Speech and Writing in Poetry and Its Criticism

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Abstract

This paper examines some of the ways in which literary criticism simultaneously exploits and marginalizes the poem as printed artifact. It argues that the author-centered, phonocentric premise of close reading is employed to neutralize the spatial dynamics of poetic language and reduce the material identity of the text to the status of a transparent medium. This relationship between criticism and poetry is maintained from the Eighteenth Century to the Twentieth. The paper examines the tension between the aural and the visual in modernist theory and practice and contends that the appreciation of silent visual form has become one of the conventions of post modernist writing.

Poetic Meaning: by ear or eye

The phrase 'reading poetry' reverberates with ambiguity. When removed from a specific context, 'reading' unwraps itself into such disparate processes as reciting, hearing, interpreting and criticizing. The principal distinction is between the reader's role as passive or active in relation to the printed poem: do we allow the poet to speak to us via the silent record of the printed page, or do we regard the silent text as a series of signals from which alternatives, either in spoken performance or critical analysis, may be generated?

John Hollander's essay 'The Poem in the Eye' is an ingenious reinterpretation of the Horatian tag, ut pictura poesis. He rewrites the line: 'A poem's shape, then, may be a frame for itself as it may be a frame for its picture of the world'. [1] Hollander's analogy with the visual arts is at once deceptive and convenient, because at one point in the essay he suggests that hearing and seeing poems are separate engagements, analogous to the Saussurean division of language into a system of differences and speech events. 'It is on the second of these axes that I would pose the ear, the individual talent, the voice, the parole; on the first are ranged the eye, the tradition, the mask through which the voice sounds, and the langue. The ear responds to the dimension of natural experience, the eye to that of convention' (p. 248). It is here that we find a potential contradiction, because some of Hollander's most striking critical insights depend primarily upon the eye to identify effects such as enjambment, where syntax crosses the line ending without a grammatical break. This would not necessarily be heard in verse where aural signals such as rhyme or rhythmic inversion are absent or ambiguous. To claim that these effects of lineation become evident when the poem is recited by the kind of reader who is fully aware of the 'conventions' of the 'mask' is to tacitly acknowledge the dependence of that reader upon the visual shape of the text. 'The mask through which the voice sounds' is a rather more refractory medium than Hollander

would have us believe, because unless our final point of assurance is a recording of the poem as recited by its creator, the *voice* is ours.

To privilege the spoken poem by regarding the typographic object as a mere pragmatic necessity is a tendency endemic both to literary criticism and to the ex-cathedra theorizing of poets. It takes us back to the Hellenic, pre-Gutenberg, ideal of one person literally speaking to another. The printed poem is regarded as a kind of objectified memory, which pre-serves the original intentions of the poet. Oral readings and critical analyses which are divergent and occasionally contradictory are usually explained as being the product of misinterpretation or extended ingenuity on the part of the performer or the critic, but one must ask the question why a resolution of these in the identification of a single authoritative *voice* never takes place? In what follows I shall argue that in poetry such as blank and free verse the interplay between the 'mask' of the visual text and the mind of the reader has effectively superseded the ideal of the poem as a medium through which the absent poet speaks to us. I shall attempt to demonstrate that traditional critical techniques often exploit the purely typographic status of poetry to the extent that it is the silent written text as the voice behind the mask which produces meaning.

The poetic line is the most significant unit of poetic grammar in the sense that it continuously interacts with the conventional syntactic patterns of language, and the effects produced when syntax crosses the 'white space' of the right hand side of the poem have consequently attracted the attention of such critical practitioners as Hollander, Donald Davie, Christopher Ricks and Stanley Fish. [2] Enjamb-ment is generally recognized as an element of poetic language which produces ambiguity, and the critic will recognize it as a physical and thematic opening of the text which may be closed by its relocation as part of a richer and more complex meaning—a practice which adds a sophisticated dimension to the phrase 'reading between the lines.'

A celebrated instance of this occurs at the beginning of Wordsworth's 'Tintern Abbey':

> Once again
> Do I behold these steep and lofty cliffs,
> Which on a wild secluded scene impress
> Thoughts of more deep seclusion; and connect
> The landscape with the quiet of the sky.
> (1798, lines 4–8)

Isobel Armstrong and Antony Easthope note that there are crucial ambiguities at the terminal words 'impress' and 'connect'.[3] 'Connect' could refer to an unbroken unity of panorama, 'the cliffs connect the landscape to the sky', and it could also refer to the process of mediation, 'I connect the landscape with the quietness of the sky'. Similarly with 'impress' there is a momentary hesitation between the cliffs literally impressing upon the landscape (a typical Eighteenth Century inversion), and the revelation that the cliffs impress 'thoughts of deep seclusion' upon Wordsworth himself. Both commentators identify these ambiguities as syntactic, Armstrong proposing the text as an example of the tendency of Romantic syntax to effect 'transformations in preception and relationship' (p. 263) and Easthope as an example of parataxis, 'the juxtaposed syntax of speech' (p. 127). What both share is an implicit belief in the poem as speech act, whether reified into the protocols of Romantic epistemology or mimetically enacting the slippages and hesitancies of the speaking voice. But in a purely oral sense the poem is unreadable. It would be quite possible for a performer to reproduce the hesitancy at 'impress' by pausing slightly and then moving on to reveal the rest of the syntactic unit, but in order for the listener to resolve the ambiguity he must refer to an entirely different reading, the prosaic, where the 'natural' pause falls *before* impress. 'Connect' is more problematical; there is a genuine syntactic confusion concerning the subject of this verb, but, again, without the

spatial gap which follows it the listener would more readily identify the subject as the cliffs because of the grammatical continuity established by their relationship with 'impress'. There can never be a single self–sufficient oral performance of these lines which would produce the contrapuntal shifts of meaning identified by criticism. The syntax of the lines is, itself, relatively unambiguous; the traps, invitations to premature conclusions and text-ual gaps are imposed upon it by typographical disposi-tion. The synthesis of aberrant readings can only take place in the silent realm of analysis: in oral performance they must remain separate. Thus if this repertoire of effects is said to inhere in the text, if the final readable text is regarded as containing within itself these semantic en-richments, then its essential ontological status must be a function of its visual identity.

SAUSSURE'S *LANGUE ET PAROLE*

Hollander's analogy between ear/eye and *langue/parole* is clearly based upon an analysis of language which de-rives from the work of Ferdinand de Saussure. In his *Course in General Linguistics*[4] Saussure distinguished bet-ween the *langue* as the system of impersonal rules and conventions which controls language as a whole and the *parole* as the actual manifestation of this system in indi-vidual constructions or utterances. His most specific, and famous, description of the workings of the *langue* is in the statement that, 'in the linguistic system there are only dif-ferences, *without positive terms'* (*Course*, p. 120). The rather sinister implication that language is an entirely autono-mous differential system of arbitrary signs is suppressed by Saussure's distinction between the terms 'signifier' and 'signified'. Signifiers are linguistic signs, words, sepa-rately identifiable by their difference from one another; but beyond this they are capable of providing access to in-telligible signifieds, the elements of reality outside language which language articulates. Most importantly

Saussure makes this point by asserting that the primary object of linguistic analysis is speech, where signified and signifier seem spontaneously fused, rather than writing which is at the prey of absence and anonymity (*Course*, pp. 23–24). Just as Saussure created his hierarchy of speech/writing to support the presence of individual meaning and intention so Hollander has to categorize the effects he identifies as the products of speech rather than writing, or more importantly, the products of the author rather than of a system of literary conventions.

DERRIDA ON SAUSSURE

In recent years Saussurean linguistics has been subjected to a variety of theoretical questions and speculations. The most penetrating and subversive of these occur in the work of Jacques Derrida. In *Of Grammatology* [5] Derrida examines the interplay of concepts of speech and writing in the work of Saussure, and in a number of texts by Plato, Rousseau, Husserl, Levi Strauss and Condillac which he regards as indicative of the dominant Western tradition of linguistic thought. Derrida traces a tendency in Saussure's *Course* towards 'phonocentrism' in which speech is regarded as the communicative ideal where words issue from the speaker as the spontaneous and nearly transparent signs of his present thought.[6] But Derrida suggests that this ideal is, as it emerges in the work of Saussure and others, self contradictory, and that writing, which is traditionally regarded as a derivative and parasitic mode of communication, is in reality a much more powerful element. 'If "writing" means inscription and especially the durable instituting of signs (and this is the only irreducible kernel of the concept of writing) then writing in general covers the entire domain of linguistic signs . . . The very idea of institution, hence the arbitrariness of the sign, is unthinkable prior to or outside the horizon of writing'.[7] This represents only one aspect of Derrida's approach, but it is important to the subject of

this essay. If, as Derrida argues, writing, as the only means of *preserving* meaning, is a more dominant signifying category than evanescent speech, then a question must be asked about critical approaches which refuse to acknowledge that the written rather than the supposedly original spoken poem contributes to the elucidation of meaning. In the second part of this essay I want to look at some statements, mostly by poets, about how poetic structure is supposed to *convey* meaning, and to examine the way that criticism whilst apparently in complicity with these beliefs is, in its dealings with visual structure, capable of *generating* meanings.

The history of the sort of criticism which recognises the written text as more than a transparent medium for the 'voice' of the poet provides instructive examples of the simultaneous tendencies to generate meaning from that text and establish them as properties of it. *Paradise Lost* offered a challenge to the reading practices and formal expectations of the Eighteenth Century because its unrhymed enjambments engaged a convention of reading, the acknowledgement of the poetic line as a formal effect, without satisfying the criteria on which that convention operated; many lines could be seen but not *heard* as discrete units.[8] Thomas Sheridan, in *Lectures on the Art of Reading* (1775), attempted a solution by proposing that the spatial gap at the line ending was a signal, inserted by Milton, of an extra–grammatical intrication of meaning capable of generating textual depth; in effect a key to unlock hidden meanings *inherent in* the spoken poem and located *through* the written text.[9] Sheridan's naturalization of the visual status of the poetic line as a function of the structure of the original oral poem has become quietly institutionalized in the reading strategies of the past two hundred years. In a 1785 essay by Thomas Barnes, the assimilation of Sheridan's reading to the contemporary attitude to the written poem is acknowledged, 'But when

read with the eye only, without the accompaniment of the voice, there is a *fainter association* of the sound, the *shadow of the music,* as it were, connected with the words; so that we can judge exactly of the composition as if it were audible to the ear'.[10] Official critical history rarely tends to interrogate those assumptions which establish its relationship with literary texts and Sheridan is usually presented as a marginal figure, but it is worth noting that his directions for reading verse were adopted verbatim by Lindley Murray in his *English Grammar* (1795), the most widely used and adapted pedagogical work of its type of the subsequent century.[11]

It is also worth noting that Sheridan's method of elucidating blank verse has been very precisely employed in the work of John Hollander and Christopher Ricks.[12] At one point in Ricks's *Milton's Grand Style* there is a moment of potential contradiction. Ricks comments on the 'fluidity' of Milton's syntax and refers to the following line (p. 81):

> all things smil'd
> With fragrance and with joy my heart oreflow'd
> (VIII 265–6).

He quotes the Eighteenth Century critic Jonathan Richardson, who noted that the phrase 'with fragrance' can be read as both a reference to the 'fragrance' of 'all things' and as the 'fragrance' which 'oreflowed' from Adam's heart. Ricks agrees with Richardson and goes further by suggesting that there are at least four variations in syntactic structure.

> Milton's line and a half can be divided in many ways, the sense varying minutely each time:
>
> 1. All things smil'd
>   With fragrance and with joy my heart oreflow'd

2. All things smil'd with fragrance
    And with joy my heart oreflow'd
3. All things smil'd with fragrance and with joy,
    My heart oreflow'd
4. All things smil'd
    With fragrance and with joy,
    My heart oreflow'd

It is Ricks's briefly self–conscious reference to his own critical practice which is most interesting. 'Not that we need to break the verse down like this in reading—its flow keeps us moving' (p. 82). Does the term 'reading' mean silent critical interpretation or oral delivery? He does not say which because, as with 'Tintern Abbey', the one excludes the other. The four shifts in emphasis are convincingly illustrated by Ricks's typographic experiment, but it is difficult to imagine that all of these rhythmic and syntactic arrangements could be delivered in a single vocalization. Ricks seems to be aware of the signifying properties of typography, but he does not regard them as Miltonic: 'E.E. Cummings might achieve such effects through typography and punctuation—Milton uses syntax' (p. 90). It is strange that Ricks has used 'typography' and 'punctuation' in his rewriting of Milton to illustrate the apparently quite different qualities of 'syntax'. Jonathan Culler in *Structuralist Poetics* rewrites a prose sequence from a philosophic treatise by W.V.O. Quine as adventurously spaced free verse and effectively interprets it as a lyric on paradox.[13] And Stanley Fish in *Is There a Text in This Class?* relates an amusing anecdote on how his students explicate the stylistic and referential identity of a modernist religious lyric which is (unknown to them) a list of the names of modern American linguists left on the blackboard from the preceding seminar.[14] It would seem from these cases that the silent generation of meanings from the printed text is acknowledged or ignored according to context: Milton uses syntax but the modernists use typography. I would argue that the context is defined by the interpretive strategies of the reader,

and the function of shape and typography in this defini-
tion was considerably increased by the destabilization,
begun by the Imagists, of the previously established
relationship between the structure and the meaning of
a poem.

The idea that the structure of a poem is in some way or-
ganically produced by its prelinguistic genesis in the
mind of a poet appears in the work of theorists as diverse
as John Dennis, Blake, Coleridge and Whitman,[15] but in
Imagist poetic theory the poem itself is identified almost
as a recording of the spontaneous contingencies of an ori-
ginal oral event. In a letter to Harriet Moore, Ezra Pound
reveals a near obsessive preoccupation with the need to
break away from the complicit structures of abstract form,
tradition, writing.

> Rhythm MUST have meaning. It can't be merely a
> careless dash off, with no grip and no real hold on
> the words and sense, a tumty tum tumty tum tum
> ta. . .Every literaryism, every book word, fritters
> away a scrap of the reader's patience, a scrap of
> his sense of your sincerity. When one really feels
> and thinks, one stammers with simple speech; it
> is only in the flurry, the shallow frothy excitement
> of writing, or the inebriety of a metre, that one falls
> into the easy—oh, how easy!—speech of books
> and poems that one has read.[16]

The 'easy speech' of books and poems is the tainted
and codified written text threatening the purity and trans-
parency of the poet's voice. The problem to which Pound
and the Imagists continually return is that of how to
maintain the effect of organic form and spontaneity when
the poem must function in the absence of the poet, its
anonymity displacing the moment of origin and allowing
in aberrant reading strategies based on the 'speech of
books and poems'. The basic formal unit of the poem, the
line, was defined by Amy Lowell as a 'cadence' a 'rhyth-
mic curve. . .corresponding roughly to the necessity of

breathing'.[17] The possibility that such a correspondence, when transformed into silent spaces on the page, might produce effects not intended by the poet is sidestepped by a rhetorical effacement of the written text as intermediary between poet and reader/listener. This is from the Preface to *Some Imagist Poets 1916* which Amy Lowell edited.

> But one thing must be borne in mind; a cadenced
> poem is written to be read aloud, in this way
> only will its rhythm be felt. Poetry is a spoken and
> not a written art. . .It is not a question of rules
> and forms. Poetry is the vision in a man's soul
> which he translates as best he can with the means
> at his disposal.[18]

It is odd that this ideal of unmediated poetic expression is so closely bound up with orality when the text which Hugh Kenner called 'the *Ars Poetica* of our time' focuses upon nonphonetic pictorial language. Ernest Fenollosa's *The Chinese Written Character as a Medium for Poetry*[19] was so attractive to Pound and later practitioners of the modernist poetic because of its explication of the Chinese written sign's apparent capacity to represent images, metaphors and natural processes whilst by–passing the systematic, logical protocols of Western language.

> A true noun, an isolated thing, does not exist in
> nature. Things are only the terminal points, or
> rather the meeting points of actions, cross sec-
> tions cut through actions, snap shots. Neither
> can a pure verb, an abstract motion, be possible
> in nature. The eye sees noun and verb as one;
> things in motion, motion in things, and so the
> Chinese conception tends to represent them.

> The sun underlying the bursting forth of
> plants=spring. The sun sign tangled in the
> branches of the tree sign=east.

'Rice–field' plus 'struggle' = male.
'Boat' plus 'water', boat water, a ripple (p.141).

The problem with Fenollosa's concept of poetry is that of transferring the compression and economy of the ideogram to the subject/object matrix of the sentence. The term 'juxtaposition' is often applied to Pound's poetry, especially the *Cantos*; it implies that the static, spatial relationships of the ideogram can be reproduced by in some way compromising the temporal, sequential nature of the sentence, and indeed there is an analogy to be drawn between Fenollosa's explication of the ideogram and the way in which we may be said to understand the 'juxtaposed' or 'ideogrammic' method in English. Fenollosa renders Chinese characters intelligible to the non–Chinese reader by breaking them up, literally, 'explaining' them in terms of the linguistic system to which they are opposed. Similarly, to understand a juxtaposed poem, such as the Imagist prototype for the *Cantos*, 'In a Station of the Metro', one must recognise the syntactic discontinuity between the two lines and give it thematic value.

The apparition of these faces in the crowd;
Petals on a wet, black bough.

To grasp any potential effect of the profundity of superficial perception, the sentence without a verb must be understood as a version of, a withdrawal from, a normal sentence; a notional verb must be inserted to make the effect possible. The 'meaning' of the poem, in the sense that criticism would regard it as being in some way concerned with perception, must be rendered in terms of the oral, sequential language which it seeks to disrupt. Thus, like the blank verse enjambments considered above, the oral poem which is performable and which contains the sum of the meanings inherent in the written text is something quite separate from the written text itself. But Pound, recalling Lowell, identifies the written text as tras-

parent, its visual identity a mere paradigm of the process of oral transmission. 'All typographic disposition, placing of words on the page, is intended to facilitate the reader's intonation, whether he be reading silently or aloud to friends'.[20]

WRITING AND SPEECH

This tendency to reduce writing to a function of speech is characterized by Derrida as a will to preserve the ideal of unmediated expression. He quotes Hegel, '. . .the visible language is related only as a sign to the audible language; intelligence expresses itself immediately and unconditionally through speech', and comments, 'What writing itself, in its non–phonetic moment, betrays is life. It menaces at once, the breath, the spirit, and history as the spirit's relationship with itself' (*Of Grammatology*, p. 25). What is menaced is, in Lowells words, the 'translation' of 'the vision in a man's soul'. In the third chapter of *Of Grammatology*,'Of Grammatology as a Positive Science', Derrida postulates a 'necessary decentering', a 'dislocation'' of 'the founding categories of language', 'through access to another system linking speech and writing. . .This is the meaning of the work of Fenollosa (sic) whose influence upon Ezra Pound and his poetics is well known: this irreducibly graphic poetics was, with that of Mallarmé, the first break in the most entrenched Western tradition' (p. 92). This 'poetic' reflects, in its obsessive shifts between the graphic and the phonetic, the eye and the ear, not a break with the 'Western tradition' of the priority of speech but a relocation of that tradition in the relationship between text and interpretation. The 'tradition' found itself capable of adapting its interpretive techniques to accommodate 'nontraditional' writing. But there has hardly been a more vigorous attempt to distance the 'poetic' from the 'tradition' than in Charles Olson's essay 'Projective Verse',[21] a work which revived Poundian modernism in the midst of the New Critical atmosphere of 1950.

Olson's 'Closed' and 'Open' poetry

Olson's crucial distinction is between 'closed' and 'open' poetry. 'Closed' poetry is 'print bred', 'the lyrical interference of the individual as ego', frozen in the abstract formulae of metre and rhyme—in other words the greater part of poetry written before the Twentieth Century. Olson's attitude to 'closed' poetry is an extension of Fenollosa's perception of the infelicitous tendencies of Western language, that the conventions of the medium itself absorb and restructure the relationship between the individual and reality. According to Olson the formal protocols of the 'closed' lyric reify and delimit any genuine attempt at communication between poet and reader, so that the original subject and object, the poet and the world, are transformed into grammatical, stylistic categories. 'Projective Verse' is really a manifesto for 'open' poetry, a term undoubtedly connected with Fenollosa's vision of an escape from the tyranny of 'closure' in the sentence: 'All processes in nature are inter–related; and thus there could be no complete sentence. . .save one which would take all time to pronounce' (Fenollosa, p. 142). Olson wants to re–establish in poetry what he sees as a primal link between language, perception and thought. He begins by attempting to reduce the differential structure of language to single discrete and indivisible sound particles. 'Let's start from the smallest particle of all, the syllable. It is the king and pin of versification, what rules and holds together the lines, the larger forms, of a poem' (p. 17). The syllable in this scheme is the key mediating component, that which establishes a non–arbitrary link between the process of perception and ratiocination and the generation of linguistic sequence and aesthetic organization.

> Let me put it baldly. The two halves are:
> The HEAD, by way of the EAR, to the SYLLABLE
> The HEART, by way of the BREATH, to the LINE
> (p. 19).

The poet must, it seems, respond to the dynamics of phenomena rather than impose upon it the falsifying strictures of closed form. 'From the moment he ventures into FIELD COMPOSITION—put himself in the open— he can go by no track other than the one the poem under hand declares, for itself. . .FORM IS NEVER MORE THAN AN EXTENSION OF CONTENT' (p. 16).

In attempting to synthesize the diverse and often contradictory elements of the modernist tradition (he acknowledges Pound and Williams as his precursors) Olson performs what could be, in Derridean terms, a self–deconstructive move. It is, at least, self contradictory. He simultaneously celebrates and marginalizes the material status of language. The poem is proposed as a transparent representation of the response of the poet to the world, yet it is the poem's status as a physical artifact, as a sequence of phonetic integers, or an arrangement of black marks on paper, which is supposed to produce the economy of this mediation.

> . . .every element in an open poem (the syllable, the line, as well as the image, the sound, the sense) must be taken up as participants in the kinetic of the poem just as solidly as we are accustomed to take what we call the objects of reality; and (that) these elements are to be seen as creating the tensions of a poem just as totally as do those whose objects create what we know as the world. (p. 20).

Breathing and Typewriting

That most tangible constituent of the poem's identity, the line, becomes a funciton of the poet's interaction with his environment. 'And the line comes (I swear it) from the breath, from the breathing of the man who writes, at the moment that he writes, and thus is, it is here that, the daily work, the WORK get in, for only he, the man who writes, can declare, at every moment, the line its metric

and its ending—where its breathing shall come to, termination' (p. 19). The manuscript and printing press have, according to Olson, removed verse 'from its place of origin and its destination'; he believes that the traditional metrical line was petrified by print into a barrier between poet and reader. His solution is provided by more recent technology, the typewriter, which:

> due to its rigidity and its space precisions, it can for a poet indicate exactly the breath, the pauses, the suspensions even of syllables, the juxtapositions even of parts of phrases, which he intends. For the first time the poet has the stave and the bar a musician has had. For the first time he can, without the convention of rime and meter, record the listening he has done to his own speech and by that one act indicate how he would want any reader, silently or otherwise, to voice his work (p. 27).

The typewriter with its apparent ability to reproduce the breath, the inspiration of the poet, would preserve the moment at which material signifier and spiritual signified seem presented as an undissociated unity. Olson's desire to record the 'listening he has done to his own speech' corresponds to the effect identified by Derrida, with the French verb s'*entendre parler,*' "hearing/understanding—oneself speak" through the phonic substance—which *presents itself* as a nonexterior, nonmundane therefore nonempirical or noncontingent signifier. . .' (*Of Grammatology,* pp. 7–8). But it is the evanescence of the signifier in speech which creates the impression of immediate access to a signified, the suppression of difference. Once the typing stops, what Olson calls the 'kinetic' of the poem becomes stasis, that set of spaces gaps and discontinuities which are themselves meaningless until thematized or naturalized by the process of interpretation.

It is not my intention to destroy Olson's theory of poetic communication in order to propose an alternative. But

Olson's essay, in its attempt to subsume the material identity of language, and especially its written identity, beneath a phonocentric ideal of presence, presents a powerful yet familiar instance of self contradiction. He refuses to accept that the interpretive conventions of reading poetry are themselves purposive accumulators of meanings which cannot be assumed to have been transferred directly through the medium of poetic structure. The fact that such conventions do operate within the institutionalized relationship between poetry and interpretation is illustrated in the work of John Hollander. Olson refers to 'Cummings, Pound and Williams' as poets who have 'already used the machine as a scoring to (their) composing, as a script to its vocalization' (p. 22). One of William's most famous typographically 'scored' poems is 'The Red Wheelbarrow'.

so much depends
upon

a red wheel
barrow

glazed with rain
water

beside the white
chickens [22]

Hollander has explicated the poem:

. . .The line termini cut the words 'wheelbarrow' and 'rainwater' into their constituents, without the use of hyphenation to warn that the first noun is to be part of a compound, *with the implication that they are phenomonological constitutents as well.* The wheel plus the barrow equals the wheelbarrow, and in the freshness of light after the rain (it is the kind of light which the poem is *about*, although never mentioned directly), things seem to lose their compounded properties.[23]

Hollander's ingenious interpretation is an eloquent commentary on the gap between what a poem is generally held to be and how it is understood. Olson, the spokesman for the modernist program, writes of this sort of poem as having 'the reading its writing involved, as though not the eye but the ear was to be its measurer, as though intervals of its composition could be so carefully put down, as to be precisely the intervals of its registration' (p. 23), yet Hollander exploits the spatial rather than the temporal relationships within the poem to tell us, quite persuasively, that it is 'about' something which it never mentions.

A consistent application of Hollander's interpretive technique would have the 'white/chickens' turned into an Impressionist blur, but to shift the linguistic balance between a color and its object involves a process quite different from that used by a painter. In his *Elements of Criticism* (1762) Lord Kames objects to division of 'phenomenological constituents' when their linguistic components are separated by formal elements such as printed poetic lines. 'Colour, for example, cannot be conceived independent of the surface coloured. . .' (Vol. II, p. 130). Kames's anxiety about language coming adrift from things was fueled by such lines as the following from *Paradise Lost*.

> Now in loose garlands thick thrown off the bright Pavement
> III, 362–362.

Thomas Sheridan (1775) provides an elaborate, readerly solution to Kames's objections:

> . . .now here by finishing the verse with the adjective *bright*, it is separated from its substantive, *pavement*, contrary to the genius of our tongue. And yet in the right manner of re-

peating it, there appears to be no defect, but
rather the idea seems to acquire a new force from
this very circumstance. . .But this separation in
point of sound between the quality and its subject,
gives time for the quality to make a stronger im-
pression on us; and therefore should never be
used, but when the poet means that the quality
not the subject, should be the principal idea;
which is the case in the above instance, wehre the
intention of the poet is, to fix our thoughts, not on
the pavement itself, but on the brightness of the
pavement.[24]

Sheridan is remarkable in that, two hundred years
prior to their modernist emergence, he manages to pre-
empt the assumption of Olson and Hollander that what is
generated by the spatial configurations of the text pro-
vides access to an oral event, an original intention behind
it. Sheridan, Hollander, and Olson share a belief in the
status of the visual format as a form of written music,
capable of transferring a number of, sometimes complex
and subtle, effects from the mouth of the poet to the ear
of the reader. But it has already been shown that in certain
cases when the typographic device is fed through the
system of critical response the result can be an effect
which is only appreciable in the silence of close reading.

Silent Poetics

There would seem to be an unacknowledged tension
between the sophistications of critical reading and the
still popular ideal of the poem as the archetype of spoken
communication. I have so far attempted to trace the
implications of this conflict through the *ex cathedra*
reflections of poets and the explanatory work of critics,
but it could also be argued that poems themselves have
been instrumental in actually promoting the sense of
instability which is reflected in the work of Hollander and
Sheridan. Whether or not Milton and Wordsworth *in-
tended* to cause us to consider the discontinuity between

seeing and hearing a poem will remain a matter for speculation, but it is certainly the case that within the modernist tradition of technical experiment there have been many instances of the visual format being employed as a major element of the poem's structure.

Much of e.e. cumming's poetry exploits the mediating function of print by making the materiality of language the theme as well as the functional condition of the poem. Many of cummings's poems cannot be read aloud; nor can they be converted into an interpretive strategy which supercedes their visual identity. '57' from the collection *73 Poems*, is concerned with the mediation of the sort of perceptual effects Hollander identifies as the theme of 'The Red Wheelbarrow'.

57

mi (dreamlike) st

makes big each dim
inuiti

ve turns obv

ious t
o s
trange

un

til o
urselve
s are

will be wor
(magi
c
ally)

ids.[25]

This poem is 'about' the effect of mist upon the perception and the imagination, but its repertoire of effects can hardly be mirrored in sequential interpretative language. It would be very difficult to describe the order in which things happen in the poem because the referential function and material identity of the language are so closely meshed. In regarding 'mi (dreamlike) st' and 'turns/obv/ious/t/os/trange' as meaningful at all we must place them in the same formal context as Wordsworth's 'impress/Thoughts', but we must also ask the question of whether cummings has overexploited a minor stylistic precedent or whether his work stands within a tradition acknowledged by Samuel Johnson's judgment of *Paradise Lost* as 'verse only to the eye'. [26] I believe that the latter must be accepted as the case, because it is no longer possible to dismiss explicitly visual texts such as Herbert's 'Easter Wings' or more recent experiments in Concrete Poetry merely as bizarre aberrations. They represent the most conspicuous manifestations of a trend which is firmly established within 'traditional' poetry, but which critical writing has been reluctant to acknowledge as a legitimate technique. The technique does not yet have a name, but I offer the term 'silent poetics'. They are silent because they operate in an independent sphere beyond the reach of aural performance. They can be very roughly reproduced in speech, but in this form they would lose their subtly pervasive influence upon the texture of the poem—an interplay which is available *only* to the eye.

It would be impractical for me to attempt to document every instance of this technique in contemporary poetry, but in order to illustrate the extent to which 'silent poetics' have become part of the reflexive conventions of even the most accessible and traditional poetic writing I shall invite the reader to look at a recent piece of work by Hugo Williams, called, appropriately enough, 'Poetry'.

Ten, no, five seconds
after coming all
over the place
too soon,

I was lying there
wondering
where to put the
line–breaks in. [27]

Williams seems to be making an irreverent comparison
between whatever the poet might get up to in bed and his
difficulties in detaching himself from the relentless men-
tal processes of invention and technical refinement. The
problem with such a paraphrase is that once we have
reached the phrase 'line–breaks' the preceding references
to 'coming all/over the place' and the humorously en-
jambed 'too soon' begin to resonate with poetic, as well
as sexual, meaning.

If the poem were 'heard' rather than looked at it would
either have to be rendered as an absurd series of hesita-
tions with a pause at each line break, or as a tediously flat
piece of erotic prose. To experience the relentless inter-
play between sequential language and 'silent poetics' we
have to see it on the page.

The poem itself is something of a joke, but its status as
such is a token of the visual format as a fully institutional-
ized element in the available repertoire of poetic effects.
Williams' implied assumption that the reader will appre-
ciate his playful interpolation of form into content is itself
sufficient to grant the visual format a degree of presence
and recognition. Pope's line in *An Essay on Criticism*,
'That, like a wounded Snake, drags it slow length along',
involves a very similar acknowledgement of the twelve–
syllable Alexandrine. But, unlike Pope,Williams makes a
statement *in* poetic language which the critical establish-
ment still finds it difficult to accept: Silent Poetics has

become a convention of poetic writing which continues to elude the methodology of interpretation. It is probably the final point of resistance to the process of demystification by which critical writing has systematically catalogued and colonized the 'language of poetry'. The printed page is its ultimate refuge, and the sense of independence granted by this silent realm is vividly, and literally, illustrated in the following piece of typographic anger by Benjamin Zephaniah.

According to My Mood

I have poetic license, i WriTe thE way i waNt.
i drop my full stops where i like . . . .
MY CAPITAL LettERS go where i liKE
i order from MY PeN, i verse the way i like
(i do my spelling write)
According to My MOod
i HAve poetic license,
i put my commers where i like,, ((()).
(((my brackets are write ((
I REPEAT WHen i likE.
i can't go rong
i look and i.c.
It's rite.
i REpeat when i liKE. i have
poetic license!
don't question me???? [28]

Things have changed somewhat since Wordsworth confronted the reader with the question of whether he or the cliffs connected the landscape with the quiet of the sky, but Zephaniah's final line affirms the sense of satisfaction which the unreliability of the printed page grants to both poets.

In 'reading poetry'it should be recognized that the eye has, for some time, been as significant as the ear in the process of appreciation.

NOTES

1   In *Vision and Resonance: Two Senses of Poetic Form*,
     New York: Oxford University Press, 1975, pp. 245-
     287, 285.

2   Hollander, John. *Vision and Resonance*, pp. 91-116,
     245–287; Donald Davie, 'Syntax and Music in *Paradise
     Lost*', *The Living Milton*, F. Kermode, (ed.) London:
     Routledge, 1960, pp. 70-84, especially pp. 70–73;
     Christopher Ricks, *Milton's Grand Style*, Oxford:
     Blackwell, 1963, especially pp. 40–46, 79–80, 100;
     'Wordsworth: "A Pure Organic Pleasure form the
     Lines"', *Essays in Criticism* 21, 1971, pp. 1–32; Stanley
     Fish, *Is There a Text in This Class?*, Cambridge, MA,
     and London; Harvard University Press, 1980, pp.
     162–66, 322–37.

3   Armstrong, Isabel: "Tintern Abbey": from Augustan
     to Romantic', *Augustan Worlds. Essays in Honour of A.
     R. Humphreys*. J. C. Hilson, M. M. B. Jones and J. R.
     Watson, (Eds.) Leicester: Leicester University Press,
     1978, pp. 261–79; Anthony Easthope, *Poetry as Dis-
     course*, London and New York: Methuen, New
     Accents Series, 1983, pp. 126–28.

4   *Course in General Linguistics*. Wade Baskin, (Trans.).
     London: Peter Owen, 1960. First published in French,
     Cours de linguistique générale, Paris, 1916.

5   *Of Grammatology*. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak,
     (Trans.). Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins
     University Press, 1977. First published in French, *De
     la Grammatologie*. Paris: Minuet, 1967.

6   Ibid., pp. 34–43.

7   Ibid., p. 44. Also quoted in Jonathan Culler's *On
     Deconstruction. Theory and Criticism After Structural-
     ism*. London: Routledge, 1983. p. 102.

8   See Richard Bradford, '"Verse Only to the Eye?" Line
     Endings in *Paradise Lost*', *Essays in Criticism*, III, 1983,
     pp. 187–204.

9   *Lectures on the Art of Reading*, Volume II, pp. 193–98.

10 Barnes, Thomas. 'On the Nature and Essential
    Characteristics of Poetry as distinguished from
    Prose', *Memoires of the Manchester Literary and Philo-
    sophical Society*, I, 1785, pp. 54–1, 69–71.

11 T. S. Omond calls the book 'our principal Grammar'.
    *English Metrists: Being a Sketch of English Prosodical
    Criticism from Elizabethan Times to the Present Day*,
    Oxford: Clarendon, 1921. pp. 107–08. R. C. Alston is,
    he admits, defeated in his attempt to record all the
    reprints and new editions of the work. He does,
    however, find that it had reached its sixty fifth edition
    by 1871 as well as numerous editions and reprints in
    the United States and Canada. There were also trans-
    lations into French, German, Dutch, Swedish, Span-
    ish, Russian and Japanese. Alston, *A Bibliography of
    the English Language from the Invention of Printing to the
    Year 1800*, Leeds, J. Arnold and Sons, I, pp. 95, 112–13.

12 See note 2.

13 *Structuralist Poetics, Structuralism, Linguistics and the
    Study of Literature* . London: Routledge, 1975, p.
    162–3.

14 *Is There a Text in This Class?*, pp. 322–37.

15 Dennis, John. Preface to *Brittania Trimphans*, 1704, *The
    Critical Works of John Dennis*. E. N. Hooker, (Ed.), Bal-
    timore: Johns Hopkins University Press, I, 1939, pp.
    374–379; Blake, William. Introduction to *Jerusalem,
    The Complete Writings*. G. Keynes, (Ed.). Oxford:
    Oxford University Press, 1966, p. 261. Coleridge, S. T.
    Biographia Literaria, J. Shawcross (Ed.). Oxford:
    Clarendon, 1954, Chs. XII and XIV; Whitman, Walt.
    Preface to *Leaves of Grass*, 1855, *Collected Writings of
    Walt Whitman*. G. W. Allen and S. Bradley, (Eds.). New
    York: Rinehart, 1965, V, p. 714.

16 Pound to Harriet Monroe, January 1915, reprinted in
    Imagist Poetry, Peter Jones, (Ed.) London: Penguin,
    1972, pp. 141–42.

17 'Some Musical Analogies in Modern Poetry', *Musical Quarterly*, 6, 1920, pp. 127–57, p. 141.

18 Reprinted in Jones, pp. 136–40, see pp. 129–40.

19 Edited by Ezra Pound and first published in *The Little Review*, 1919. References from *Prose Keys to Modern Poetry*. Shapiro, Karl, (Ed.). New York: Harper and Row, 1962, pp. 136–55.

20 Letter to Hubert Creekmore, February 1939, in *Ezra Pound*. Sullivan, J. P. (Ed.). London: Penguin Critical Anthologies, 1970, p. 192.

21 First published in *Poetry New York*, III 1950. References taken from *Selected Writings of Charles Olson*. Creeley, Robert (Ed.). New York: New Directions, pp. 15–26.

22 From 'Spring And All', 22, 1923, in *Collected Earlier Poems*. New York: New Directions, 1938.

23 '"Sense Variously Drawn Out": On English Enjambment', *Vision and Resonance*, pp. 91–116, p. 111.

24 *Lectures on the Art of Reading*, II pp. 257–258.

25 *73 Poems by e.e. cummings*, London, Faber and Faber, 1964.

26 *Life of Milton*, p. 193 in *Lives of the English Poets.* , Birkbeck, Hill Oxford, 1905, Volume I. See also, note 8 above.

27 Published in the *London Review of Books*, Volume 10, 22 December 1988, p. 8.

28 Published in *Artrage, Inter–Cultural Arts Magazine*. Autumn 1988, p. 41.

A Verbal and Visual Translation of Mayakovsky's and Lissitsky's *For Reading Out Loud*

Desktop publishing systems offer users flexibility which requires more knowledge than previous experience with the typewriter or wordprocessor provides. As this article demonstrates, the computer does not inherently bestow any aesthetic grace upon computer assisted productions.