

The Development of Visual Poetry in France

David W. Seaman

Poems which contain visual elements in their construction—e.g., pattern poems and acrostics—are often considered isolated aberrations. By examining literature in Europe and especially in France, one can discern a fairly continuous tradition of visual poetry. Beginning in antiquity and recurring in every period of western civilization, visual stimuli in writing and typography are applied to the composition of poetry. Although at first they are usually incidental or decorative, by the nineteenth century they are considered valid attributes of serious poetry.

The development of visual poetry can best be traced through French poetry because France provides the most continuous tradition of writers who were sensitive to visual stimuli. It is nevertheless necessary at times to take account of a significant contribution or a pertinent example in a related literature, and most important, it is necessary to trace this tradition from a time when the French language did not even exist. For the history of visual poetry begins, certainly, with the origin of the alphabet. The pictograms inherent in the alphabet inevitably reappear to scribes, poets, and readers, whether in their original connection (e.g., the head of an ox becomes A, a house B, and so forth) or whether in a new relationship suggested by the letter's shape (e.g., Francis Ponge sees curly beards in the s' of *Assyriens*).¹ Plato was the first to theorize that the shape of letters might play a role in the meaning of a word, implying in the *Cratylus* that the word for "round" relies on the o's in it.² Since Plato's time, many theories have supported similar ideas, and regardless of their accuracy, they are sure signs that men see meaning in the visible aspect of language.

Visual poetry belongs to a tradition of visual communication which can be distinguished from the oral-aural tradition. What we call literature was transmitted and conserved orally until the invention of writing, and even written literature was for centuries just the record of

an oral tradition. As late as the Middle Ages it was common practice to read aloud, even in private; thus Saint Augustine, in his *Confessions*, records his surprise that Saint Ambrose read silently.³ The establishment of printing quickly silenced literature, making it a visual medium, and this silence has been lamented by poets from the seventeenth century to the present. Joseph Joubert said, for example, that "one of the principal causes of the corruption and degradation of poetry [in the eighteenth century] is that poems are no longer made to be sung."⁴ Today, as Marshall McLuhan points out, speed-reading techniques are built on the principle of separating vision and inner verbalization;⁵ meanwhile poet-critic John Ciardi suggests defining poetry purely visually, as writing with an irregular right-hand margin.⁶

In the face of this evidence, there is nevertheless a great reluctance on the part of the literate readers of western civilization to recognize the importance and seriousness of visual poetry; thus, I am seeking here to show that what are often considered isolated aberrations are actually part of the growing visual tradition in literature.^{6a}

The first time this visual aspect of writing was applied to poetry was, to our knowledge, in the *Greek Anthology*. The nucleus of this collection is the Stephanus (garland) of Meleager, collected by that poet in the first century B.C. and containing his own epigrams and the best epigrams of the period from the seventh to the third centuries B.C. It is primarily known through the Palatine and Planudean manuscripts, which expand the contents to include Christian epigrams up through the tenth century A.D.

Simias of Rhodes (fl. 300 B.C.) composed three of the six visual poems in the *Greek Anthology*, and probably influenced Theocritus, Dosiadas, and Besantinus who wrote the others. All these poems claim some relationship to an object on which they might have been inscribed—an altar, an axe, etc. Since there exists one attested Greek tombstone with an epigram patterned to conform to its shape, we may assume that these poems were actually used decoratively, on altars or on votive plaques forming an axe, wings, and pipes of Pan.⁷ The one possible exception to this, Simias' Egg (Fig. 1), could have been written on an egg or ovoid stone, but it is the poetic imagery which dictated the form, for the epigram depicts the poem as a young bird ("weft") newly hatched of a nightingale (the poet): "Lo here a new weft of a twittering mother, a Dorian nightingale. . ."⁸ This poem, like the Axe, must be

Κωτίλας

Ματρός

τῆ τῆς ἴων νέου

πρόφρων δὲ θυμῷ δέξο δι γὰρ ἄγλας

το μὲν θῶον κριθείς Ἐριμῆς εὐδὲ κερῶ

ἀντιγυρὸν δ' ἐκ μέτρα μονοβήμονος μέγαν παρὰ θ' ἀξίειν

Θεοὺς δ' ὑπερ λείχρον φέρων νεύμα ποδῶν σποράδων τίθεισκε

Θεοίε τ' ἀλλοίαις νεβρίαις κηλ' ἀλλάσσων ὕρεινόνων ἐλάφων τέκεσι.

παλλυκρηίνας ὑπερ ἀκρῶν ἡμεῖναι περὶ λαφῶν κατ' ἀρθμίας ἴχθους τιθῆναι.

κητίεσι κηθῶμος ἀρθμικαλῶν ἀπὸ πύλων θῶρ ἐν κλητῷ δεξιμῶνος θάλασσαν ποικιλάται

κητὸν τοῦ κηθῶμος μεθέρων ἀφῶρ ὄσῳ το ἀκρῶν νεβρίαις κη' ὄσῳν ἐπειταί κη

κῆσι δὲ θάλασσαν κλητῶν ἴσα θεοὺς περὶ δούλων τῆ πολυλόκῃ ματίε μετρε μελῶ

βημῶν κητῶν κλητῶν ὄσῳ τῶν ματρός παλαγῶν μαθῶμος βαλλίαις ἐλαί τῆσι

βημῶν δ' ὄσῳ κλητῶν ἀν' ὄσῳν νεύων ὄσῳν τῶν σφῶρων τ' ἐν κητῶν Νουμῶν

κῆσι δὲ κηθῶμος ποδῶν φίλας ματρός βροτῶν ἀπὸ θ' ἡμερῶντα μαζῶν

ἴχθῳ θῶον τῶν παναίλων Πιερῶν μονοβήμονος αὐτῶν

κηθῶν εἰς κηθῶν δεκάθ' ἴχθῳν κηθῶν τῶν βροτῶν

φίλας βροτῶν ὑπερ φίλας ἐλῶν κηθῶσι ματρός

ἀγλαί μιν κηθ' ἡμερῶν ματρός αὐτῶν

ἄγλας ἀθῶνους

Δαρίας

κῆρῶν

In his duobus poematibus, Ovo et Secuti, versus eo legendi sunt ordine, qui
eos in adversis pagina collocatos vides.

Κωτίλας

ἄγλας

ματρός

Δαρίας,

τῆ τῆς ἴων νέου

ἀγλαίε κηθῶνος

πρόφρων δὲ θυμῷ δέξο δι γὰρ ἄγλας

ἀγλαί μιν κηθ' ἡμερῶν ματρός αὐτῶν

το μὲν θῶον κηθῶμος Ἐριμῆς εὐδὲ κερῶ

φίλας βροτῶν, ὑπερ φίλας ἐλῶν κηθῶσι ματρός.

ἀγλαίε δ' ἐκ μέτρα μονοβήμονος μέγαν παρὰ θ' ἀξίειν

κηθῶν, εἰς κηθῶν δεκάθ' ἴχθῳν, κηθῶν τῶν βροτῶν.

Θεοὺς δ' ὑπερ λείχρον φέρων νεύμα ποδῶν σποράδων τίθεισκε,

ἴχθῳ θῶον τῶν παναίλων Πιερῶν μονοβήμονος αὐτῶν,

Θεοίε τ' ἀλλοίαις νεβρίαις κηλ' ἀλλάσσων ὕρεινόνων ἐλάφων τέκεσι

καὶ δ' ἡμερῶν ποδῶν φίλας ματρός βροτῶν ἀπὸ θ' ἡμερῶντα μαζῶν,

παλλυκρηίνας ὑπερ ἀκρῶν ἡμεῖναι περὶ λαφῶν, κατ' ἀρθμίας ἴχθους τιθῆναι

βημῶν δ' ὄσῳ κλητῶν ἀν' ὄσῳν νεύων ὄσῳν τῶν σφῶρων τ' ἐν κητῶν Νουμῶν

κῆσι δὲ κηθῶμος ἀρθμικαλῶν ἀπὸ πύλων θῶρ ἐν κλητῷ δεξιμῶνος θάλασσαν ποικιλάται,

κητίεσι κηθῶμος ἀρθμικαλῶν ἀπὸ πύλων θῶρ ἐν κλητῷ δεξιμῶνος θάλασσαν ποικιλάται,

κητὸν τοῦ κηθῶμος μεθέρων, ἀφῶρ ὄσῳ το ἀκρῶν νεβρίαις κη' ὄσῳν ἐπειταί κη

κῆσι δὲ θάλασσαν κλητῶν ἴσα θεοὺς περὶ δούλων τῆ πολυλόκῃ ματίε μετρε μελῶ

Figure 1. Simias; Egg. Original form (left), and rearrangement with lines in the order they must be read. In *Anthologia graeca sive poetarum graecorum lusus*, ed. by Fredericus Iacobs, I (Leipzig: Dyck, 1794), 140–141.

read in alternating lines from the beginning and end into the middle. This technique enabled the poet to write in couplets of equal length, and further demonstrates a willingness to force readers out of the normal sequential pattern.

Another visual device, the acrostic, is used in the altar poem composed by Besantinus in the first century A.D. Acrostics were used in earlier poetry, such as the Psalms, but there they are doubtless only mnemonic aids of an oral literature. Two Latin writers of the second century B.C., Ennius and Plautus, were known to use acrostics; none of Ennius' have survived, but Plautus' plays all use an acrostic of the title in the argument. The audience clearly would be unaware of the acrostic, but its presence indicates that someone was definitely expected to look at the script and see the visual word play.

Another Latin writer, Publilius Optatianus Porphyrius, who lived during the reign of Constantine (around 300 A.D.), wrote several visual poems. An altar and a set of shepherd's pipes seem to follow the *Greek Anthology* quite closely, but a hydraulic organ, *Organon*, is original (Fig. 2). This organ describes one of the many wind and hydraulic organs in existence at that time, which were often in public places such as the circus, where they were used to herald the players. Porphyrius' *Organon* declares a certain Augustus to be the winner of his contest. Turning the poem on end, one sees that it is in three distinct parts: There is a row of 26 lines, each having 18 letters; these make up the keyboard, and the text describes Augustus' victory. Just above this is a phrase which the organ puffs out: "What pleasure to praise Augustus the winner!" Above this stand the 26 organ pipes of different length, increasing gradually from 25 to 50 letters apiece. This part of the text describes the technique used to make the poem.⁹

There are two notable innovations in Porphyrius' organ poem, apart from the clever design. One is that we are obliged to a degree to manipulate the text, turning it on its end in order to see the organ properly, and in order to read the line in the middle. This is a small step in the attempt to break down the strong horizontal format of Western writing. The second innovation works rather to strengthen the rigidity of the written text, since the poet has carefully counted and regulated the number of letters in each line. The Greek technopaegnia were designed metrically, and perfect form must be attained by careful inscription or type-setting. Letter-counting insures the creation of the desired form,

Post Martios labores,
 Et Caesarum parentes
 Virtutibus per orbem
 Tot laureas virentes,
 Et Principis tropaea;
 Felicibus triumphis
 Exultat omnis aetas,
 Urbesque flore grato,
 Et frondibus decoris,
 Totis virent plateis.
 Hinc ordo veste clara
 Cum purpuris honorum
 Fausto precantur ore,
 Feruntque dona laeti.
 Jam Roma culmen orbis
 Dat munera et coronas
 Auro ferens coruscas
 Victorias triumphis,
 Votaque jam theatris
 Reddantur et choreis.
 Me sors iniqua lactis
 Sollemnibus remotum
 Vix haec sonare sivit
 Tot vota fonte Phoebi
 Versuque compta solo
 Augusta rite sacris.

AVGUSTO VICTORIE IVVAT RATA REDDERE VOTA

O si diviso metiri limite Clio
 Una lege sui, uno manantia fonte
 Aonio, versus heroi jure manente
 Ausuro donet metri felicia texta,
 Augeri longo patiens exordia fine,
 Exiguo cursu, parvo crescentia motu,
 Ultima postremo donec fastigia tota
 Ascensus iugi cumulato limite ciadat,
 Uno bis spatio versus elementa prioris
 Dinumerans, cogens aequari lege retenta
 Parva nimis longis, et visu dissona multum
 Tempore sub parili, metri rationibus isdem,
 Dimidium numero Musis tamenaequiparantem:
 Haec erit in varios species aptissima cantus,
 Perque modos gradibus surget fecunda sonoris
 Aere cavo et tereti, calamis crescentibus aucta.
 Quis bene suppositis quadratis ordine plectris
 Artificis manus in numeros clauditque aperitque
 Spiramenta, probans placitis bene consona rythmis,
 Sub quibus unda latens properantibus incita ventis,
 Quos vicibus crebris juvenum labor haud sibi discors
 Hinc atque hinc animaeque agitant, augetque reluctans
 Compositum ad numeros, propriumque ad carmina praestat,
 Quodque queat minimum ad motum intremefacta frequenter
 Plectra adaperta sequi, aut placidos bene claudere cantus
 Jamque metro et rythmis praestringere quicquid ubique est.

Figure 2. Porphyrius: *Organon*.

if based on the assumption that each letter has the same size. This is obviously a technique aimed at manuscripts rather than works set in type, although the regular spacing of most typewriters again makes it possible.

Porphyrus used the technique of regularly spaced letters frequently in his long *Panegyricus Constantino Augusto Dictus*, from which came the altar mentioned above.¹⁰ In this work are numerous visual poems which follow a slightly different procedure: Each line has exactly the same number of letters, and is written accurately to form a rectangle. Within this rectangle certain letters are emphasized (in modern editions by boldface, in manuscripts by different colored inks) and stand out in a pattern. By reading the letters in the pattern, one sees another line or more of poetry, constituting an addition, a commentary, title, or other information. Porphyrus can be credited with another important innovation, combining two different letterforms to add more dimensions to the text. This technique will still seem scandalous when Mallarmé uses it at the end of the nineteenth century.

These patterned acrostics were practised and developed by several Latin poets of the Carolingian Renaissance around 800 A.D. Hrabanus Maurus wrote one including a crown poetically presented to Judith; Alcuin made diamonds and squares, and his disciple Joseph Scott wrote many similar ones, and also the more interesting design in Figure 3. In this visual poem three crosses under a pointed arch form a typical Romanesque design, which evokes the facade of a church, the three crosses on Calvary, an altar-piece, or the ornamented vestment of a priest, as the fringe-like letters at the bottom suggest. In the larger cross there is a neat arrangement so that the first four words radiate from the letter at their intersection: "Sancta crucis semper salvet. . ."¹¹

The most complex acrostic of this kind is the anonymous *Fragmentum Augienses* (Fig. 4).¹² This partially reconstructed text existed in two copies, with some interesting variations in the form, primarily in the central ornament, where one manuscript had the design $\frac{C}{U} \frac{R}{X}$ while the other bore an image of Christ. Color was used, and the letters in boldface in Figure 4 were originally colored red. (The lower-case letters are reconstructions.) The words which form the Greek cross can be read starting at the left margin of line 12, going clockwise to the

INCLYTASICUPIASSAN**C**TISUBCULMINATEMPLI
 VELLAETASSEDESINTR**A**REPATENTIBUSASTRIS
 COETIBUSETCURASS**U**PER**U**MTEIUNGERELECTOR
 ENITÈRESTCERTUM**X**PICR**X**QUAEQUERECLUDIS
 FULGIDACAELORUM**M**RESERAN**D**OLIMINASTIS
 HUMANIENGENER**I**S PERQUAM**D**EUIGERATHOSTEM
 DUMPIUSALTI**H**RONOIESUSDE**C**ULMINEPATRIS
 UENERATETPR**I**NCEPSHUMANOSS**U**MSERATARTUS
 ACTERRAEFA**C**TORCAELIQUEMARI**S**QUECREATOR
 MIRIFICOT**E**NERAEESTCARNISUELA**T**USAMICTU
 NUMINATAR**R**TAREAECELLETDUMPER**D**EREMORTIS
 HOC**R**ISTUSSIGNOIN**F**ANDOSAUCERT**I**TETACTUS
 UINGULA**D**ISRUMPIT**F**ATISIN**P**RAESAN**E**FANDIS
 SICH**O**STILENEFASUIN**C**ITSERPENTE**P**ER**R**EMPTO
 PE**C**CATI**Q**UECAPUTTUM**N**IGRISABDDITAN**T**RIS
 IN**C**LYTAQUA**P**ROPTER**A**RIATIS**C**ARMINAM**U**SIS
 LA**U**RIGERAE**Q**UE**C**RUCISE**M**PER**D**EUOTACAN**M**US
 IP**S**ABONISHOMINUM**P**RAEBET**P**RAECONIA**U**OTIS
 P**A**XHONORAT**Q**UESALUS**L**UXSUMMO**F**ULGIDAD**O**NO
 M**R**SQUASA**E**UAFUGIT**D**ULCISE**T**UITAREU**E**RTIT
 EX**I**MIOHANCTOTUSU**E**NERABITURORBISH**O**N**O**RE
 ET**S**IMULHA**E**CHOMINUM**T**UTANDOUOTARE**S**ER**U**AT
 NE**T**URBANSANIMUM**R**APIATINCRIMINAS**E**R**P**ENS
 PR**I**MASALUS**C**UNCTIS**I**NTEPER**F**E**C**TAPERENN**I**S
 P**O**STEAQUAM**R**ECTOR**T**ES**C**ANDIT**G**RATASUP**R**EMO
 QU**A**E**F**ULGIS**U**OTOMEDI**C**INAES**P**RU**M**TADOLORUM
 IN**C**LYTACR**X**SALUE**P**ER**T**EEST**P**A**X**UERARE**L**ATA
 U**I**RTUS**U**ITASALUS**H**OMINUM**M**ORS**P**OEN**A**DI**A**BL**I**
 Q**V**A**P**ROPTER**C**URRITS**P**PLEX**Q**UIN**P**ACISOR**I**GO
 IN**T**VAMEN**S**PR**O**PERAN**S**TOTIS**P**RA**E**CONIA**U**EL**I**S
 Q**V**A**E**RITETA**E**TERNA**E**S**I**BIUITAE**G**AUDIALA**E**TA
 TU**C**A**E**LESTE**D**ECUSCITO**P**RI**M**API**A**CLATUL**I**ST**I**
 AU**R**EALUS**A**E**C**LISSAN**C**TISS**I**MA**N**OTAPRO**A**TO
 CR**U**X**U**ERE**U**NERAND**A**P**O**TEN**S**PRE**T**IOSA**V**A**E**TO
 FR**O**NDICOM**T**ULERAT**P**R**I**MUMTE**U**ISCERESA**C**R**O**
 FRUGIF**E**RO**C**IS**P**ESLA**D**ANT**M**OD**O**S**I**DERA**C**A**E**L**O**
 E S A S O

Figure 3. Joseph Scott: Acrostic.
 Courtesy of The Newberry Library.

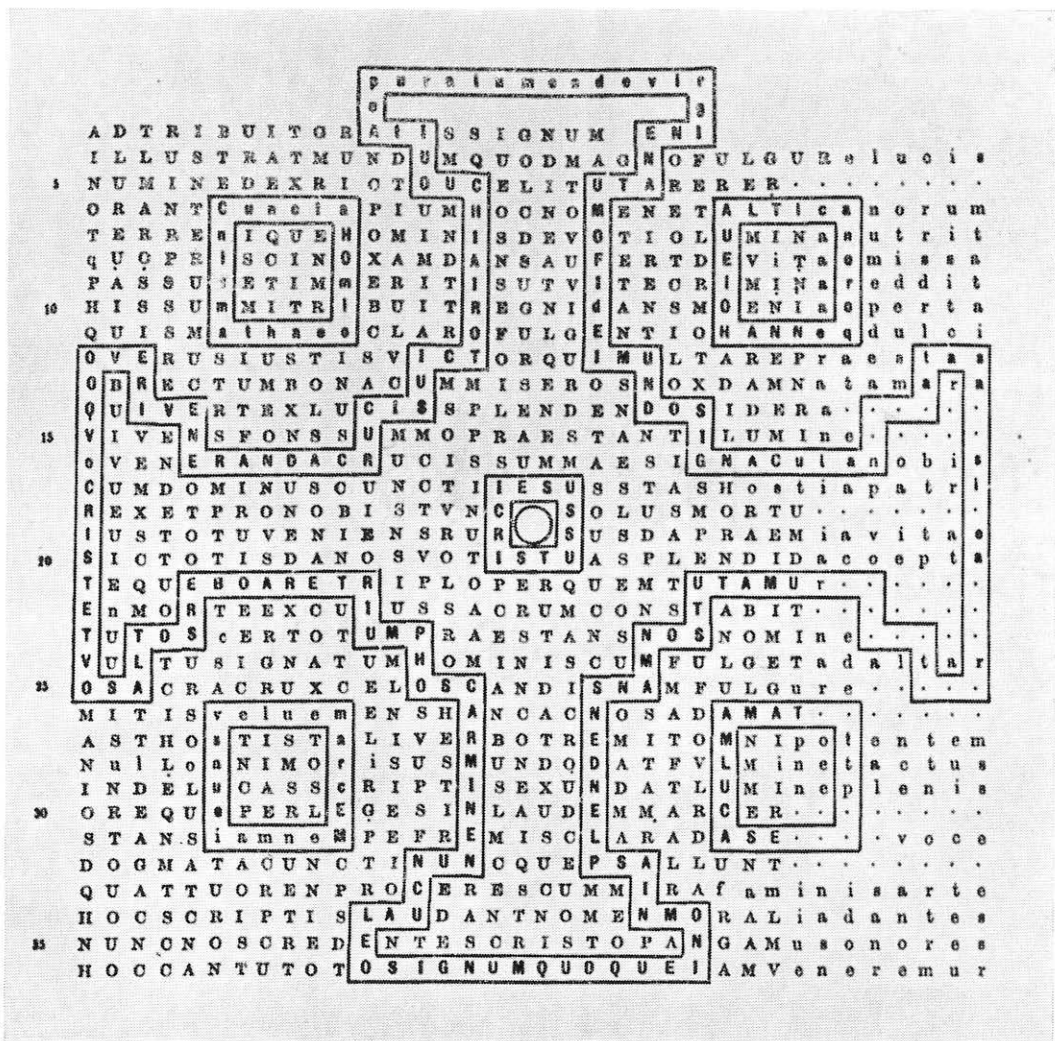


Figure 4. *Fragmentum Augienses*. Courtesy of The Newberry Library.

other side, then taking up again at the left margin of line 13 and going down. The four squares follow in clockwise order.

To prepare complex visual texts like these, the poet took advantage of the unstable orthography of the time, and used any available abbreviations. Digraphs are written as two letters, H can be inserted after T (e.g., triumphat), Christ may be spelled with a CH or an X, semi-colon replaces the ending -US, and a final M can be signified by a long accent over the final vowel. Presumably the poet worked simultaneously on both the acrostic pattern and on the letter-count of the whole text. Since most of these poems are prayers or hagiographies, they do not aspire to originality, and can overwork a specialized vocabulary which facilitates their composition. As such they have much in common with Medieval illuminations and decorated initials. It must be remembered that for a monastic scribe, writing the holy word was an act of worship, so that ornamentation, even covering a whole page with one decorated initial, was an expression of devotion. In a similar fashion these complex acrostics not only were devotional for the poet, but could also stimulate meditation: the reader follows the letters like the beads of a rosary, finding satisfaction in the resolution of the poetry and the acrostic, while the visual design of the acrostic turns the text into an icon.

For this reason I object to F. J. E. Raby's view, expressed in his *History of Secular Latin Poetry in the Middle Ages*, that such visual poems as technopaegnia and acrostics are perversions and symptoms of declining taste.¹³ A much better characterization, if one must be made, is to apply the term "mannerist." As defined by E. R. Curtius, mannerism is a tendency to neglect the synthesizing theme of art, and concentrate on one aspect—here, the rhetorical *ornatus*, which Curtius in *European literature and the Latin Middle Ages* finds gloriously exemplified in technopaegnia.¹⁴

It is not surprising to find the so-called "Rhétoriqueurs" at the center of the visual tradition in vernacular poetry of the late Middle Ages and early Renaissance. Since this is a poetry written primarily for courtly circles, it rejects such oral devices as the formulaic style of the epics, and shuns the meditative quality of the monastic works we have seen. Rather than the measured acrostic, it was the intellectual word-game which predominated. The simple acrostic was of course practised, with François Villon in the mid-fifteenth century signing his

name acrostically in several of his ballads, including the *Ballade des contre-vérités* (Ballad of counter-truths), which ends in this manner:

V oulez vous que verté vous die?	<i>Do you want the truth from me?</i>
I l n'est jouer qu'en maladie,	<i>Well, there is no joy save in sickness,</i>
L ettre vraie qu'en tragedie,	<i>No truer words than in tragedies,</i>
L âche homme que chevalereux,	<i>No cowards other than knights,</i>
O rrible son que melodie,	<i>No horrid sounds except in songs,</i>
N e bien conseillé qu'amoureux. ¹⁵	<i>No better advised than lovers.</i>

One of the simpler forms of visual poetry from this period is the "vers brisés," where the lines of a poem are divided into two columns. These could then be read individually or straight across, and the feat was even more admired if the meaning was changed by the different readings. This poem by Jean Bouchet (1476–1557?) does just that, and makes sure no one will miss the point by adding an explanation:

Heureux est il	Celui qui n'a procès
Qui plaidera	N'est prins pour homme sage;
S'il est subtil	On lui faict des excès;
Mal il n'aura	S'il n'est rempli d'oultrage.

Allez droict, vous ne plaidez;
Sincopez: procès vous aurez.¹⁶

<i>Happy is he</i>	<i>The man who has no case</i>
<i>Whoever will sue</i>	<i>Isn't taken for a sage;</i>
<i>If subtle he'll be</i>	<i>He's heaped with excess;</i>
<i>He'll have no rue</i>	<i>If he's not full of outrage.</i>

Go straight, you won't sue,
But divide, and you do.

Another popular technique was to write poems that could be read from bottom up, or from right to left, as well as in their normal fashion. The fifteenth-century courtier and poet Jean Meschinot wrote a hymn to the Virgin which he said could be read in 32 different ways, while a modern critic has seen 254 permutations of it. It is essentially two columns of attributes which can be read in any order.¹⁷

The "rhétoriqueur" Jean Marot (1450?–1526), a courtier under Anne de Bretagne and Francis I, is responsible for one of the most curious of visual poems (Fig. 5).¹⁸ He makes brilliant use of the rebus,

Quite a collection of such visual word play, some poetical and some not, is presented in the book, *Les Bigarrures* (curiosities), by Estienne Tabourot (1547–1590). He includes, for instance, various kinds of Macaronic verse, and palindromes, which can be read forward and backward, letter for letter or word for word. There are many pictorial rebuses, the rebus-poem by Marot, and another class of rebus in which letters or numbers are included in the line of poetry, their homonyms supplying words. The following anonymous example, Tabourot claims, is a letter from a headmistress to the parents of a student. It makes a clever poem, because on one level it is a discussion of the girl's calligraphy, but when the letters are replaced by their homonyms, as in the second version given by Tabourot, it bears more on her behavior. In reading the second version, it must be noted that V was used for U, and that M was pronounced "ame."

Vostre fillette en ses escrits
 Recherche trop ses a a.
 L met trop d'ancre en son I,
 L s trop ses V V ouverts,
 Puis son K tourne de travers
 Et couche trop le Q infame;
 C'est cela qui gaste son M.

*Your little girl, in her writing lessons,
 works too much on her small a's.
 She puts too much ink in her I,
 And she leaves her U's too open.
 Then she turns her K askew
 And lays out a messy Q;
 That's what is ruining her M.*

Vostre fillette en ses escrits
 Recherche trop ses appetits.
 Elle met trop d'ancre en son nid,
 Et laisse trop ses huis ouverts.
 Puis son cas tourne de travers,
 Et couche trop le cul infame;
 C'est cela qui gaste son ame.¹⁹

*Your little girl, in what she writes,
 Seeks out too much her appetites.
 She puts too much anchor into her nest,
 And too often leaves her windows agape.
 She isn't straightforward, for the rest,
 And she sleeps too often with her bottom foul;
 That is what is spoiling her soul.*

The serious poetical intent of such bagatelles is never insisted on, and Tabourot tells us even, "I gathered them here and there, on the white walls of various taverns."²⁰ These poems easily become graffiti because they can hide a double-entendre: one meaning is for the eye, the other is for the ear. This explains in part the many anonymous epigrams in the collection *Le Cabinet satyrique* (1618, amplified in 1700), where scabrous double-meanings were hidden in acrostics.²¹ This application of visual technique detracts from the reputation of visual poetry, which too often is relegated to such collections as these two, or more recently

to C. C. Bombaugh's *Gleanings for the Curious*.²² It must nevertheless be recognized that a part of the attraction of visual poetry is in its entertainment, which can be prurient or ridiculous, as well as poetic and intellectual.

A more serious application of visual poetry, and a worthy successor to the Carolingian acrosticians can be found in Eustorg de Beaulieu, who was at various times both a priest and a reformed minister, as well as poet and musician. The multiple acrostic in Figure 6 was on the final page of his volume of poetry, *Les Divers Rapportz* (1537). It is based on the phrase "Gloire à Dieu seul" (Glory to God alone), which can be read by following the letters in any horizontal and vertical zig-zag, proceeding from the center toward any corner.²³

Imitation of the classics was an important aspect of the Renaissance, so it is not surprising to find that the Planudean manuscript of the *Greek Anthology* appeared in two editions in 1516, and that imitations of the Greek technopaegnia abounded in all corners of Europe. Tabourot wrote pattern poems in his school days, and the sixteenth-century scholar Salmon Maigret (Macrinus) included a Latin one in his *Lyriconum Liber II* (1531). The first English pattern poem is a crude set of wings included in Stephen Hawes' *The Convercyon of Swerers* in 1509, and it was apparently already influenced by earlier French models.²⁴ The elegant wings by Melin de Saint-Gelais (1491-1558)

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l u e s u e i d i e u s e u l
u e s u e i d a d i e u s e u
e s u e i d a e a d i e u s e
s u e i d a e r e a d i e u s
u e i d a e r i r e a d i e u
e i d a e r i o i r e a d i e
i d a e r i o l o i r e a d i
d a e r i o l G l o i r e a d
i d a e r i o l o i r e a d i
e i d a e r i o i r e a d i e
u e i d a e r i r e a d i e u
s u e i d a e r e a d i e u s
e s u e i d a e a d i e u s e
u e s u e i d a d i e u s e u
l u e s u e i d i e u s e u l

```

Figure 6. Beaulieu: Acrostic.

O heureuse nouvelle, ô desiroux rapport
 De la santé de qui la maladie
 Estoit fin de plus d'une vie!
 O agreable port,
 Dont les plaisirs
 Sont égaux
 Aux travaux!
 Des longs desirs,
 O favorable sort!
 Et toy, ô mon ame assouvie,
 Qu'attends-tu plus? as-tu encore envie
 D'avoir un plus grand bien ça bas avant la Mort?

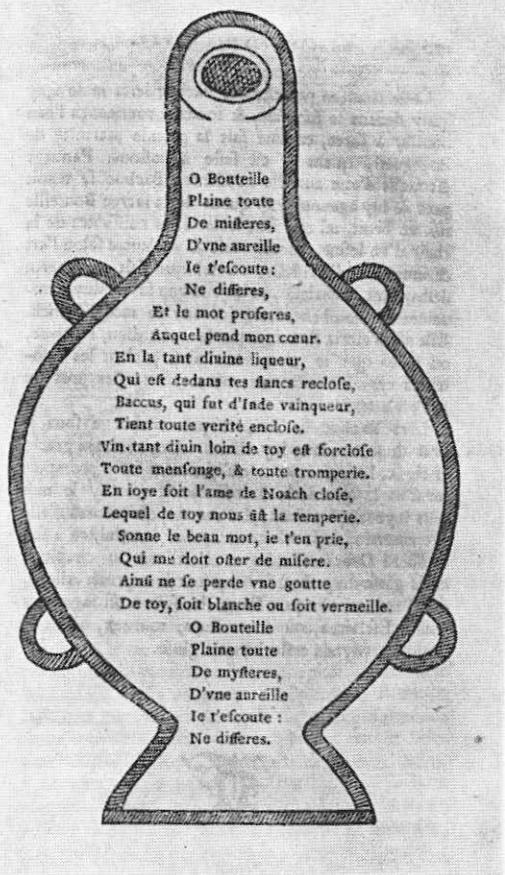
*Oh happy news, oh desirous report
 On the health of her whose malady
 Was the end of more lives than one!
 Oh pleasant burden
 Whose pleasures
 Are equal
 To the labor!
 After long wishing,
 What a favorable outcome!
 And you, Oh my assuaged soul,
 What more do you wait? do you still wish
 To have a greater gift in this world before your Death?*

Figure 7. Melin: Wings.

are a good example (Fig. 7). These wings should be turned sideways to reveal their shape; they symbolically bear a message of good tidings concerning the health of the mother of King Francis I.²⁵

A few original shapes of visual poetry appeared during the flurry of imitations. These include a pear by Richard Willis, and the famous bottle in the disputed fifth book of Rabelais' *Gargantua et Pantagruel*, which was published posthumously in 1564 (Fig. 8). The bottle appears at a point when Panurge is led before the oracle of the Holy Bottle and is obliged to sing an epileny, or grape-harvester's song.

Figure 8. Rabelais: Bottle.
 In *Les Oeuvres de Maistre
 François Rabelais, III*
 (Paris: Alphonse Lemerre,
 1873), 168–169.



*O bottle
 All full
 Of mysteries
 With one ear
 I listen;
 Do not wait,
 Give me the word
 On which my heart hangs!*

*In the liquor so divine
 Which is enclosed within your sides,
 Bacchus, who was conqueror of India
 Keeps all truths enclosed.*

*Wine so divine, far from you is forclosed
 All lying and all deceit;
 Let Noah's soul rest in joy,
 He who made you our fair weather.
 Sound the beautiful word, I pray,
 Which must raise me out of misery.
 Therefore let no drop be lost
 From you, either white or red,*

*O bottle
 All full
 Of mysteries.*

Designed with metrically longer and shorter lines, the bottle's shape is clear, with a straight neck and rounded trunk, then a straight base; sometimes the first word, "O", is printed separately, like a mouth or stopper. The shape is triply appropriate, as it is a wine-drinking song addressed to the Holy Bottle, and anticipates the oracle's answer: "Trinc!"²⁶

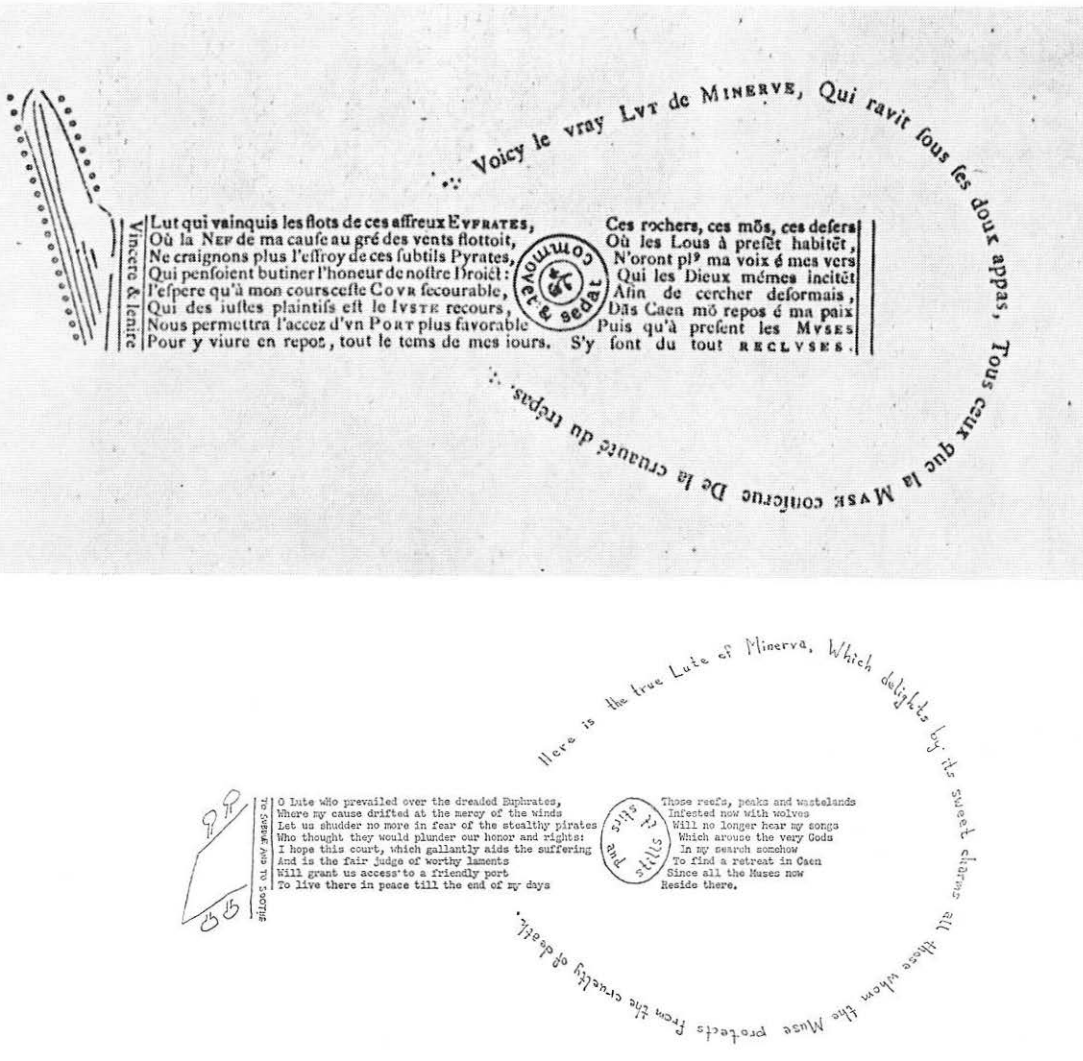
Before the end of the sixteenth century, George Puttenham prepared the first extensive treatise on how to write visual poetry, in his *Arte of English Poesie* (1598). This book described all the fine points of

writing verse, dealing with metre, rhythm, ornaments, and the uses of verse. In a chapter on "Proportion in Figure," Puttenham discusses the construction of pattern poems, referring to Simias' Egg, and also claiming a source in Oriental poetry. He gives careful metrical instructions for making poems in a variety of geometrical shapes: square, triangle, lozenge, oval, taper, etc. More interesting, however, than Puttenham's interest in the craft and attractiveness of these shapes, is his insistence on their symbolic or suggestive value. In an exchange of love letters, for example, he feels the rejected suitor should write in the shape of a taper, signifying hope; the taper is a tall, thin triangle shape, and in Puttenham's own examples the poem is read from the base up to some culminating word on the peak. A similar case is made for the feeling of infinity in the sphere, steadfastness in the square, and so forth.²⁷ These observations by Puttenham represent a crucial step in the developing awareness of the value of visual poetry; the visual contribution can be more than a mere game, or an ornament: it can actually carry part of the meaning of the poem. While this may have been recognized or taken for granted by some poets, it is gratifying to see it expressed explicitly. The application of this idea is nevertheless slow to appear.

Robert Angot's *Chef-d'oeuvre poétique* (1634) demonstrates in several pattern poems an early attempt to break away from the straight linear matrix of the printed page. Of the five pattern poems in his collection, two are constructed on the familiar lines, while the other three use such devices as turning the print sideways or obliquely, curving the lines of print, and adding hand-drawn designs. His shapes are leaves of laurel, bottles, Easter eggs, a cross, and the lute seen in Figure 9. The theme of Angot's collection is a concert of the muses, and it opens with this lute, whose sound box is outlined by a long curving line of type (actually a regular octosyllabic quatrain). The hole in the sound box is a circular emblem with a Latin motto, and there is also a Latin motto upside-down at the top fret of the finger-board. The main part of the poem is made up of two sets of eight lines, forming the strings of the instrument, and some tuning keys are drawn in by hand.²⁸ The design is simple but unmistakable, using straight lines where they make the most sense, and relying heavily on that long curving line which must certainly have required the patient cooperation of the printer. The versatility of typography is put to use in the composition of a pattern

poems by Justus Georg Schottel (Fig. 10). These examples are included in his *Ausführliche Arbeit von der Teutschen Haupt Sprache* (1663), a linguistic treatise where he explains how pattern poems are written, much as Puttenham did. Although his patterns are developed by metrical variation, he (or he and his printer) shows the ability to manage the length of the lines by using different typefaces, and he also makes decorative use of all sorts of printer's devices—vignettes and ornaments, as well as a large repertory of punctuation and diacritical signs.²⁹

Figure 9. Angot: Lute. Courtesy of The Newberry Library.





Creutz von Trogaischen.

So viel Schmerz
Ich im Herzen
Stets empfinde/
Meine Sünde

Trunken täglich mich/ weil ich nicht kan leben
Wie die Seele wil: Weil ich nicht kan streben
Recht mit Ernstigkeit nach des Himmels willen/
Wuß ohn Willen oft Leibeswillen füllen/

Auf Gott vertrauen/
Auf ihn schauen/
Sei stets mit
Höchste Güte
Seine Güte
Mein Gemüte
Stets erfülle
Stets umhülle
Er mich Armen
Mit erbarmen
Denn erquickte /
Denn ich schickte
Dem Begehren
Nach dem Herren. *

Docal

Docal von Saccitischen und Anapestischen.

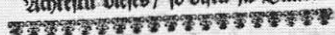


Jugend
Und Tugend
Seht artig zusammen
Jugend
Und Tugend
In eifriger Flammen/
Leder gar selten man findet
So zu wissen Zeiten erwindt.

Wissagung / Laster und eckel Sünden
So an Tugend und Kunstschick wachen.
Lasset sich einer zu Tugend schon an
Folget dem guten wir finden die Bahn.
Wird er geneidet in allen
Kan keinem gefallen/
Künste ver gehen/
Laster entstehen/



Wiß alles vergehe
Was nicht und schmeich/
Das unsrige tollend zerren
Und stauet wie Wägen und Wind/
Nichtes in dieses / so bistu ja Blind.



Da

Figure 10. Schottel: Cross and Goblet. Courtesy of The Newberry Library.

The spirit of "reason" so dominated eighteenth-century France that even the poetry is expository and prosaic, and there seems little inclination toward visual poetry. Among the few pattern poems to be found are two by Charles François Pannard (1694?–1765), a writer of vaudevilles who composed the glass and bottle in Figure 11. They are both drinking songs, one apostrophizing the glass and the other the bottle in a cheerful manner that imitates eloquent love poetry.³⁰ They are masterpieces of pattern design, with little justifying required to reveal their form. But a more characteristic attitude toward visual poetry is

*Nothing can we find upon the Earth
 So good or so lovely as a glass.
 Charming cradle of tender love,
 It's you, country fern,
 It's you who serve to make
 The happy instrument
 Where often fizzes,
 Foams and sparkles
 The juice that makes us
 Gay, laughing,
 Content.
 What sweetness
 It brings to the heart!
 Soon,
 Soon,
 Soon,
 Bring me some,
 Ring it out,
 Now,
 Now,
 Now,
 Give me some,
 Fast and just right.
 One can see in its darling floods
 Gaiety and Laughter brimming.*

Nous ne pouvons rien trouver sur la terre;
 Qui soit si bon, ni si beau que le verre.
 Du tendre amour berceau charmant,
 C'est toi, champêtre fougere,
 C'est toi qui fers à faire
 L'heureux instrument
 Où souvent pétille,
 Mouffe & brille
 Le jus qui rend
 Gai, riant,
 Content.
 Quelle douceur
 Il porte au cœur!
 Tôt,
 Tôt,
 Tôt,
 Qu'on m'en donne;
 Qu'oa l'entonne.
 Tôt,
 Tôt,
 Tôt,
 Qu'on m'en donne
 Vite & comme il faut.
 L'on y voit, sur ses flots chéris,
 Nager l'Allegresse & les Ris.



in color, complemented by a picture on the same plate with the text. The result is related to an illuminated manuscript, except that the poet himself has selected and controlled all the separate elements. In this way Blake is assured that a severe title will appear in stiff, bony letters, while a gentle title—*The Songs of Innocence*, for example—can be in a graceful script with extended finials that reflect the design of the accompanying illustration. The use of color and ornamentation affects even the lines of poetry, when in *The Chimney Sweeper*, for example, the

Que mon
Flacon
Me semble bon ?
Sans lui,
L'ennui
Me nuit,
Me suit ;
Je sens
Mes sens
Mourans ;
Pesans.

Quand je le tien ;
Dieux ! que je suis bien !

Que son aspect est agréable !

Que je fais cas de ses divins présens !

C'est de son sein fécond, c'est de ses heureux flancs

Que coule ce nectar si doux, si délectable,

Qui rend tous les esprits, tous les cœurs satisfaits.

Cher objet de mes vœux, tu fais toute ma gloire.

Tant que mon cœur vivra, de tes charmans bienfaits

Il saura conserver la fidelle mémoire.

Ma Muse, à te louer, se consacre à jamais.

Tantôt dans un caveau, tantôt sous une treille,

Ma lyre, de ma voix accompagnant le son,

Répètera cent fois cette aimable chanson :

Regne sans fin, ma charmante bouteille ;

Regne sans cesse mon cher flacon.

◆◆◆

T ij

Model
Bottle,
Her I'll coddle !
Forlorn,
I'm bored,
Followed
And gored,
Feelings,
Reeling,
Feel like
Dying.

But to hold her,

God ! how I smolder !

How her look is agreeable !

How estimable her presence divine !

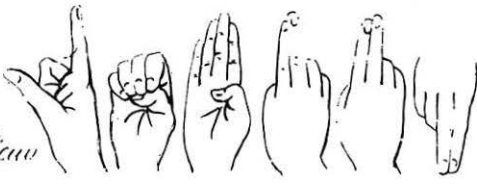
*It's from her fertile breast, it's from her happy side,
That flows this nectar, so sweet, so delectable,
Which renders all men's hearts and their minds satisfied.
Dear object of desire, you make all my glory,
So long as my heart lives, of your charms bona fide
He will know to preserve a faithful memory.
My Muse lives to have you forever glorified.
Whether down in a cellar, or under the stars,
The sound of my lyre, as my voice joins the task,
Will repeat the song where a hundred times we ask :
Reign without cease my bottle and my cask,
Reign without end, my charming flask.*

Figure 11. Pannard: Glass and Bottle. Courtesy of The Newberry Library.

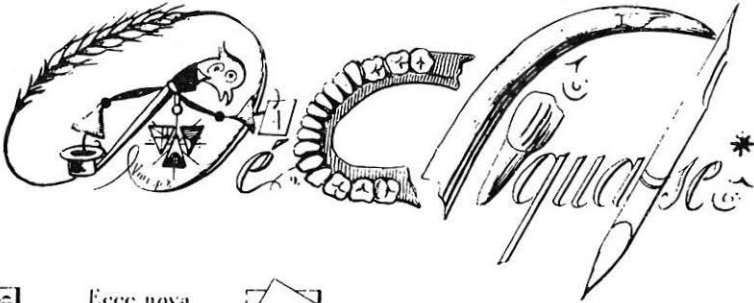
letters are shaded a sooty grey, and hang like a cloud of smog over the miserable boy in the picture.

Blake's creation is the unique expression of a poet with many talents, something that is impossible to copy; yet, it is an important sign of reaction against the apparent rigidity of typography and printing. Although his alphabets are actually closely related to printing faces, Blake captures the decorative spirit of the Medieval illuminator, but also announces the sensitivity of serious poets to the nuances in visual

A Monsieur



de

MONSIEUR. — Quand je me donnais tant de peine, plutôt pour être cru quelque jour que pour devenir un correcteur passable (1) : quand je m'enfonçais en sauvage dans l'étude de la typographie et des langues, je restais nécessairement étranger à une infinité de connaissances qui sont, sans contredit, d'un bien plus grand usage dans la vie civile. Par exemple, je négligeais, ou plutôt je

ne soupçonnais même pas. je m'aperçois, hélas ! que le mot n'est pas dans l'Académie, qui connaît, qui possède si bien la chose. Le mot dont j'ai besoin manque à la langue, il n'ose pas encore s'avouer français : mais

★ Ce mot *déliquasse* n'ayant point été composé en types mobiles, mais inamoviblement tracé sur cuivre, ne se prêtait point à ce que nous appelons, nous autres typographes, *correction sur le plomb*. Et pourtant j'avais, je devais avoir à cœur, moi correcteur de mon métier, d'empêcher que personne pût soupçonner un seul

letter Y, which stands out both as a capital and in its isolation at the beginning of line 2, bears several of the suggestive meanings which Hugo mentions.

Un lion habitait près d'une source ; un aigle
Y venait boire aussi.
Or, deux héros, un jour, deux rois, —souvent Dieu règle
La destinée ainsi, —
Viennent à cette source où les palmiers attirent
Le passant hasardeux
Et, s'étant reconnus, ces hommes se battirent
Et tombèrent tous deux.³⁷

*A lion lived near a spring, an eagle
Came to drink there too.
Now one day, two heroes, two kings, —God often arranges
Fate that way, —
Come to this spring where the palms attract
The passerby
And, recognizing each other, these men fought
And both fell.*

For Hugo the letter Y was a tree, the fork of the road, a confluence of streams, a goblet, and so forth. In the little scene in this poem the Y is the spring itself, it is the palm tree, and—especially in its role as adverb of place—it is the meeting of the roads of the two kings.³⁸

Hugo's visual sensitivity also applies to the pattern of the poem on the page, as can be seen dramatically in *Les Djinns*. The fifteen strophes tell the tale of the arrival and passage of a horde of Djinns, Oriental demons of the night, the lines of poetry increasing from two syllables to eight, then decreasing again to two. Rhythmically, the effect is breathtaking, and visually it strongly suggests something which approaches from a distance, grows larger, then fades away, swirling like the whirlwind mentioned in the poem. Figure 13 shows Hugo's manuscript for the conclusion of the poem, where it is possible to see that he gave it the spiral shape even as he composed it.³⁹ What is evident here in Hugo's work, and what becomes more prevalent in the rest of the nineteenth century, is visual poetry written, not as a display of wit and ingenuity, but as a synaesthetic art form.

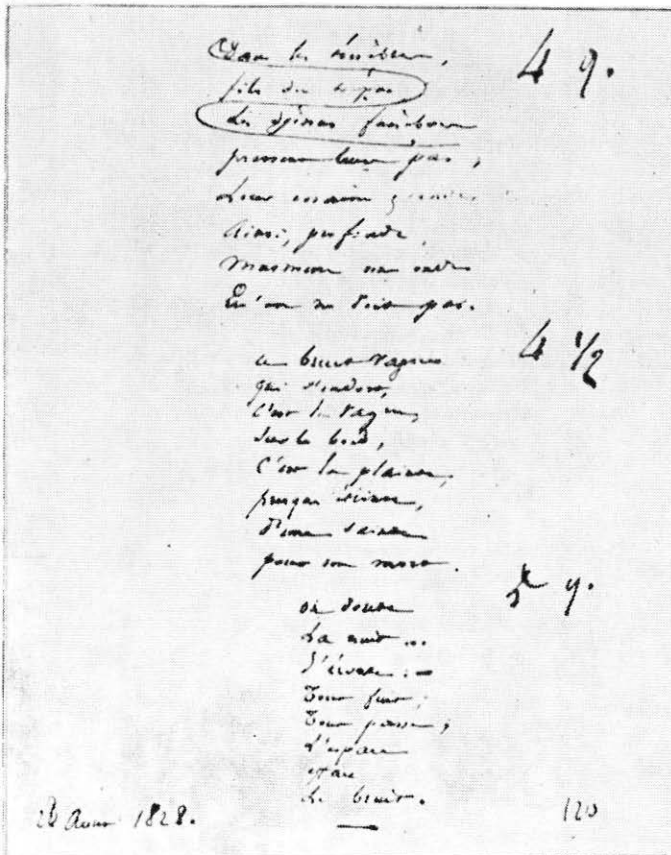


Figure 14. Hugo: Manuscript for *Les Djinns*.
 Courtesy of Editions Albin Michel.

1. *Le Grande recueil II* (Paris: Gallimard, 1961), p. 217.
2. Trans. by H. N. Fowler (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1929), p. 147.
3. Trans. by William Watts (New York: Macmillan, 1912), I, 273-75.
4. Jacques Charpier and Pierre Seghers (eds.), *L'Art poétique* (Paris: Seghers, 1956), p. 197.
5. *The Gutenberg Galaxy* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1962), p. 43.
6. *Saturday Review* (September 17, 1966), pp. 10-11.
- 6a. The most extensive collection available illustrating visual poetry, decorated alphabets, and other visual treatments of language, is Massin's *Letter and Image* (New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold, 1970).
7. Hermann Beckby (ed.), *Anthologia Graeca* (Munich: Ernst Heimeran Verlag, 1954), IV, 536.

8. *The Greek Anthology in Five Volumes*, Loeb Classical Library, trans. by W. R. Paton (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1918), V, 134.
9. N. E. Lemaire (ed.), *Poetae latini minores* (Paris: Lemaire, 1824-26), I, 708-9.
10. *Poetae latini minores*, I, 395.
11. E. Duemmler (ed.), *Poetae latini aevi carolini* (Berlin: Weidmann, 1881-84), I, 159.
12. *Poetae latini aevi carolini*, IV, 1115.
13. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1957), p. 17.
14. (New York: Pantheon Books, 1953), pp. 274, 284; see also Helmut Hatzfeld, "Mannerism is not Baroque," *L'Esprit créateur*, VI, No. 4 (Winter, 1966), 225-26.
15. *Oeuvres* (Paris: Garnier Frères, 1962), p. 132.
16. Charles Bruneau, *Charles d'Orléans et la poésie aristocratique* (Lyon: Chez Henri Lardanchet, 1924), p. 192.
17. Bruneau, p. 193.
18. *Le Recueil* (Paris: Antoine Bonnemere, 1538), pp. unnumbered.
19. (Rouen: David Geoffrey, 1616), fol. 17.
20. *Ibid.*
21. Fernand Fleuret and Louis Perceau (eds.) (Paris: Librairie du Bon Vieux Temps, 1924).
22. (Baltimore: Kurtz, 1860).
23. Hélène Harvitt, *Eustorg de Beaulieu* (New York: AMS Press, 1966), p. 85.
24. Margaret Church, "The First English Pattern Poems," *Publications of the Modern Language Association*, LXI, No. 3 (1946), 637-38.
25. *Oeuvres complètes*, ed. by Prosper Blanchemin (Paris: Paul Daffis, 1873), II, 130.
26. *Oeuvres complètes*, (Paris: Garnier Frères, 1962), II, 451.
27. English Reprint Series (London: J. Murray, 1869), pp. 98-113. [New reprint available: Kent, Ohio: Kent State University Press, 1970; cloth \$7.00, paperback \$3.75].
28. Prosper Blanchemin (ed.) (Rouen: Boissel, 1872), p. 2.
29. (Braunschweig: Zilligern), p. 954-955.
30. *Théâtre et oeuvres diverses de M. Pannard* (Paris: Duchesne, 1763), III, 434-35.
31. (Paris: Dabo & Tremblay, 1819), VII, 65.
32. *The Life and times of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman* (New York: Odyssey Press, 1940), p. 226.
33. (Paris: Chez les libraires qui ne vendent pas de nouveautés, 1830?), p. 41.
34. Raymond Queneau, *Bâtons, lettres et chiffres*, Collection "Idées" (Paris: Gallimard, 1965), pp. 287, 290.
35. Geoffrey Keynes, *William Blake: Poet, Painter, Prophet* (New York: Orion Press, 1964), pp. 11, 27.
36. Jean Massin (ed.), *Oeuvres complètes* (Paris: Club français du livre, 1968), VI, 715-16.
37. *Oeuvres complètes* (Paris: Hetzel, s.d.), V, 227.
38. A twentieth-century echo: Paul Claudel, in his essay on Nijinsky, prefers spelling the dancer's name with a final y instead of the usual i in French, "because of the Y which looks like a leaping dancer." *Positions et propositions* (Paris: Gallimard, 1928), I, 227.
39. J.-R. Chevaillier and Pierre Audiat (eds.), *Victor Hugo: Poésie* (Paris: Librairie Hachette, 1950), p. 89.