star People,” 2009h), alienation (“Asteroid People,” 2009c) and the human proclivity to be emotionally unstable (“Wind People,” 2009j). Finally, interesting is also Boston’s portrayal of humanity falling into the vacuum of “countless transformations … our bodies would undergo … from the grotesque to the sublime” (“Surreal People,” 2009k) and suffering from omnipresent “anonymous shades in an / anonymous crowd we would / watch one another constantly” (“Gray People,” 2004b).

If the reflection of the actual world brings about many concerns, then predictions of the future gleaned from a reservoir of interpretations that the possible dimension offers to the reader seem even more devastating. Abundant in apocalyptic visions, some of the scenes in “Rat People” (2010c) or “Assassin People” (2010b) bear a resemblance to those from Doris Lessing’s (1974) The Memoirs of a Survivor. Encapsulated in constant terror, the future world will, as Boston’s version suggests, be populated not only by “model citizens” who “would train and practise … to maintain their status” and “avoid termination,” but also by “double or triple agents / in constant fear of exposure” (the latter lines are preceded by the phrase “we would all lead lives / of”). Similarly, predictions are made as regards the treatment of culture and the excessive uniform-

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8 For the sake of clarity, it has to be highlighted that all of the quoted extracts below, even if they are devoid of the “would” particle, have been derived from the apodosis parts of the examined poems.
ity within modern society. While in “Parchment People” (2006) Boston, by dramatically announcing that books “would become indecipherable / except to a clever few,” envisages the annihilation of literature, in “Dream People” (2008) the vision of a community which “would inhabit / a singular consciousness,” being a direct repercussion of omnipresent anonymity, comes as another menace. More plausible scenarios, even from today’s perspective, one encounters in “Ghost People” (2004a) and “Bird People” (2009f), where humanity both succeeds in “finding the stars / and other worlds beyond our own” and discovers “strange species” which would “evolve / to stranger incarnations.” Finally, living in “Chess People’s” (2009e) land, infested with “maps of our cities” that “would be truly rectilinear, / numbered and lettered,” verges on perfection, but only deceptively so, because the invented world scares rather than delights.

Besides generating multidimensional textual worlds, the use of the 2nd conditional results in the absence of a base text-world in the majority of “what if?” poems. In other words, the projection goes, through the conjunction if immediately triggering the construction of new spaces, directly from the discourse world to the wish text-world, preventing readers from finding the initial textual context they could refer to in the course of reading. This process may be demonstrated on the example of “Puppet People” (2009g). Even if certain references visible on the lexical level, like “people” and “the world” (both bracketed in the protasis part) or “Gothic heaps” and “humans” (both found in the apodosis part), may allude to the reader’s reality, the poem lacks any grammatical cues of the present or past, both of which occur to be indispensable for the mental creation of a base text-world. Instead, “Puppet People” (2009g) from the very outset commences with the conjunction if. In effect, the reader is immediately faced with the conceived hypothetical space. This lack of preparatory stage and – what follows – a considerable epistemic distance one has to overcome when dealing with the selected texts result from the protasis part of the conditional, which – as already mentioned – marks a hypothetical situation as distant from actuality.

In this context, the lines “would have learned nothing from Darwin” (“Surreal People,” 2009k) and “flora thrive and/ civilizations rise” (“Star People,” 2009h), functioning as expressions of situations in the past and present accordingly, turn out to be exceptions to the tendency indicated in the previous paragraph. Along with their role as points of references to the reality comes, as may be surmised, their status as base text-worlds. In a similar vein the explicit remarks about the past in “Parchment People” (2006) (the lines “Yet as the years passed / and we endured the changing / light and heat around us” that are incorporated into the apodosis passage) provide some initial textual and conceptual context for further comprehension of the hypothetical space. It is, however, another case – the concluding phrase “herds as we will” in “Rat People”
(2010c) – that sparks confusion. The difficulty arises whether to regard the quoted extract as a sign of base text-world or rather as an expression of situation emerging as a consequence of the hypothetical situation in the poem.

Owing to the prevalent lack of a base text-world in most of “what if?” poems, there springs up opaqueness about the significance of the plural pronoun “we” that emerges, without fail, in all of the discussed works in the apodosis part of conditional clauses. It may be inferred from the texts that by “we,” Boston may mean either humanity (or some alternative creation) as a whole or only some elitist community. On the one hand, the pronoun “we” preceded by the phrase “if … people were the world”\(^9\) implies the involvement of all human beings (or some alien equivalent); on the other, in the texts emerge other enactors\(^10\) (their number ranging from 1 to 5), which occurs to refute the former suggestion and operate to the latter’s advantage. When in “Rat People” (2010c) the deictic perceptual projection from “we” to “you” ensues (the reader initially perceives the “rat” world through the eyes of “we” who “would dominate / streets and fields” to later view it from the perspective of “you” who “could ride / and devour the human”), one does not have even a shadow of doubt that there are two separate groups in question. Likewise, the poem “Assassin People” (2010b), with references made to “we,” “your,” “model citizens,” “Machiavelli” and “the Borgias,” points to even a more diverse community.

In addition, it remains unclear whether the apodos part results in generating material or mental processes. Even though the discussed part of the conditional construction is said to “contain a material intention process” (Gavins 2007: 120), debatable is whether actions taking place within mental spaces have any bearing on one another. Moreover, in the apodos part of the “what if?” poems verbs of senses and the verb to be predominate, which, as containing zero energy, are considered to convey mental processes.

To recapitulate, as a result of the analysis three main observations have been made. Firstly, the use of type 2 conditional in the examined works leads to the creation of multidimensional text-worlds. Both the protasis and the apodos parts of the discussed grammatical construction generate three main and interconnected mental spaces – spaces of the real world, projected spaces and hypothetical spaces (speculative extensions). In effect, such a space blending combines the actual, the possible and the impossible in one, enabling the reader to

\(^9\) Dependent on the chosen poem, the dotted space could be filled in with different kinds of “people.” Consider, for example, “Asteroid People” (2009b) and “Bird People” (2009e), which start with the lines “If asteroid people / were the world” and “If the bird people / were the world,” respectively.

\(^10\) Enactors are those characters who exist in a literary text, “at different conceptual levels of a discourse” (Gavins 2007: 41). In the case of “what if?” poems, the reader counts only as a participator, not an enactor, because the worlds or, more specifically, mental spaces he/she comes cross in the course of reading are enactor-accessible.
look at the real world from at least three different cognitive perspectives. Secondly, Boston’s “what if?” poems are, in the majority of cases, devoid of a base text-world, which hinders readers’ conceptualization and re-creation of worlds they encounter. Finally, owing to this absence, it remains unclear whether the poet, when using the pronoun “we” in the apodosis part of conditional constructions, addresses some community as a whole or rather some elitist social group. All in all, it may be concluded that notwithstanding their syntactical simplicity and consistency, the examined poems set a number of readerly traps regarding the conceptualization (cognitive processing) of Boston’s alternative text-worlds. On the other hand, the multidimensionality of meanings found in “what if?” works opens a wide array of interpretative possibilities for the speculative poetry reader.

In the light of the results obtained from the above presented analysis, the question arises how the “what if?” poems work when put together with Boston’s “The Last Alchemist” (2009i) and “Dystopian Dusk” (2010d), based on the 1st and the 3rd conditional, respectively. As such a comparative analysis would require more space, even another paper, for its proper motivation, this issue therefore needs to be deferred. Herein my sole intention is to shed some light on the problem. One main observation that can be made on the strength of the preliminary comparative analysis is that although from the grammatical point of view the 1st and 3rd conditionals make possible the expressions of more probable a future and a past for ever fixed, it is the 2nd conditional that makes the “what if?” poems epistemologically closest to the discourse world. In “Dystopian Dusk” (2010d), references are made to: (1) the unreal past (“if it happened all at once, … we would have raised an alarm”), (2) a situation in the past (“yet each turn of the screw/ that tightened the bonds”) and (3) a situation in the present (“now we wait”). Notwithstanding both the presence of a base text-world and implicit metaphors alluding to the reality, with no definite setting provided, a world created in the poem seems hardly graspable. The scenarios of “ontological questions” that “will become passé” or “metaphysics” that “will be reduced to no more/ than a bedtime game,” envisioned in “The Last Alchemist” (2009i), are even less convincing. Equipped with both the inevitable “when” and the conviction about the ultimate – “the laws of physics” that have nailed and sealed/ the universe” or “the final truth” that “has been signed and delivered” – coming true, the poem makes it evident that the future predicted by Boston remains only mere speculation. Having in mind the above presented remarks, one can only wonder what makes the reader perceive a hypothetical situation manifested linguistically by the 2nd conditional as epistemologically closer to a safe anchor of the discourse world than poetical lands set in the undefined past (3rd conditional) and future (1st conditional).
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