Chapter Nine

VISUAL (TYPOGRAPHIC) STRUCTURES

A natural interest by poets in the visual shape of the poem antedates the Gutenberg Galaxy by over a millennium, judging from the extant examples in the Greek Anthology, and we can safely assume I think that such an interest actually stretched much further back into early written culture. But modern criticism has so tended to isolate and emphasize the logical structure of the poem, as well as its "spatial form," that the exploration of the expressive uses of typography by modern poets has seemed to critics almost a regression, an extremity reducible to absurdity. The critical reception of visual devices in free verse--word-placement, configuration, functional use of white space--and of visual shaping of the whole poem in "concrete poetry" has been less than enthusiastic, apparently on the grounds that such effects are coarse, trivial, even puerile. But human awareness of the design possibilities in the written component of the language is far more extensive (and far more extensively legitimized) than is evident in poetry, and in view of the present absence of any coherent account of the visual-aural processing of verbal information by humans or of the dynamic-static, temporal-spatial, reader comprehension of a text, it seems very unwise to denigrate any approach which gives us information about the nature of the Word, even if the potential of that approach is clearly finite. Words in the shape of things, things in the shape of words, poems in the shape of things, signs becoming symbols, linearity becoming matrix, seriality becoming synchrony--all these phenomena are, as W. K. Wimsatt has shown in a brilliant essay (B233), aspects of mimetic form, or, more appositely, interfaces of the word.


Cummings' work: stress verse, free verse, pictograms, syllabic verse, oral verse in visual form, dramatic free verse, and foot verse. The typographical poetry is found to be both oral and visual. Three periods in Cummings' prosodic development are postulated. The useful Appendix III classifies the poetry by prosodic type.

Since "the general shape of his stanzas is Greek, the precise dimensions Hebrew," Herbert set for himself in the construction of the poem the problem of synthesizing his Hellenic and Hebraic sources and their traditions.


Based on her dissertation, "The Pattern Poem," at Radcliffe in 1945. The rediscovery of the Greek Anthology at the end of the Middle Ages resulted in, among other things, a considerable number of imitations of pattern poems—in England, in the sixteenth century, by Stephen Hawes, Richard Wills, and Puttenham, and on the continent, by Scalinger, Jean Crispin, and Joannes Pierius Valerianus. N.B.: Puttenham's mistaken attribution of the egg form to Anacreon proves he had not seen an authentic text.


Lucid argumentation that the chief merit of poetry as seen lies in the near-instantaneous impression we gain, as opposed to the strictly sequential ordering of meaning in sounds. See H31.

Having its roots in Elizabethan rhetorical patterning and Herbert's "Easter Wings," concrete poetry is still a young and playfully inventive art; it will have to become "visual not merely graphic," absorbing the dimension of space into a set of rational and functional principles of meaning, as traditional poetry has done. Three such principles are vertical-horizontal, axial, and circular. Many examples.


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Historical outline, that is, of the international movement in this century (mainly Switzerland and Brazil), with examples.


H 17  Hedges, James S. "Correlation of Line and Syntax in Shaped Poems." Papers from the 1977 Mid-America Linguistics Conference. Ed. Donald M. Lance et al. Columbia: University of Missouri Linguistics Program, 1978. pp. 445–51. Random sampling of such a correlation in a large number of poets produces an average: 95% in non-shaped poetry vs. 68% in shaped poetry. Conclusion: "when the poet becomes preoccupied with the visual image of the poem upon the page, the correlation between line and syntax is substantially lower than when the visual shape of the poem on the page is dictated by nonvisual criteria, i.e. by the number of syllables in the line, by phrasal units, by notions of rhythm analogous to "isochronous units," etc.

H 18  Helms, Alan E. "I: Visual Prosody and the Sound of Punctuation." (Three-part dissertation.) DAI 32 (1971): 3305A (Rutgers). If prosody comprises the "total rhythmic form" of a poem then everything which affects that form is by definition prosodic, including white space, lineation, paragraphing, spatial deployment of lines, and--especially--punctuation, since the pointing controls both the temporal positioning and pacing of elements and also the sense. "To alter the poem's punctuation is to alter the poem's prosody, and, hence, its meaning," as can be shown by constructing twin dummy models of poems which differ only in punctuation.


H 20  Hollander, John. "The Poem in the Eye." Shenandoah 23 (1972): 3–32; rpt in revised form as chapter 12 of his Vision and Resonance (A13), pp. 245–87. There is melos, and then there is opsis. There is, as correlate to the reading of poems, the "reading" of the shape of poems (in the sense in which art critics talk about "reading" or "scanning" a painting) which is so crucial for our determinations of meter and genre. There is the long tradition of poems picturing things--the pattern poems of the Renaissance, the concrete poetry of our own century--but then again there is the central visuality of syllabic verse and free verse, the importance of which far surpasses mere picturing by form in its deep access to the structure and nature--both quidditas and haecceitas--of the poem. After all, "a poem's shape may be a frame for itself as it may be a frame for its picture of the world."

A short but exceptionally illuminating exposition of how the texture and timing of the line

"Two stones dropping in a silent chasm"

vary when the line is broken, syntactically/typographically, into various vertical linear arrangements, e.g.:

A   A        AB      A     A     ABC
BCD    BC      CD    B     B      D
     D    CD      C

Research into the history of shaped poems, especially Persian and Turkish, shows that Puttenham's four pattern poems in the Arte, purported to be translations, "owe nothing demonstrable to any direct contact with Eastern patterns." Probably the form was known to him only by word of mouth (from his trip to Italy?), and he seems to have relied mainly on the Occidental geometrical tradition.

Since the typography of a poem is a spatial structure, it has a geography, and a topological analysis becomes possible: Lipski maps out rules for continuity in such a text and then synthesizes them into a formal model.

Identifies three characteristics of concrete poetry: foregrounding of spatial ordering, "reduction of language," and "functional repetition"; distinguishes three varieties of concrete poetry: poems retaining elements of traditional prosody, poems relying on sound for their "controlling structure," and poems employing space exclusively. Concludes that concrete poetry is open to analysis and interpretation. The examples are pleasing.

An adequate understanding of the possibilities inherent in this verseform rests on an adequate typology of the basic modes of visual organization, or a "visual syntax." Marcus postulates four types of relationships as syntactic constituents: figure-field, depth, structure, and movement; these four types are illustrated by fifty-seven subtypes with examples on pp. 356–60. This is the most valuable treatment of the subject yet produced.

An apologia. Some representative types of this verse: code poem, picture
poem, text poem, anagram, node, circle, constellation, emergent poem, computer-generated lines, and the chance poem. Serious and judicious.

The author's review of international works on Poetics reveals a surprising reluctance to admit the graphic dimension of poetry as central to the theory. His arguments for the primacy of the printed poem in the Western cultural tradition include elements such as punctuation, lineation, and eye-rhyme, and forms such as pattern poems and concrete poetry. Adapts Mukarovskij.

Quaintly, North considers it a "quaint delusion" that a poem "may be taken in with the eye." See response by Conrad, H 9.

A survey of concrete poetry.

Notes eleven typographical poems that are also variant sonnets at the beginning of Sylvester's Divine Weekes and Works.

Though George Puttenham (E614) apparently had the last word on strictly geometrical form in poetry, Ranta identifies two forms in modern poetry—a "rising" and a "diminishing" design—which may be combined into a third, composite form, and which also operate both visually and aurally—spatially and temporarily. These designs are conventional strategies of structure, not particularly connected to Concretism; they entail adding, repeating, or deleting lines from stanzas. And naturally the structural principle is displaced into imagery as well. The psychology of perception offers corroboration. Turgid beyond endurance, this essay is too long by half.

Shows that three poems—by William Carlos Williams, E. E. Cummings, and Marianne Moore—have a vertical, typographic, palindromic form, showing axial symmetry of meter, sound, and syntax. None of them is as interesting as "Lewd did I live, and evil I did dwell" or "A man, a plan, a canal--Panama!"

Poems capable of double interpretation depending on ambiguity of punctuation. See James R. Kreuzer's earlier examples in


Contrasts a Pignatari concrete poem to Yeats's "The Magi" in order to point up what devices, functions, and effects are available in each mode. Traditional poetry allows patterning of sound, sense, rhythm, image, and ambiguity, whereas in concrete poetry the signs take on added substance beyond their purely referential linguistic nature, detaching themselves from the usual code if not establishing an entirely new code, and representing the simplest (most fundamental) conceptual categories by the strategy of spatialization. The two
poems exemplify two entirely different "modes of language use in poetry."

A fusillade against concrete poetry for its goal of "removing language from its role in the creation of poetry" or "the abrogation of language." Concrete poetry "might be another art, but it is not poetry. . . . it is the content, the feeling, the emotion that distinguishes poetry as an art." Value judgments masquerade as premises in this completely muddled polemic.

Demonstration through numerous examples of the centrality of the principle of reduction in concrete poetry; since a concrete poem is "a structure which explores elements of language itself rather than one which uses language to explore something else. . . . the real concrete text only represents itself and is identical with what it shows." Jakobson's notion of equivalence and Levin's notion of coupling are also turned to use.

Traces part of the early history of the Concretist movement then elaborates a typology of concrete poems as (1) optic, (2) kinetic, or (3) phonetic. Many examples.