

Balz Engler, *Reading and Listening: The Modes of Communicating Poetry and their Influence on the Texts*. Berne: Francke, 1982, chapter 4: Sounds and Shapes, 29-35

#### 4. Sounds and Shapes

Spelling, punctuation, and typography alone can establish how few texts should be experienced. If their evidence agrees, we may be fairly confident in our conclusions. However, we are rarely so fortunate. On the contrary, a closer look at poetic texts will show that the evidence is often conflicting, some suggesting an aural experience, some a visual one. I shall therefore have to discuss some of the problems that arise from this situation, and try to impose some kind of order on the confusing varieties of evidence. I shall do this by distinguishing five ways in which the visual elements of a printed text may be related to the aural ones, and I shall label these *score*, *comment*, *complement*, *contrast*, and *contradiction*. As in the previous chapter, passages illustrating these features will be chosen from all periods of literate poetry. Typography, which was only briefly touched on earlier, will be central now. Spelling and punctuation will not be disregarded though many of the examples will be relegated to the notes.

##### *Score*

The text as a score for performance indicates how the poem is supposed to sound; it does not, ideally, contain any shapes that cannot be translated into sound.

This notion of the text is no doubt the one taken for granted by most readers and critics. It is this falsely generalized view that allows us to neglect possible differences between the poem as an aural and a visual experience, because it suggests that the performance is something derivative, something that need not be considered in its own right. This view is therefore often basic to discussions of the poem as immanent structure (p. 17). We also find it in critics who insist on the importance of performing poetry: It forms the basis of "the impersonal illumination" of a poem in

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formal reading suggested by Yvor Winters (see p. 15).

Yeats created a scored text when he included, in his *Oxford Book of Modern Verse, 1892-1935*, the eulogy of Mona Lisa in Pater's essay on Leonardo da Vinci. Pater writes:

She is older than the rocks among which she sits; like the vampire, she has been dead many times, and learned the secrets of the grave; and has been a diver in deep seas, and keeps their fallen day about her; and trafficked for strange webs with Eastern merchants; and, as Leda, was the mother of Helen of Troy, and, as Saint Anne, the mother of Mary; and all this has been to her but as the sound of lyres and flutes, and lives only in the delicacy with which it has moulded the changing lineaments, and tinged the eyelids and the hands.

Yeats chose a different typographical arrangement for Pater's text, because, as he explains in his preface:

Only by printing it in *vers libre* can one show its revolutionary importance. Pater was accustomed to give each sentence a separate page of manuscript, isolating and analyzing its rhythm.

In Yeats's anthology the passage looks as follows:

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*Mona Lisa*

SHE is older than the rocks among which she sits;  
1 Like the Vampire,  
She has been dead many times,  
And learned the secrets of the grave;  
5 And has been a diver in deep seas,  
And keeps their fallen day about her;  
And trafficked for strange webs with Eastern merchants;  
And, as Leda,  
Was the mother of Helen of Troy,  
10 And, as St Anne,  
Was the mother of Mary;  
And all this has been to her but as the sound of lyres and flutes,  
And lives  
Only in the delicacy  
15 With which it has moulded the changing lineaments,  
And tinged the eyelids and the hands.

In Yeats's arrangement, the line-units always coincide with speech-units, and the visual pauses with the ones that grammar allows for in performance. Punctuation additionally marks most of the line-endings. Where it occurs earlier in the line (lines 8 and 10), it indicates a pause, too. It is used in a rhythmical-oratorical rather than grammatical-logical manner. Yeats's arrangement of the lines slows down the pace,\* and gives more weight to the single phrases. This allows him to show how Pater permitted the text "to arise out of its own rhythm."

However, Yeats uses typography in a manner that goes beyond scoring Pater's prose for performance, and which we have to place in another category.

*Comment*

There are visual elements in Yeats's version that make a *comment* on the aural ones, without directly contributing to the meaning of the text.

The beginning and the ending of the passage from Pater's essay are marked by white spaces; the margin is wide on the left, uneven on the right, and the lines begin with capital letters.\* All this helps to characterize the text

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as a poem, in a way that can only indirectly be communicated to a listener.

Other visual elements that may make general comments on a text are the design of books, and the type used in them. They may suggest an attitude of reverence towards the text, as in William Morris's Kelmscott Press edition of Chaucer.

Spelling may indicate the antiquity of a text, without necessarily demanding antiquated pronunciation. Chatterton makes use of this possibility in his poems.

Typography may also place a text in a particular genre. A song whose lines are of unequal length may be printed with indentations in order to make the page look reasonably balanced. But the poet may himself introduce indentations\* to *suggest* that a text should be considered an ode, a ballad, or a song in general.

Some of the problems of using visual comment are illustrated by Coleridge's ballad "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner." When the poem was first published in 1798, in *Lyrical Ballads*, Coleridge spelled its title "The Rime of the Ancyent Marinere," using spelling to reinforce the effect of an old-fashioned vocabulary. In the 1800 edition he did away with many of the archaic spellings. He retained, however, the indentation of the shorter lines in the ballad-measure, which gives the poem the visual aspect of a song. In 1817 this kind of comment was removed, too. Instead, another visual element that suggests antiquity was added: marginal notes that summarize the narrative, and interpret some of the passages.

These notes represent a particularly interesting kind of visual comment. They raise the question of the extent to which notes should be considered part of the text. In many cases the poets themselves have appended them as Butler in *Hudibras*, Pope in *The Dunciad*, Eliot in *The Waste Land*, and Hart

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Crane in *The Bridge*. They are certainly also part of the experience in the reading of a critical edition.

If we consider notes part of the text - and in each case such a decision has to be made anew - they can no longer be classified as comment; and listening can no longer be an adequate experience, because it cannot accommodate the text and the notes, running parallel to each other. Their relationship is that of complements.

### *Complement*

Where the visual elements complement the aural ones in a text, at least part of the experience has to be visual. Obvious examples of this relationship may be found where texts depend on pictures in order to be understood - with emblems, and with some of Blake's prints.

The picture and the text may even be fused, as it was popular in Elizabethan and Jacobean poetry, and as it has again become common in modern poetry. The most familiar example is probably George Herbert's "Easter-wings":

☞ Easter wings

Lord, who createdst man in wealth and store,  
Though foolishly he lost the same,  
Decaying more and more,  
Till he became  
Most poore:  
With thee  
O let me rise  
As larks, harmoniously,  
And sing this day thy victories:  
Then shall the fall further the flight in me.

☞ Easter wings

My tender age in sorrow did beginne  
And still with sicknesses and shame  
Thou didst so punish sinne,  
That I became  
Most thinne.  
With thee  
Let me combine,  
And feel this day thy victorie:  
For, if I imp my wing on thine,  
Affliction shall advance the flight in me.

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The motto "Easter wings," which appears on the left of both stanzas, is rarely reproduced in modern editions. It indicates how the page should be held for the picture to appear. The *explicatio* can only be read if the page is turned ninety degrees. It compares the shape of the wings to man's passage through distress into the freedom offered by the resurrection.

In Herbert's poem the visual shape of the poem is as important as the aural elements; it does not, however, directly serve the aural experience; indirectly, of course, it determines the length of the lines. But whereas the visual and aural elements are in harmony with each other in this case, there may also be tension between them.

### *Contrast*

Some visual elements suggest an experience conflicting with the one indicated by the text as a score. A case in point is enjambment.\* While the sequence of spoken language, reflected by the syntax of the text, suggests continuity, the eye is forced to stop at the end of the line, and to move back to the left margin of the text.

This contrast may be brought out in performance by a contrast between closure and intonation. As F. W. Leakey has recommended:

While pausing, of course, at the end of each line (since this is what the clear typographical indications of his text, or 'score', require), [the performer] must equally, wherever a phrase is 'broken' at the end of a line, raise slightly (or at least maintain) the pitch, in order to indicate that the line is syntactically incomplete - keeping the listener, as it were, in suspense.

Leakey's view presupposes that texts are always scores, a view that is not borne out by the practice of modern poets. As any

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comparison between performances and printed texts shows, poets rarely use as subtle a technique as that suggested here, but read on without indicating the line-ending.

Unfortunately, this is difficult to illustrate in writing. There are, however, examples in which this contrast between visual and aural elements even appears in print. T. S. Eliot has the following paragraph of free verse in the fifth section of *Ash-Wednesday, 1930*:

	number of syllables
Where shall the word be found, where will the word	10
Resound? Not here, there is not enough silence	11
Not on the sea or on the islands, not	10
On the mainland, in the desert or the rain land,	12
5 For those who walk in darkness	7
Both in the day time and in the night time	10
The right time and the right place are not here	10
No place of grace for those who avoid the face	11
9 No time to rejoice for those who walk among noise and deny the voice*	17

We can re-arrange this verse-paragraph according to its syntactical units; and we may be surprised to find that we get a number of lines of similar length that show striking syntactical parallelism, and even form rhymed couplets and triplets:

	number of rhymes	syllables
Where shall the word be found,	a	6
Where will the word resound	a	6
Not here, there is not enough silence	b	9
Not on the sea or on the islands,	b	9
Not on the mainland,	c	5
In the desert or the rain land,	c	8
5 For those who walk in darkness	d	7
Both in the day time	e	5
And in the night time	e	5
The right time and the right place	f	7
Are not here, no place of grace	f	7
For those who avoid the face	f	7
9 No time to rejoice	g	5
For those who walk among noise	(g)	7
And deny the voice	g	5

In his own reading of the passage T. S. Eliot follows the structure suggested by syntax and rhyme, with the exception of a long pause after *Not here* in line 2, which is not brought out strongly by either visual or aural

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elements, and a pause after *not here* in line 7, at the end of the line in the free-verse arrangement.

The free-verse structure, then, largely remains visual; and one may feel tempted to relate the contrast between the aural and visual elements to the contents of this passage. It reflects the difficulty for the Word of God to resound, because of the obstacles placed in its way.

### *Contradiction*

The tension between the visual and the aural elements may become so strong that the two become incompatible, that they exclude each other.

This phenomenon is more common in English poetry than one may at first think. The visual rhyme,\* even though it occurs fairly frequently, has received curiously little critical attention. Often it may look somewhat elusive - the product of linguistic history rather than a poet's choice. But there can be no doubt, for example, that rhymes like *love - prove, or flood - brood* in an eighteenth or nineteenth century text were visual rhymes when the Poet used them.

There is a convention that visual rhymes are acceptable in English poetry. Two reasons are usually given to explain this convention, which is not a common one in other languages. First, these rhymes had become part of the English corpus of traditional rhymes before linguistic development separated their vowels from each other. Secondly, phonetic, i. e. aural rhymes are so scarce in English that the poets are in need of a device to supplement them. It is almost impossible, for example, to write a moderately original sonnet with the rhyme-word *love*, because the only pure rhymes available are *dove, glove, shove, and above*. These historical and statistical observations do not take us far, however, in explaining

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how visual rhymes are integrated into the English system of rhyme.

The noun *wind* may illustrate the problem. Its modern pronunciation according to ordinary sound-development would be /waind/. But in the eighteenth century the pronunciation /wind/ became current in polite speech, and has since become general. /waind/, however, has remained "in ordinary poetical usage." Still, there are instances where poets also use the pronunciation /wind/. Tennyson's "The Wreck" offers a particularly puzzling example:

When her orphan wail came borne in the  
    shriek of a growing wind,  
And a voice rang out in the thunders of Ocean  
    and Heaven 'Thou hast sinned'.

As *wind* precedes *sinned*, it will be read according to "ordinary poetical usage," but this destroys the aural rhyme. This example may lead us to share F. W. Bateson's opinion that

in a Victorian or earlier poem in which a line ending *wind* precedes a line ending *kind* the modern reader does not need to go back and start all over again with a long vowel in *wind*; a sight-rhyme, simply because it is visual, permits *wind* a notional existence that is not strictly either long or short (unless other words in either line by introducing assonance insist on sound superseding sight).

But the relation between sound and spelling is rather more complex than Bateson suggests. In particular, the graphic shape of the rhyme-words is not the only criterion to be considered. Besides what one might call "pure" visual rhymes, like *rushes* - *bushes*, or *stars* - *wars*, there are also "impure" ones, like *grass* - *was* or even *would* - *blood*. In English poetry, graphic shapes can be acceptable in rhyme if they are pronounced in the same way in some environment.

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Thus, the letter <s> in *was* can also stand for the voiceless fricative in *ask*, or *this*; the double <o> is pronounced /u/ in *foot*. The letters in rhyme-position here have a double task. They stand for the sounds of a word, for what can be aurally experienced, and at the same time, they stand for the notion of a graphic shape, a grapheme that can be pronounced in a number of ways, two of which make the rhyme possible.

Obviously, the aural effect of these rhymes is less satisfying than the visual. Geoffrey Crump has defined the limits of their usage as follows: they are "sometimes described as 'allowable'; but they have only been allowable at times when a too intellectual and literary view of poetry has obscured its inherently musical nature." Disregarding the value judgement, we may take this to mean that the visual rhyme is unsuitable for aural poetry.

Whereas the problem of the visual rhyme only concerns single sounds and graphic shapes in a context that is predominantly aural, the mutual exclusion of the aural and the visual becomes quite radical in concrete poetry. Indeed, concrete poetry may be visual or phonetic - poetry that cannot be read out and listened to, because its whole point is in the typographical arrangement of letters and words, or poetry that can only be appreciated in performance.

Visual concrete poetry usually depends for its effect on the fact that the sounds of words have been tied down in a pattern and silenced. It depends, that is, on bringing out the contradiction between speech and visual pattern. A British example of this is Edwin Morgan's "The Chaffinch Map of Scotland" (1965), which is based on the pun, possible in Scots and American, between *chaffinch*



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elements, finally, makes listening impossible.