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Theorizing Typography: Printing, Page Design, and the Study of Free Verse

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Theorizing Typography

Printing, Page Design, and the Study of Free Verse

WHEN I FIRST TOOK MY INTRODUCTORY poetry workshop to the print shop at Dickinson College, I hoped to engage the bodies as well as the minds of the beginning poets. Setting lead type, choosing paper by weight and texture, mixing an ink color, deciding upon the arrangement of a poem on the page, then turning the press over to ink the type and make an impression that ratifies all those decisions, adds another aesthetic dimension to poetry. I have come more and more to believe this aesthetic dimension is crucially absent in the way many if not most poets have thought about poetry since the prominence of free verse and its offspring from the late nineteenth century to the present. Poetry originated as bodily movement, odes danced and recited to the Greek lyre, epics passed down through the traveling scopos reciting by memory. Metrical and rhyming verse made these kinds of bodily engagements natural, but free verse lends itself more sparingly to physical activity.

What surprised me, however, with my student poets in the print shop: editing. Although the poems they were prepared to print had been through two workshops, and thus were as heavily revised as could be under the strictures of time, my role in the shop switched from “I can help you set type,” to “okay, run some edits by me.” Two impetuses fueled the editing frenzy: one, it’s damn hard to set type, and those gauzy memories about wordy passive verbs and repetitive images suddenly popped out as more than academic: fewer

words, fewer pieces of lead to handle. Further, setting type slows us down and makes us not only want to take out extraneous words, but also allows us see the poem in a word by word progression that typing doesn’t. The attention can’t wonder from setting lines on the composing stick, moreover, or the type will “pi”—go skittering across the floor—taking precious time to retrieve from behind type racks and under tables. Two, viewing the poem in relief in the galley gives a three-dimensional view of the poem that heightens the visual appearance without regard to meaning. The more visually astute of the students began to experiment with stanzas, line length, and arrangement of lines in space, rather than leaving them in the columns of verse that take after metrical poetry, even though very few of them count syllables or accents as they write, unless assigned to do so. The physical engagement with the text changed the text in a way that mental work simply did not.

Engaged by my experience in the print shop with my students, my purpose here is to open the question of how study of typography and the arrangement of the poem on the page may augment our methods of theorizing and thus teaching poetry. Historically, the contemporary poetry we teach *tout corps* depends upon Modernist “free verse,” that separates the line break from the “music” of rhyme and accentual-syllabic verse. Once poetic lines become divorced from these “musical” effects, poetry is no longer primarily an aural, and thus physical, event. We cannot listen to a poem in free verse and envision the poem on the page, as we can do with heroic couplets and other strict rhyming and rhythmic forms. Poetry after free verse *is* the arrangement of the material word on the page, not the poem “out loud.” Even while Ezra Pound described free verse in the 1913 issue of *Poetry*, “As regarding rhythm: to compose in the sequence of the musical phrase, not in the sequence of a metronome,” he also asserted that “*vers libre* has become as prolix and as verbose as any of the flaccid varieties that preceded it. . . without even the excuse that the words are shoveled in to fill a metric pattern or to complete the noise of a rhyme-sound” (Pound in Perloff 86). Pound’s conflict about sound and free verse still is shared and debated, with the most common agreement telling us that free verse is an imitation of speech, which is often neither musical nor metrical. More so, free verse can pressurize the appearance of the line on the page with its focus on the line break that can create a visual surprise or can “cut” into a word, creating a tension that goes against the grain of speech.

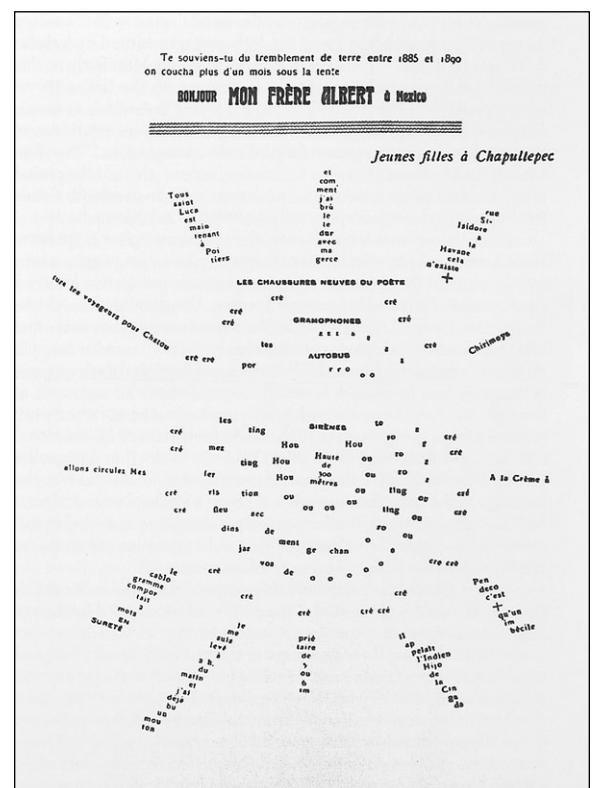
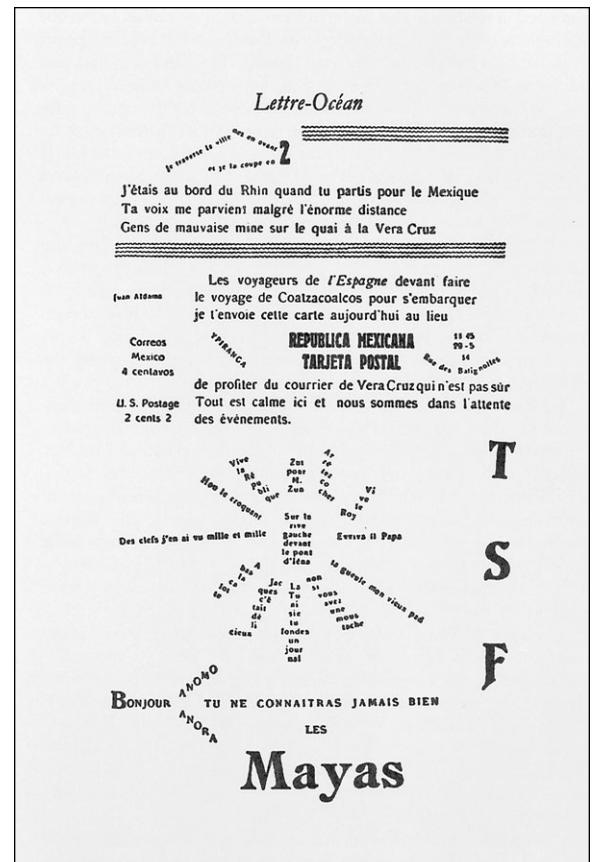
The early avant-garde’s play with poetic language as visual art grasped the change in poetic emphasis from aural to visual with the ascendancy of free verse, and, further, moved poetry from weight on metaphor to emphasis on the material word, trying to put some physicality into the poetry. Letterpress technology made rapid advances at the end of the nineteenth century with the invention of higher-speed presses and typesetting machines, giving poets (and advertisers) cheaper access to printing. This allowed avant-garde experimentation (especially by the Parisian poet Apollinaire) with typography and an abil-

ity to put pressure on word as image, rather than word as creating a poet’s image in the mind. This typographic/poetic experimentation crystallized a theoretical opportunity. Yet avant-garde love of ephemera (among other issues—*pace* Saussure, semioticians, for example, idealistically ignore writing, concentrating on the unit of sound as key to language and believing that the written word is an unfortunate necessity) lost the moment for constructing a theoretical question about how experiments in unusual typography and layout can inform our understanding of free verse. As late as 1950, Roger Shattuck called Apollinaire’s *Calligrammes* “amusing, unpretentious poems” with “meager and shallow” text (Shattuck in Drucker 141). And by the 1930s, renowned typographer



Top: The Dickinson College Print Shop.

Bottom: Introductory Poetry Workshop: Typesetting



Beatrice L. Warde could write an essay entitled “The Crystal Goblet, or Printing Should be Invisible.”

A visual experimental strain did continue from Apollinaire, yet it is not at the forefront of our teaching. The “visualist imperative” (Davidson 71) of Imagism did allow for experiments with line and word spacing. The influence of Cubism and Dadaism encouraged poets to see the page as verbal collage, and led to rediscovering Greek patterned poetry that was used to such profound effect in the Renaissance by poets such as George Herbert. Michael Davidson argues that the “Pound/Williams generation used the typewriter to create a new visual aesthetic” of “the word as image or object” (Davidson 74). Charles Olson’s use of the typewriter was an attempt to create poetry that mimicked the physicality of writing and of walking. In the 1950s concrete poetry came to the fore and called direct attention to the materiality of language. American Language-writers draw upon a similar aesthetic, though for them “linguistic materialization is part of a general critique of expressive poetics” (Davidson 77). Historically these movements have not been at the center of what we teach, have not illuminated free verse, perhaps because we do not see them at the center of expressive poetics.

We continue overwhelmingly to teach poetry composition within the musical accentual-syllabic tradition, believing, as Marjorie Perloff argued at the 2006 Associated Departments of English conference, that in order to write inventively, poetry students need to read more deeply in the literary history of poetry from its beginnings in the Anglo-Saxon alliterative line, through the metrical forms. But because the free verse tradition departs from the tradition of the “music of the line,” I suggest that poetic theory and education can concentrate as well upon the “neglected” tradition of typography and the material text as conceptual elements. I suspect that focus upon these along side the musical elements of poetry will illustrate both the opportunities we have missed in not studying typography and the space on the page, as well as show the musical tradition in a new light, each illuminating the other.

In 1998, perhaps before her emphasis on poetic education in metrical verse, Perloff works on a definition of “free verse” in her essay “After Free Verse: The New Non-Linear Poetics” basing her classification upon free verse that depends “upon the unobtrusiveness of sound structure . . . as if to say that what is said must not be obscured by the actual saying” (Perloff 95). Perloff examines an anthology published in 1969, *Naked Poetry*, edited by Stephen Berg and Robert Mezey, offering representative poems from Rexroth, Roethke, Patchen, Stafford, Kees, Berryman, Lowell, Levertov, Bly, Creeley, Ginsberg, Kinnell, Merwin, James Wright, Philip Levine, Plath, Snyder, and the editors. From these poems Perloff develops six tenets of “free verse,” summarizing in the sixth that the “none of these does much to exploit the white space of the

page or to utilize the material aspects of typography” (Perloff 95). Perloff seems to argue in this section of her essay that most free verse of the fifties and sixties was neither sonically remarkable nor visually new and interesting. Free verse of the era, in other words, is of no material interest. (The rest of her essay, however, is about how materially interesting forms are becoming).

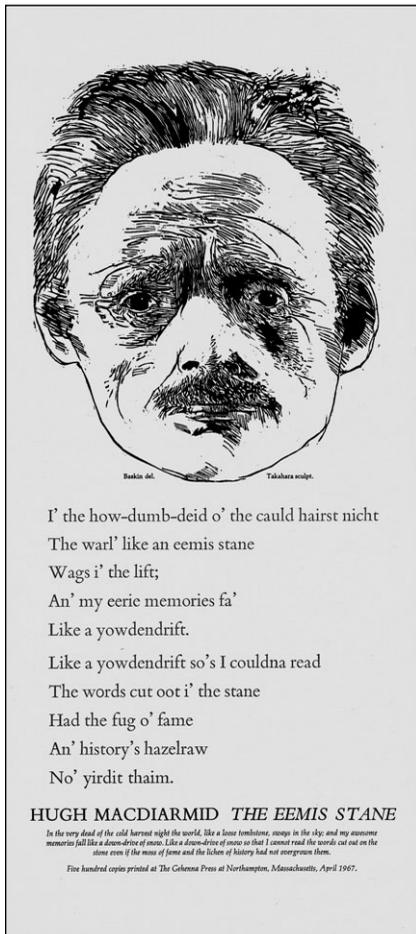
As Berg and Mezey compiled and published their edition, however, The Gehenna Press issued celebrated and legendary broadsides designed by Leonard Baskin. Examples of poems by Hugh MacDiarmid and Archibald MacLeish reveal two ways that the heretofore “low” form of broadside fixes material interest to poems that may not do much in their traditionally printed form to “exploit the white space of the page.” In broadside form, however, we can see how each poem was chosen for the material interest of its language. Baskin crowns the Scots poet Hugh MacDiarmid’s anti-war poem “The Eemis Stane” (literally, “Loose Tombstone”) with a woodcut print of a head to render the hollow-socketed look of a skull, with the protruding hair reminiscent of an electro-shock therapy victim. With the poem in blood red type sitting on top of its title and author, and a prose meditation below (which is actually a standard English prose rendering of the poem), the broadside looks more like the traditional emblem, with its engraving, motto, and poem, than it does a simple poem, metrical or not. The poem, I should add, is in Lallans dialect (an imitation of lowlands Scots), and the visual interest of the language on the page, with its repeated phrases close to Anglo Saxon, with that same “just out of reach” / I can almost get it quality—“yowdendrift” being the most obvious example— attracts Baskin. Of course the poem is not purely free verse; it rhymes. This technique, however, represents one prominent way that printing gives material texture to a poem besides the interest of the printed word itself; the wood block print gives it physicality, here a shell-shocked entrée into the poem appropriate to the subject. It brings it off the page.

Yet in his important book *Printing Poetry: A Workbook in Typographic Reification*, Clifford Burke makes a case for pure type in printing poetry, “I question the function of illustration in a book of poetry. A poem is itself a kind of illustration; the line scheme creates a pictorial image, a score for the reading of the text.” He continues, “The way the lines are structured means something, and I have always been fascinated by the way those shapes develop on the page. An illustration with any poem seems to me to limit it, to freeze particular verbal images into pictorial certainties where they might otherwise reverberate with implications” (Burke 74). Burke’s book discusses typeface choice and arrangement of poems on the page as crucial to their engaging the reader fully in the corporeal experience of poetry. Attention to typography itself without an image, even in a poem composed in the columnar shape of metrical verse, can emphasize the material word that embeds the physi-

cal in the poem, in a way that the poem printed in trade book form does not.

Another of Baskin’s broadsides from the late sixties makes this point particularly. Baskin sets Archibald MacLeish’s free verse “A Voyage to the Moon” in a large Centaur typeface, which predominantly emphasizes the letter “O” in the poem, from the wide letter spacing of the title, to MacLeish’s isolation of the letter in a single stanza, as well as separating in individual lines, centered, the words “Now,” and “O, a meaning!,” The typographic design of the Centaur “O” further emphasizes the O in its prominence of “Over,” twice beginning a line, and “Now,” also beginning a line. Obviously the “O” is moon-shaped. That and the emphasis on “Presence” in blue ink, all caps, typographically and thus materially represent the poem, which commemorates the moon landing; we have a “Presence” in the “O” of the moon.

Perhaps sensing what Perloff later observes about the materiality lacking in free verse poetry of the fifties and sixties, Baskin’s broadside printing adds textured, physical interest to poetry during that period. Flourishing during the same period, Dudley Randall’s Broadside Press underscores even more powerfully the effectiveness of getting free verse off the page. Randall’s work gave voice to black poets that arguably could not be heard on the traditionally printed page or in the staid trade book of poetry. “I try,” Randall says, “to make the format of the broadside harmonize with the poem in paper, color, and typography” (Randall in Thompson 81). Helen Vendler, writing in the *New York Times Book Review* in September of 1974, adds to Randall’s comment, “The instant appeal of broadsides is an old story and suggests that the world would prefer reading poems the way poets write them—one by one” (Vendler 313). Randall’s broadside of Gwendolyn Brooks’ “We Real Cool” from 1966 speaks for itself. Whether this text image means to imitate chalkboard or graffiti,



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A VOYAGE TO THE MOON

PRESENCE among us,
wanderer in our skies,
dazzle of silver in our leaves and on our
waters silver,
O
silver evasion in our farthest thought:
“the visiting moon” . . . “the glimpses of the moon” . . .
and we have touched you!
From the first of time,
before the first of time, before the
first men tasted time, we thought of you.
You were a wonder to us, unattainable,
a longing past the reach of longing,
a light beyond our light, our lives—perhaps
a meaning to us.
Now
our hands have touched you in your depth of night.
Three days and three nights we journeyed,
steered by farthest stars, climbed outward,
crossed the invisible tide-rip where the floating dust
falls one way or the other in the void between,
followed that other down, encountered
cold, faced death—unfathomable emptiness.
Now, the fourth day evening, we descend,
make fast, set foot at last upon your beaches,
sift between our fingers your cold sand.
We stand here in the sand, the cold, the silence—
and here, as at the first of time, we lift our heads.
Over us, more beautiful than the moon, a
moon, a wonder to us, unattainable,
a longing past the reach of longing,
a light beyond our light, our lives—perhaps
a meaning to us.
O, a meaning!
Over us on these silent beaches the bright
earth,
presence among us.

ARCHIBALD MACLEISH

850 copies printed at the Gehenna Press 1969

Archibald MacLeish



Design, Cledie Taylor, 1966. Broadside Press

as James Sullivan points out, it represents something much closer to what the speakers of the poem could produce than does the poem printed in a book. The broadside also deemphasizes the traditional publishing data, giving precedence to the actual words of the speakers. This not only represents Brooks' intention, but it also bucks the establishment in ways appropriate to Brooks' work. While insightful on the Brooks broadside, Sullivan goes on in his book to ravage the tradition of the fine press broadside, such as those represented by Baskin's work, and plays the elitist card, offering that "a set of relatively privileged institutions [mediate broadside's] reception" (Sullivan 109). Artists' works such as Baskin's are expensive (though the two examples I use were in my smallish college library), but Sullivan ignores or is unaware of the resurgence of letterpress printing that allows such operations as Ugly Duckling Presse to produce chapbooks and broadsides as ephemeral and as cheap (and at times experimental) as did the avant-garde movement.

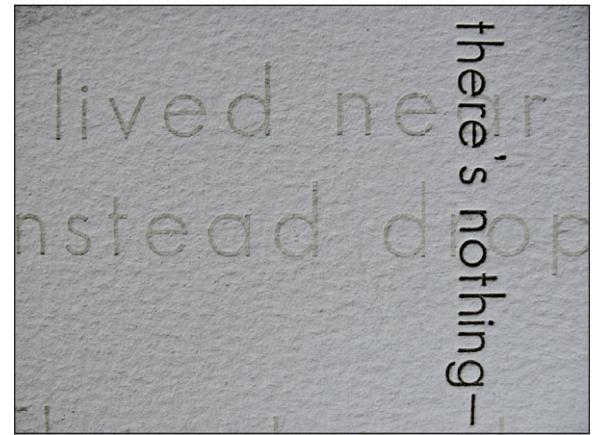
Which brings me back to where I began. The tradition of typographical experimentation is available for us to recover and present as theorists and teachers of free verse poetry. In the second part of her essay on free verse, for instance, Perloff argues that poets represented in Maggie O'Sullivan's anthology *Out of Everywhere* show a transition toward what Wendy Mulford calls "multi and non-linear" writing" of younger women poets (Perloff 100) which is page based, involving the individual's eye movement in ways that free verse does not. From Apollinaire to Susan Howe, we can teach this tradition to our students (there is much more material available than I have room to address) and we can as well practice printing with them. I can attest to the difficulty of learning to set type well, as the old masters practice it. It is painstaking, time-consuming work, and if you read some of the letterpress listservs, you can see that the senior generation of printers want novices to apprentice themselves for seven years at no pay in order to sweep floors and perform menial tasks in exchange for learning slowly the art of printing. This is unnecessary. For example, the Center for Book Arts offers a yearly seminar, "Letterpress Printing & Fine Press Publishing Seminar for Emerging Writers" in which a small group of writers learn to set type and print on a Vandercook proof press. During the four-day session, representatives from several chapbook presses such as Ugly Duckling urge the members of the seminar to start their own poetry imprints and presses using their newly acquired skills, no obeisance or apprenticeship required. The shop at Dickinson includes presses pulled from barns and rescued from scrap heaps, as well as type cases and an imposing stone bought for \$250 from the local mental hospital. The initial

equipment set up including presses cost less than \$1000. Printing poems page by page is not prohibitively expensive and is teachable even to student poets. Setting type and printing individual poems intensifies students' attention to the concision and structure of the poem, and trains them to consider the material space of the page. The young poets especially find that printing reengages the poetic body, both through the physical work of setting type and printing, and through the necessary material choices of typeface, paper, and placement of the poem on the page. With the authority of both sound and abstract mental imagery deemphasized, the authority of the poet's body and intention may indeed rest upon material gestures to embody thought and desire. We can re-embolden poetry. ◀

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Kazim Ali broadside, close-up. Printed by Kseniya Thomas at Dickinson College.

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photo by John F. Martin

The APR/Honickman First Book Prize is an award of \$3,000 and publication of a volume of poetry. Melissa Stein's *Rough Honey*, with an introduction by Mark Doty, will be published in September 2010, with distribution by Copper Canyon Press through Consortium.

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