Balz Engler, *Reading and Listening: The Modes of Communicating Poetry and their Influence on the Texts*. Berne: Francke, 1982, chapter 6: Visual Poetry, 45-52

6. Visual Poetry

Two basic characteristics distinguish the event of reading poetry on a page from that of listening to it. It is private, not social, and the reader decides on the manner in which the event will take place. Visual reading isolates the recipient from his surroundings, and invites his reactions as an individual, not as the member of a group. The text in front of his eyes gives him some freedom in deciding on the speed of reading and the placement of pauses and emphases. It also forces him to make difficult choices of which he is relieved in listening by the voice of the performer.

The rule, valid with an aural text, that it is understood swiftly or not at all (see p. 39) does not apply to a visual text. Here, redundancy is not necessarily a virtue. The text may be difficult, full of ambiguities and allusions. The end of a text need not coincide with the fulfilment of the expectations raised; it is marked visually, and may indeed have the function of sending the reader back to the text (see below, p. 92). As it was pointed out earlier (p. 26), the difficulty of a text and its length are often related to each other. The slower the reading demanded, the fewer words are needed to achieve the minimum duration essential to constitute an event. The texts may therefore be extremely short, without depending on a situation established beforehand (see p. 24 above). In the following, I shall have a closer look at the implications of these features of reading. First, the relationship between the reader and the text, as created by the act of *reading,* will be discussed, and then I shall turn to the relationship between the reader and the poet, as it is suggested by the text.

The difference between listening and visual reading is not only the difference between the perceiving organs involved. As research into the reading process has

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shown, the eye does not, like the ear, receive a sequence of signals that are analyzed as the sequence moves on. Instead the reader sets his own pace. The eye jumps from one fixation point to the next - the `saccadic movement' in the terms of psychology - and at each fixation point it rests for a moment. It then has an area of clear vision about the space that covers between seven and ten letters. The size of the jumps and the length of the fixations depend on how difficult the reader expects the text to be. The more difficult, that is, the less predictable the text proves to be, the shorter are the saccadic movements and the more extended the fixations. The eyes may even be forced to go back to a point earlier in the text and start again.

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The text is decoded in groups of words*; and the size of these `chunks' corresponds to the syntactic units, to the phrases that make up a sentence*. The more difficult it is to establish the syntactic structure the shorter the group of words will be that is analyzed as a unit, and as a consequence the slower the reading.

Visual reading is often called ‘silent’, and this may tempt us to belittle the role of sound in it. Experiments have shown that the speech organs are often active during ‘silent’ reading. This activity is generally minimal with an experienced reader, but it increases with the difficulty of the text. Reading a difficult text therefore includes a strong kinesthetic experience, that of articulating the sounds occurring in it*.

On the other hand, these experiments have also shown that with experienced readers there are hardly any movements of the larynx during visual reading, and that it makes little difference whether we are breathing in or out while reading. This means that the kinesthetic experience of intonation and stress, compared with that of articulation, is minimal - an important difference from reading aloud. Indeed, this may be the reason why reading "like print" is so monotonous (see above, p. 38).

Given these characteristics of visual reading, it may be useful to distinguish several types of it, which are employed in reading poetic texts. Our choice among them may be forced on us by the text; the poet may, for example, use difficulty to control our experience of his poem on the page. Just as frequently, however, our way of reading has been determined by our education; generations of students, for example, have been taught that close reading is the most profitable way of reading poetry.

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We can distinguish four types of visual reading - excluding from the start skimming as inappropriate to verse: *pacing, halting, repeating,* and *study*. I shall discuss these in turn, but shall deal most fully with *study,* because of the important role that close reading has played in the teaching of poetry.

The first of these types of visual reading is *pacing,* the steady advance through the text. Pacing is suggested by texts that are suited to performance, i. e., in the terms introduced earlier, by texts that are scores, and those in which the visual elements comment on the aural ones. It is also the way of reading that C. S. Lewis considers appropriate for *Paradise Lost.* If the pacing is slow and stately enough, it helps to create the exhilaration associated with a Primary Epic recitation (see above, p. 24).

If the reader does not understand a word or a reference, he may interrupt the sequence of reading, and resume it only when he is satisfied that he has cleared up the difficulty. This second way of reading may be called *halting.* It is required by many old texts, and texts with footnotes (see above, pp. 31-32). A poet may also consciously introduce certain unfamiliar allusions in order to make the reader consult books that he considers important - as Ezra Pound does repeatedly in his *Cantos* (see below pp. 99-101).

After reading a passage the reader may feel

that he has not yet sufficiently grasped it, but that the clues for a more adequate experience may be found in the text itself. He will then resort to *repeating* the passage, the third type of reading distinguished here. He will be prompted to do this with texts in which the visual element contrasts with or contradicts the aural one, but also with passages where the syntactical relationships have remained obscure to him.

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In many cases this may have been intended by the poet. Ellipsis and the inversion of clauses may be used as an "anti-grammatical gesture," as a device to force the reader to become active and make up his own mind as to how the words should be linked. In modern poetry, this may occasionally be impossible, and the reader may have to accept two or more possible meanings of a passage, and the relationship between these may even be meant to contribute to the total effect of the poem. In performance, by contrast, these syntactical ambiguities would normally be removed by intonation.

Syntactical obscurity may be used to various degrees. Sentences may be long and involved*. Syntactical relationships may be blurred by leaving out logical connectives like *but* or *because,* or by omitting punctuation (see above, p. 27), and parts of speech.

In texts of this kind single words carry much more weight than in texts that call for pacing. Because the meanings of the words are not restricted by the straitjacket of syntax, they may enter into a relationship with everything suggested by other words in the context, and call up extremely rich associations.

Sound is affected by repetition, too. The repetition of groups of words can have an effect that may be compared to that of refrain in song. The units repeated, however, are not only shorter; they are also distributed irregularly, because they are created by the reader in response to difficulties perceived in the text. In a text that is patterned along traditional poetic forms, repetition will help to break these up in experience, and thus favour a sense of the text as free verse*, which is structured along semantic principles (see the chapter on Hopkins below).

Finally, repetition may neutralize the forward drive in the text. If a text is read twice, for example, its beginning and its ending are not

only the points most distant from each other in time; the beginning also immediately follows the ending, and they are thus the points closest to each other.

If the reader completely abandons the sequence of the text, if his eye moves forwards and backwards, up and down on the page, and every word and phrase is seen in connection with all others, we have the fourth type of reading, which I have called *study.*

A text that demands study need have no obvious sequence, no obvious beginning or end. Lines in such a text could sometimes be rearranged without any serious damage to the total effect, because that effect depends on the simultaneous presence of all the elements* of the text in the reader's mind. In other words, the poem has become a structure in space. Symmetry rather than repetition is central, and contrast replaces change.

On the basis of Pound's definition of the image as "that which presents an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time," Joseph Frank developed his thesis that this spatial form is the form of Modern literature. Modern literature, in his view, attempts

> to undermine the inherent con-secutiveness of language, frustrating the reader's normal expectation of a sequence and forcing him to per-ceive the elements of the poem juxtaposed in space rather than unrolling in time.

In *The Waste Land,* for example,

> syntactical sequence is given up for a structure depending on the perception of relationships of disconnected word-groups. To be properly understood these word-groups must be juxtaposed with one another and perceived simulta-neously; only when this is done can they be adequately understood, for while they follow one another in time,

> their meaning does not depend on this temporal relationship.

Frank's account raises a difficult problem. How is it possible for a reader to perceive the whole of a poem like *The Waste Land* simultaneously, since reading, no matter of what type, is always a process?

T. S. Eliot himself addresses this question in the preface to his translation of St.-John Perse's *Anabasis*. He justifies the obscurity of the text, due to the suppression of connectives, by the intended results:

> The sequence of images coincides and concentrates into one intense impression ... The reader has to allow the images to fall into his memory successively without questioning the reasonableness of each at the moment; so that, at the end, a total effect is produced.

This suggests that the experience of the text may be divided into two stages. First, the reader gathers the words and word-groups calling up images; then, as this process is completed, all the images simultaneously fall into place and form relationships with each other. The two stages are different in kind. The first is sequential; sound and rhythm may develop their effects. Meaning, on the other hand, remains preliminary. The second stage is instantaneous; now meaning is all-important, and sound and rhythm no longer have any place in the experience. Sound and rhythm are forced apart from meaning.

There is a flaw in this account, however. It is difficult to see how the reader should be able "to allow the images to fall into his memory" without being influenced by the sequence in which he has come to them. This presupposes that they can be neatly isolated* and remembered independently of their contexts, and, even more improbably, that they can be simultaneously recalled and related to each other.

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The view that a poem is experienced in two stages is therefore difficult to uphold. Indeed, Eliot's account of how he came to appreciate St.-John Perse's poem indi-cates that his practice does not support it:

> I was not convinced of Mr. Perse's imaginative order until I had read the poem five or six times. And if, as I suggest, such an arrangement of imagery requires just as much "fundamental brainwork" as the arrangement of an argument, it is to be expected that the reader of a poem should take at least as much trouble as a barrister reading an important decision on a complicated case.

This shows that Eliot does not reckon with a single reading, which in the end produces a total effect, but conceives of several readings and a careful study of the text. The sequential characteristics of the text, including the ef-fects of sound and rhythm, are therefore not suspended instantaneously at the end of the reading; they are gradually displaced by the spatial ones. If the text is, from the beginning, perceived as one that requires study, the se-quential characteristics will have an even smaller part to play in the reading. The spatial view of the poem will dominate the experience of the text from the start.

The closest analogy to such a reading is the solving of a riddle, or more graphically, the solving of a crossword puzzle - a comparison that is not as frivolous as it may seem. As William Empson has observed, "the fashion for obscure poetry, as a recent development, came in at about the same time as the fashion for crossword puzzles."

The types of reading discussed here are associated with particular views of the relationship between the reader and the author. *Pacing* is the type of reading that comes closest to the experience of listening to a voice. In pacing we therefore feel the

presence of the author, of somebody addressing us. With *halting* this impression is less pronounced. The reader may feel addressed by the text, but he occasionally interferes with the address and interrupts it; he can then stand aside and look at it critically. With *repeating* and *studying,* finally, the force of the address, due to the further suppression of the characteristics of speech, becomes minimal. The reader is rather in the position of analyzing evidence, of trying to make sense of a document he has found. It is not surprising that this kind of reading is associated with a notion of the text that cuts it off from both the author and the recipient and considers it as something with an existence of its own (see above, pp. 17-19).

Having surveyed different ways of reading and listening to texts, we can now return to the basic distinction between aural and visual poetry. In aural poetry the recipient is pulled forward. It is in the sequence of words, in a horizontal direction, so to speak, that semantic tension is created and released again (see above, p. 41). In visual poetry the reader may instead be drawn into the depth, in the vertical direction. Using all his intellectual and emotional energy, he may have to solve the riddle that a text presents to him.

In a letter to Bridges Hopkins distinguishes these two kinds of experience with a radicalism typical of him:

> One of the two kinds of clearness one shd. have - either the meaning to be felt without effort as fast as one reads or else, if dark at first reading, when once made out *to explode.*

Hopkins's distinction may be generalized so as to include more than meaning. Poetic texts, like all texts, have a horizontal drive, which is manifest in sound-effects, rhythm,

syntax, length, and a tendency towards argument and narrative - i. e. in extension. They also have a vertical drive, revealed in complexity of meaning, brevity, and in unity of mood - i. e. in intensity.

In aural poetry the horizontal drive is more forceful than the vertical. In visual poetry, the vertical drive gains in strength*. It may slow down, interrupt, or even suppress horizontal development. If both drives are strongly felt to be present in a text, the experience will break in two since the reader cannot follow the horizontal and the vertical drives at the same time, a problem I shall have to deal with in my chapter on Hopkins.

By way of summary, I should like to return to the essay that first used the differences between listening and visual reading as a tool of literary criticism, to C. S. Lewis's *A Preface to "Paradise Lost"* (p. 24). Lewis contends that Milton wrote the poem in an elevated style because the text has to do on its own what the traditional epic achieved with the help of the occasion on which it was performed.

Not all critics would agree that *Paradise Lost* is visual poetry or that the effects Lewis isolates are good effects. Lewis's pointed expression of his view has to be considered in the context of the attacks on Milton's "magniloquence" and artifi-ciality by critics like Middleton Murry, T. S. Eliot, and F. R. Leavis. Leavis, for example, writes:

> Milton's transfusing [Greek or Latin constructions into his English verse] is regular and unremitting, and involves, not pleasant occasional surprises, but a consistent rejection of English idiom ... So complete, and so mechanically habitual, is Milton's departure from the English order, structure, and accentuation that he often produces

> passages that have to be read through several times before one can see how they go, though the Miltonic mind has nothing to offer that could justify obscurity - no obscurity was intended: it is merely that Milton has forgotten the English language.

According to Lewis's view, Milton's style is justified by its purpose, and even what Leavis mentions as the ultimate disgrace - that one may be forced to read a passage several times - does not present any problems.

Lewis's distinction between the two types of epic can be generalized and applied to all poetic texts. Visual poetry cannot reckon with the mood of the social occasion in which aural poetry is experienced. It has to create much of the mood on its own - solemnity, cheerfulness, mystery, etc.

Lewis mentions three stylistic devices used to achieve this in *Paradise I,ost.* There are the "slightly unfamiliar words and constructions, including archaisms," which lead to *difficulty.* Further, proper names are used "not solely nor chiefly for their sound, but because they are the names of splendid, remote, terrible, voluptuous or celebrated things," i. e. for their *allusiveness.* Finally, Milton makes "continued allusion to all the sources of heightened interest in our experience" (light, darkness, storms, flowers, jewels, sexual love, and the like), i. e. *intensity.*

In other visual poetry these devices may appear in a more radical form. The text may be made extremely difficult by the choice of words and by the complication or dissolution of syntax. The allusions and references to sources of heightened interest need not be to phenomena whose knowledge is shared by the audience; they may be extremely private. As a result of these developments the pace of reading can become much slower than it is in

reading *Paradise Lost,* and the texts may become very short.

Some of the problems raised here will be dealt with in more detail below. The chapter on Browning will discuss the relationship between the reading process and interpretation. The chapter on Hopkins will deal with the Split between sound and meaning, and the chapter on Pound with the links between intensity and length. Before turning to these authors, however, I shall try to place English aural and visual poetry in a historical perspective.