

Press Art: Poets and Their Printing Machines

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ABSTRACT. Inspired by technology, twentieth-century poets have exploited its instruments through a medium which may be called "press art." They have circumvented what Marshall McLuhan perceives to be the inimical influence of the printing press, to retransform mechanical operations into artisanal handwork and thus to restore originality to products of the press. Language, and the process of its use, has been rendered visible through their innovations. This is shown through an examination of esthetic predispositions and procedures that have entered into the creation of the visual poetry of Guillaume Apollinaire, Pierre Albert-Birot, Pierre Garnier, and John Furnival, and through an assessment of these artists' roles with respect to the secondary production level involving printers or printing machines that enabled the creation and their works' status as "original" within this context of collaboration and mechanical reproduction.

"Typographic Man": classified, columnarized, paginated being deprived of his capacity for direct and natural (i.e. oral) expression; victim of the increasingly standardized, rationalized and depersonalized language of print. Such is Marshall McLuhan's depiction of the catastrophe wrought by the invention of moveable type. But the electronic age, prophesies McLuhan, will bring salvation in the form of a reconstituted, "full" language, which will draw not just on graphic, but also oral and other visual media, to retrieve exactly that mythic dimension which McLuhan associates with the traditions of oral cultures and an idealized past missing in societies dominated by the single dimension of the printed page.¹ That an evolution in technology can rectify the perceived alienation of man from his means of self-expression and inter-communication, which technology has itself brought about, is debatable; nonetheless, such visions of technologically-inspired millennia hold an undeniable fascination for philosophers and poets, particularly those who encounter in the printed word both muse and obstacle to creative activity. A similar rhetoric was heard in Guillaume Apollinaire's 1918 speech, "L'Esprit Nouveau et les poètes," in which he predicted that the technological advances of his day — telegraph and telephone, airplanes, the phonograph and cinema — would be the source of a new lyricism wedding art to technology. This marriage would bring poets, seen to lag behind the inventors of these machines, out of the "incunabula stage." They would be moved by the "New Spirit" to emulate scientist-technicians, the real prophets of the twentieth century, to "... master prophecy [...] in short, to mechanize poetry as the world has been mechanized."²

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Despite Apollinaire's invocations of diverse modes of mechanical or electrified communication, he did not specifically envision areas of innovation for his new Prometheans beyond "typographic artifices" such as the visual onomatopoeias and typefaces of commercial advertising with which Futurist and Dada poets were already experimenting. By and large, for Apollinaire and those of his followers chosen for this study of what I have baptized "press art," print mechanisms have remained the focus of the poetic revolution.³ The consequences of serious and systematic attention to the typographic detail are multiple: it has awakened a consciousness that the printed text can be more than the transcription of a manuscript; it also altered radically the poet's relation to his means and/or agent of production; not unimportantly, it has prepared a return to the forgotten simplicity of artisanal activity in which creation and production, too often viewed as the separate provinces of author and printer, are indivisible; and it has helped to foster the myth of a modern "author-scribe" who will once again be master of his own writ by controlling both theoretical and practical aspects of textual production.

It is a common perception that the sort of collaboration generally accepted for performance artists inappropriate for painters, whose work is usually associated with the concepts of individual expression and originality of style.⁴ If this perception is true for visual artists, it is doubly so for poets, who, since the romantic era privileging private communion with nature, are seen to be engaged in solitary artistic endeavor. Yet both these collaborations have occurred, from the time of Cubist and Dada artists to the Concrete poetry of the fifties and sixties, with the most dramatic experiments being, perhaps, the Surrealists' joint creations of the *cadavre exquis* and automatic writing. Artistic collaboration seemed a natural consequence of the many -isms of the 20th century, artists' collectives dedicated to the dissemination of a common esthetic transgressing boundaries of genre as the artists did the rules of the socio-political establishment. Their works are penetrated by the double and paradoxical notion that the work of art is the result of both an individual creative flash and a communal effort, be that only at the level of dialog, inspiration, or shared discovery. What poets, in particular, have learned from their painter-coinspirers is not just a heightened awareness of the visual in language, but an appreciation for manual labor, for techniques of *manipulation* that could be applied to their poetic texts — to the *hand-working* of words and verbal concepts.

In the pages that follow, I would like to examine twentieth-century poets' inspiration in technology, their exploitation of it to render language visible, and the various sorts of collaboration it invites. It is a modern phenomenon that poets conceive of machines designed for mass production as instruments for authentic, artistic creations — machines that either

require the intervention of a technician to operate them or enter into the creative process themselves as mechanical "collaborators." And it is particularly with visual texts requiring mechanical support to produce them that the collaborative relationship takes on greater importance. In these texts, the typesetter's role is analogous to that played by the cutter of a wood-block with respect to the woodcut designer. It may involve the modest task of reproducing a manuscript or the greater creative responsibility for re-interpretation, i.e. for giving material reality to visual concepts provisionally drafted in the author's hand. As will be seen in Apollinaire's collaboration with Pierre Albert-Birot, the function of word- and print-manipulation case become enmeshed to the degree that the relationship between the poet-artist and printer-artisan tends towards identity, as the one threatens to eclipse the other. Collaboration in Pierre Garnier's machine-assisted "typewriter poems" entails a matching of the human with mechanical capabilities in a direct interaction with the instrument of production, resulting in the spontaneous creation in the poet's print "idiolect." In the case of John Furnival's newspapered surfaces, collaboration occurs at one remove from the original time and place of the production. Although his persistent recourse to quotation suggests an impoverished imagination, Furnival's hand reprints of newspaper articles does just the opposite, reaffirming in an ironic mode the existence of the hand-made artifact in a mechanized world.

I. The Poet-painter and the Typographer

Guillaume Apollinaire, born Kostrowitzky, alias Croniamantal, the "assassinated poet," was haunted by the desire to be other. But the persona of the other projected in his ideogrammatical poetry cannot be found in either a fictional personage or Rimbaldian visionary; it surfaces, rather, in an image of self beyond fiction or poetry: the painter. Spokesman and elucidator for the Cubist painters, Apollinaire gravitated naturally towards creators of polychrome visions such as Pablo Picasso and Robert Delaunay. The poem "Les Fenêtres," written to accompany the catalog for Delaunay's 1913 Berlin exposition, celebrated Delaunay's series of paintings depicting "Simultaneous windows." In the word-pictures of *Calligrammes*, Apollinaire pushed his relationship with painters beyond association into identity, writing *as if* he were painting. The title under which he originally intended to publish five of the early *calligrammes* says as much: "Et moi aussi je suis peintre." The title proved to be unnecessary, for the representational quality and visually figurative power of these *calligrammes* clearly express his penchant for painting. One of the five ideo-

grams, "Lettre-Océan," first appeared in *Soirées de Paris* (June 1914), alongside the essay "Simultanisme-Librettisme," Apollinaire's contribution to the polemic surrounding the concept of simultanism and multimedia approaches to verbal art. In this word picture, perhaps his most ambitious, Apollinaire performed functions of both poet and painter. This

Figure 1. Guillaume Apollinaire, "Il Pleut," in *Oeuvres complètes* (Ps.: Gallimard, 1956), 203.

il pleut
des voix de femmes
comme si elle
étaient mortes
même dans le souvenir

cest vous aussi
qui pleut
merveilleuses
rencontres de ma vie
ô gouttelettes

et ces nuages
cabrés se prennent
à hennir
tout un univers
de villes auriculaires

écoute sil pleut
tandis que le regret
et le dandin pleurent
une ancienne musique

écoute tomber
les liens qui te retiennent
en haut et en bas

was not the case in what was touted as the “First Simultaneous Book,” *La Prose du Transsibérien et la petite Jehanne de France* (1913), which had required the collaboration of the poet Blaise Cendrars and the painter Sonia Delaunay to effect a poem that could be read and seen simultaneously.

According to Pierre Albert-Birot, in whose literary review *SIC* “Il Pleut” and other calligrams were first published, Apollinaire showed little interest in typographical interpretation. For “Il Pleut,” Apollinaire apparently furnished only a manuscript, hastily penned on notebook paper in red ink, with words sometimes retraced in black for clarity. It was left to the typographer to give typographic representation to the text miming the action of falling rain as it was traced out on the manuscript and evoked in the language of the poem (Figure 1).⁶ Apollinaire’s visual artistry should not be in dispute; however, his ability to pre-view his *calligrammes* in terms of the typographer’s spatial economy or “color” palette of type fonts might be. His calligrams do not reveal the visual geometry of Dada poems (Tzara’s “Bilan,” for example), informed by the newspaper advertising formats which inspired them; nor do they openly proclaim “le projet typographique au travail dans l’écriture” in the way that Francis Ponge’s “Le Pré” does.⁷ There, the typographic concept is clearly a forethought, embedded in the text. Ponge actually instructs the typographer, in the specialized vocabulary of the *métier*, how (in the lower-case letters) and where (at the end of the text) to set his name:

Messieurs les typographes,
Placez donc ici, je vous prie, le trait final.

Puis, dessous, sans le moindre interligne, couchez mon nom,
Pris dans le bas-de-casse, naturellement,⁸

[Typographers, Sirs:/Put here, accordingly, I beg of you, the final
mark

Then, without the slightest space, place my name below/Set in the
lower case, natural.]

While Ponge may conceive of writing as expression, a process of giving material form to verbal structures ultimately destined for print, Apollinaire might have defined writing in Roland Barthes’s terms, as *scripture*, a manual tracing of intellectual and sensual impulses combined: “Writing is the hand; it’s therefore the body: its impulses, its checks, its rhythms, its weight, its glide, its complexities, its flights — in short, not the *soul* (graphology matters little), but the subject ballasted by his desire and his unconscious.”⁹ The breadth of the stroke, the letters of unequal dimen-

sions, the uneven or curving lines of the five hand-scripted ideograms published in the 1918 edition of *Calligrammes* betray Apollinaire's painterly aspirations executed through the calligraphic project, or "beautiful writing," implied in the title. Words shrink or expand in dimension to fit the contours of the figures; graceful traces of ink or brashly expressive brush strokes paint a picture stamped indelibly with the character — signature — of their author-cum-painter. The supple plasticity of the handworked *calligrammes* contrasts dramatically with the orderly linearity of those recast in print. A comparison of the typeset versions of other *calligrammes* with their manuscript originals shows that Apollinaire's conception was pictorial, and not specifically typographic. In his manuscripts, letters mold themselves into contoured objects, into distinctly representational forms, which often lose their identity when set in type. For instance, what is immediately recognized as a pistol in the manuscript version of "Aussi bien que les cigales" only vaguely evokes a firearm in the typographic revision, where letters line up horizontally, and with consistent regularity — more legible, readable, and textual. Credit for this printed page belongs at least in part to the typographer.¹⁰

If Apollinaire is an example of a visual poet without the typographer's vision, Pierre Albert-Birot exemplifies the poet whose inspiration proceeds from the graphic designer's sense of the page as decorative space, framed by fanciful borders, and within which letters generally respect the usual geometry of printed matters. The model that bespeaks Albert-Birot's particular originality is the "poème-affiche" or "poème-pancarte," rubrics that identify certain of his whimsical visual poems as public announcements. These poetic placards bear cryptic inscriptions of "public interest," sometimes exhorting automobilized readers to exercise caution ("Slow down; don't destroy the countryside") or announcing to sun-worshippers that "The sun is in the stairwell; for information, enquire further on at the wine merchant's."¹¹ Reminiscent of the yet-to-come surrealist calling cards, Albert-Birot's work is distinguished by its visual cleverness, often to the detriment of verbal creativeness. Indeed, if there is a constant that gives stylistic unity to his heterogeneous collection of poems (*Poésie, 1916-1924*), it is the subordination of the text as a semantic unit to visual patterns. Some sketch out rebuses, labyrinthine structures that force reading along tortuous paths, frustrating the reader's desire to make sense. In his phonic poems composed in Dada style ("Poèmes à crier et à danser"), prolonged vowel sounds and nonsense syllables are orchestrated with verbal chains which are rendered almost unreadable by the absence of spaces between words. Other texts simply frustrate the desire to read: the non-ideogrammatic texts originally published under the title "La Joie des 7 couleurs" are printed in upper-case letters, their lines monolithic in

appearance, many right- and left-justified, the words separated by uniformly equal spaces. No indentations create openings into the text; no visual pauses give respite to the eye; no variations invite the reader to penetrate the wall of words. A justification of a creative plan which privileges form over linguistic substance and ultimately releases the poem from any obligation to be intelligible can be read in Albert-Birot's explanation of the emblem adorning the cover of his literary review *Sic*. Having centered the affirmative sign *SIC* (lat.: "yes"), also the acronym for the formula Sounds, Ideas, and Colors, he then thought to frame the core emblem with a capital F on the left side and its mirror image on the right side, so that the whole would thus be "contained by the form."¹²

Albert-Birot's "Promethean poem" of the same volume (p. 348) illustrates just how the disposition of lines and stanzas, that is the visual structure of the poem, can take precedence over verbal metaphors (Figure 2).

Figure 2. Pierre Albert-Birot, "Poème prométhée," in *Poésie*, 1916-1924 (Ps.: Gallimard, 1967), 348.

LES MOTS QUI COURENT OÙ VONT-ILS

Je vois	Le pote	Sonori	Gent m
passer	au n'est	t é d e s	ais l'ou
rires et	pas très	c l o c h	r s g r i s
pleurs	d r o i t	e s d ' a r -	e s t l a s

Tactac	Reviens	z s z s z s	Verts cu
tactactac	n e p e u x	z s z s z s	l s d e b o u
tactactac	m e p a s -	z s z s z s	t e i l l e s à
tactactac	ser d e	z s z s z s	l ' e n v e r s

Fil d'a-	T u n ' a s	Le globe	De mots
m o u r	p a s l e	e s t u n	e t m o i
fil d'ar-	p a s s o	g r o s p e -	j e s u i s
g e n t	u r d o u	l o t o n	l e c h a t

Spatia	Tactactac	Tac tac	Est mor
lité san	tac tac	où est le	t e j e s u i
s i n c o	tac tac tac	chatnoir	s p r i s d a
n n u e s	mademoi	e Jeanne	n s l e s f i l s

P I E R R E A L B E R T - B I R O T

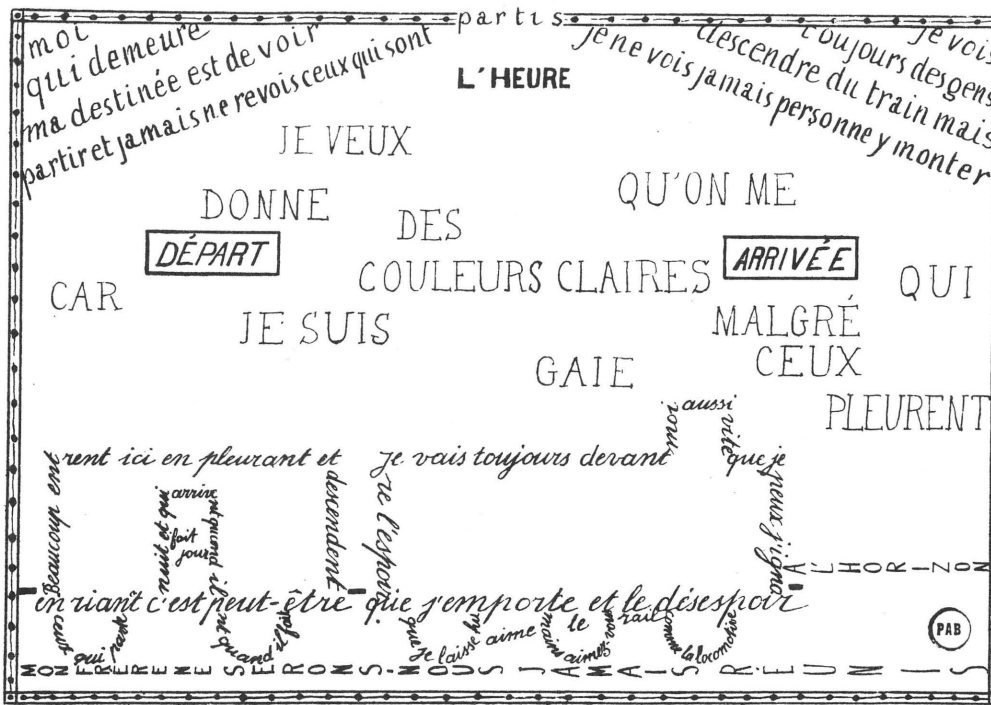


Figure 3. Pierre Albert-Birot, "L'Heure," in *Poésie*, 1916-1924 (Ps.: Gallimard, 1967), 165.

The title, "Poème-Prométhée," must be taken as a sort of classification, like the term sonnet, rondeau, or *calligramme*. It designates a more or less standard four-quatrains poem in which the visible aspects of lines and stanzas have been interchanged: the heterometric lines are condensed into blocks four-lines deep and just as wide; the stanza, which customarily appears as a rectangle surrounded by white margins, is here composed of four mini-blocks arranged in a line, to be read in either the horizontal or vertical dimensions, depending on the reading axis selected. The enjambement of the "Cloches d'argent" in the first set of squares and "notre Jeanne est morte" in the last suggest a horizontal reading orientation, from left to right, one mini-block to the next; but other semantic or syntactic discontinuities in this proto-Rubick's cube indicate that multiple readings are possible — along a diagonal, or in hop-scotch fashion. Indeed, the word groupings appear to be little more than random associations, and the title in the interrogative, "Les Mots qui courent où vont-ils?" vincerates that interpretation; the title also forms, with the author's name imprinted

below, a semi-frame around an inner textual square whose ostensible shape simply reflects the essential structuring principle of multiple blocks. The text thus squared (4 cubes x 4 cubes) is blocked out according to a grid that magnifies and repeats the mini-checkerboard of alternating s's and z's at its center. If there is any synonymy between this and other cubes, it has to do with garbled — “blocked out” — messages. Or, as it might be inferred from the evident z's, the repetitive pattern of squares may act as a visual soporific, putting interpretative faculties to sleep.

A second example shows the application of the typographic grid to a picture-poem of more pictorial inspiration. Although the letters of Albert-Birot's “L'Heure” (Figure 3) are hand-done, they have been executed with such precision — the letters uniform in height and style and perfectly aligned — that it gives the impression of type. Script tracing the outlines of a train, so inexpressive in its regularity, does nothing to dispel that impression of print, however ornamental it might be. One is immediately struck by the decorative value of “L'Heure”: its visual literalness has that whimsical charm of embroidery patterns destined for the nursery, and the sentiment expressed in the text is one to match with its series of vulgarized symbolist oppositions (day/night, hope/despair, laughter/tears, joy/sadness) and the over-used euphemisms of the voyage to dress up death in brighter colors (“les couleurs claires”).

The impoverished verbal lyricism does not necessarily detract from the interest or artistry of the piece, for the coordination of text and image presents certain complexities which engage the attention of the reader. The picture seems to be organized into distinct spaces: the top and bottom correspond to the positions of text-signs and image-object (the train); the left and right sides are identified with areas designated for departures and arrivals in a train station. But these separations are not categorical, and terms of sadness and joy, hope and despair appear in both sectors, as if to show that such sentimental associations are really a question of perspective. The train is itself not decisive, both coming and going. The slant of the script propels it off to the right, but the empty space at that edge suggests that it might be travelling in the opposite direction. This indecision affects the substance of the text, for the graphic elements work to discredit the words by rendering them ambiguous or by disrupting sentence continuity. Words trace out the shape of the train, only to complete the picture without completing the sentence; the sentence may continue, cut off, in another space not necessarily contiguous. For instance, the fragment forming the left box-car wheel is left hanging; although the upward curve sends the reader's eye first to the group of words sketching out the door, he must jump to the second wheel to complete the verb and to continue a reading following a visual analogic which links

round forms to round forms. A glance back to the box car door, significantly the symbol of openings and closings, permits the reader to finally complete the sentence. The elements of the text are displaced to create an esthetically correct image, a puzzle which is visually complete but whose units of meaning must first be recognized and then reconnected into a comprehensible verbal whole. It is not inappropriate that this picture-poem foregrounds the image of a train with its boxcar-container — thus emphasizing the importance of the visual vehicle over its linguistic load and Albert-Birot's greater sensitivity to the language of print.

II. The Poet and the Type-Writer

Heavily inked-over author's manuscripts have a fascination for critics because it is believed that the nuances revealed by erasures and insertions furnish clues to authorial intentions not found in pristine published texts. If the manuscript has, in Walter Benjamin's terms, an "aura" that reproductions do not, it is precisely because it can be authenticated as an "original," drafted by the very hand of its creator. In his essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," Benjamin suggests that new instruments of multiple reproduction may pose a challenge to that generally accepted concept of authenticity embodied in the "one-of-a-kind" creation, reproducible yet inimitable. "The presence of the original is the prerequisite to the concept of authenticity. Chemical analyses of the patina of a bronze can help to establish this, as does the proof that a given manuscript of the Middle Ages stems from an archive of the fifteenth century. The whole sphere of authenticity is outside technical — and, of course, not only technical — reproducibility. Confronted with its manual reproduction, which was usually branded as a forgery, the original preserved all its authority; not so *vis a vis* technical reproduction."¹³ He goes on to explain that technical reproductions, such as photographs, duplicate the artwork without counterfeiting it. Indeed, the camera lens can transform a painting by focussing on a detail with such a degree of magnification that it reveals elements hitherto unseen by the naked eye; its colors are often altered through the chemical processing of the film. There is thus never danger of confusion between the original still hanging on the museum wall and the reproduction on a poster, postcard, or art-book.

A crucial distinction must be made between the original in the visual arts and that in literature, for the manuscript is more comparable to the artist's preliminary sketch than it is to the finished painting. The post-Gutenberg manuscript does not have the same status as a work of art — that is, unless the manuscript is conceived as a painting and as a sort of reproduction,

executed by means of the very instruments of duplication which normally threaten claims to originality. Such would be Pierre Garnier's "mechanical" poems, composed free-hand at the keyboard of a typewriter and destined to be multicopied photographically without, however, any alteration of the original. Like printing presses, the typewriter transforms manuscripts from documents bearing a personal imprint into papers "written" by a foreign hand, neutralized in the impersonal script of a mechanical scribe. Michel Butor notes that the first sight of their texts in print encourages in authors "un travail intense de réappropriation," and he cites Balzac's heavily rewritten galleys as proof of this need to repossess them. Butor sees typescript as a "pre-printing": the typewriter simply speeds up the dialog between author and a text perceived to be already slipping out of his hands. The purpose of the dialog is the reimposition of the author's idiom. Because it retains the ambiguity of type and writing, Butor prefers the English *typewriter* to the French "machine à écrire".¹⁴

Spatialism, defined as "the poetic animation of linguistic elements without exception,"¹⁵ is Pierre Garnier's contribution to the Concrete Poetry movement's efforts to break the dominance of semantic and syntactic structures in the perception of words. Garnier seconds Max Bense's perception of a visual text as an "esthetic communication scheme," rather than a text, stating that it is not *read*: the "reader" receives first a general impression of the whole picture before taking into account individual words; he then proceeds to analysis of the "microelements" (as opposed to more visible macrostructures), that is, the word broken up into its individual letters, or fortuitous combinations of vocalic and consonantal components, which support the initial impression received. (136) The matter of these poems, conceived and produced on a typewriter, is relatively simple: one or two words broken down into their compositional elements — syllables and homophonic variants, letters, punctuation marks — recomposed according to a visual plan, abstracted from extraneous — semantic, syntactic or symbolic — influences that would lessen the visual impact of characters typed in space.

Garnier does not treat typewriting as an alien script; in his usage "originality" is guaranteed by the human type-writer's idiosyncratic touch on the keys. Furthermore, typescript represents more than a reproduction; photographically copied as is, with errors intact, the machined poem is the original and final product of a process of synthesizing both mechanical and organic forces of expression: "In the mechanical poem this unity enters into the very conception of the work: since the poem is only reproduced by means of snapshots, the poet himself becomes a typographer, uniting the two crafts." (98) Garnier likens writing to what he calls "digital poetry" to the work of other artisans — needleworkers,

woodcutters, or calligraphers — because it is above all “an art of the hands and fingers,” (22) and a question of manual dexterity. Unlike pens or brushes, however, the typewriting machine is not merely an extension of the writer’s hand; it acts as a collaboration, sensitive to the author’s touch and guided by his eyes, but responding in its own language: the “eye perceives in these poems a movement, or rather a series, of pulsations transmitted by the typewriter and by the slender personality retained by the letters. The author strikes his own impulses on the machine’s keyboard; the eye serves as a regulator. There, too, dense zones appear, bright pathways, forms brought forth by the intensity of the touch, geologies, strata and concretions.” (65)

Garnier’s digital poetry could not be executed on any of this decade’s sophisticated electronic typewriters or — worse yet! — printers attached to computers designed to eliminate imperfections. Garnier requires a manual model which not only transcribes the variable personal energies of the individual typist in the lightness or heaviness of the character imprint, but allows for machine-inspired improvisation: it leaves room for creative typos and provocative misalignments. In Figure 4, “Blason du soleil,” what would normally be classified as bad typing — “irregularity of impression, irregularity of spacing, unevenness at the beginning of paragraphs, lines of typing not parallel with the top edge of the paper, uneven spacing between the lines, misuses of certain characters, . . .”¹⁶ takes on poetic attributes, and serves to generate the visible text much in the way “ungrammatical” features generate poetic texts for Michael Riffaterre.¹⁷ The disintegration of the word *soleil*, evoking the solar life-source and universal figure of cosmic progenitor, tells the story of mistaken alliances, of illegitimate associations, that call heraldic integrity into question. One sees the major outlines of an escutcheon formed by a horizontal band of *soleils* under which descend four vertical bands of the vowels *o* and *ei*, which seem to have lost the consonants that would allow the word *soleil* to be reconstructed. The lower two-thirds of the escutcheon is divided vertically into three parts: on the left and right the parenthetical symbols — half-moons — are reversed, as if to portray the sun broken up into disconnected halves, while in the middle a repeated series of strident ‘SOS’s stand out among half-obliterated letters like a garbled call for help. The escutcheon loses its visual and symbolic point towards the bottom, as serpentine squiggles spread out laterally, their hisses warning of the dangers of misalliance. The circular forms associated with orbs, orbits and unions are ubiquitous and varied: the innocuous lower case *o* which is part of *soleil*; the upper case *O* of the distress signal; and a much smaller $^{\circ}$, suggestive of the intense solar heat and/or passion, cause for the blot on ancestral purity.

The terms bastardization and adulteration immediately spring to mind

III. The Poet as Reprinter, or Second-hand News

In John Furnival's expansive visual poems, words step off the page into the environment, invading living space. His *Tours de Babel changées en pont* (Figure 5) was drawn or stamped on wooden doors each six and one-half feet high and two feet wide; the six panels are usually displayed in a semi-circle to create an environment papered with print, which surrounds the reader/viewer.¹⁸ The doors imprinted with word-bridges — both symbolic points of passage — let in an outer world which has already been transformed by posters, newspapers, or billboards into a typographic space, seemingly realizing Apollinaire's vision in *Zone*, that the literature of the 20th century would reflect the printed matter of lived reality:

... les prospectus les catalogues les affiches qui chantent tout
haut
Voilà la poesie ce matin et pour la prose il y a les journaux

[... Handbills catalogs posters singing out loud/That's poetry
this morning and for prose there are newspapers]

The dimensions of the *Tours de Babel* are such that it is impossible to read it like a book — comfortably, one page at a time. It is a sort of verbal architecture whose six connecting towers have visual clarity when seen at a distance but whose text is only legible, close-up, to the perambulating reader who takes in the printed matter forming the towers in serial fashion, more or less like a book projected, and enlarged, on a wall. The barrage of visual information creates a sense of confusion, and the overwhelming scale of this text reinforces the perception of babble made visible.

A collage of texts, sayings, influences that have entered into the public domain, Furnival's *Tours de Babel* constitutes a collaboration with past authors, identifiable or anonymous. The use of quotation and borrowed phrases is consistent with Furnival's reinterpretation of the history of letters as founded in babble, that is handed-down and overlapping tongues. The very title of Furnival's work is borrowed: the line taken from Apollinaire's "Liens," the opening poem of *Calligrammes*, is a reflection on how men are "linked" to each other and to history by their languages. Furnival's subject is the evolution of language: the "seminal" words ejaculated through the first phallic tower ("In the beginning was the word and

Figure 5. John Furnival, *Tours de Babel changées en pont* (1964).

the word was with God and the word was God. . . .”) invoke a time before language; out of the chaos of noises, loose letters and half-formed phrases trying to get into a shape, a word-bridge coalesces which will connect these first two towers to the other four, constructed from quotations, newspaper clippings and polyglot punning. As the very first decipherable words indicate, quotations play a significant role; the reference to the Book of Genesis alerts the reader immediately to Furnival’s preoccupation with the essential *unoriginality* of verbal creations. The texts that follow Furnival’s salute to Biblical creation — popular songs, news items, idiomatic expressions — are but a copying of things said or written before. Originality must thus be expressed in the manner of reproduction. Contrary to computer printouts, electronic typescripts or photocopies, Furnival’s reproductions are not limited by machine parameters governing the dimensions of the page, typeface or format. Hand-stamped or hand-scripted to look like a printed text, only magnified, *Tours de Babel* is a throwback to another, pre-electronic age, to the era of the public scribe. Described in 20th-century terms, the originating author would be a human duplicating machine, whose function is to reproduce an already existing text.

The third tower dubbed “EBONYTOWER,” is supported by columns of text, facsimiles of newspaper articles, either real or imagined. There Furnival counterfeits the newspaper’s look and its non-directed reading format: “Like a modern newspaper, *Tours de Babel* breaks strictly linear reading habits, as it must be scanned from top to bottom and bottom to top, as well as right to left. All this communication is realized with an originality and economy that is continually impressive.”¹⁹ Also like a newspaper, the various items reported deal simultaneously with timeless human questions and with topical problems of the latter 20th century. From a moral standpoint, these are subjects that bear repeating; creative principles also dictate continual reiteration, if one can judge from the stuttering effect of the type constrained to repeat itself, forced into the justified margins of a newspaper column as unyielding as the racism recounted in the story, “Black Chauffeurs for White Women ‘unseemly’.” (Figure 6)

The black/white opposition evident in the racial issues presented is but one manifestation of a newsprint motif, which surfaces as correct or incorrect spelling (“I must not spell there their”), or as right and wrong, sometimes mistakenly assimilated: the black magic associated with the *pentacle* can be confused with the “white” thaumaturgy implied in the word *Pentecost*. It is kept alive in a parody of the ditty “Bah Bah Black Sheep,

Figure 6. John Furnival, *Tours de Babel changées en pont* (detail).

Have you any wool?", whose words suffer material and chromatic alteration ("Have you any cotton,"); the song further degenerates into "Ba Ba Blue Sheep, Have you any Policy," or simply BAB/BLA, or "blah-blah", an ironic commentary on politicians' babble reported by the press. The whole text is permeated with a black humor that explodes into a multitude of HA HA's which black out the desperate call ("Hey Fellas, cut it out!") for silence and white spaces.

A certain critical tradition would dispute the poetic inspiration in newspapers designed, for economic reasons, to appeal to a mass audience and for readers with a short attention span. Indeed, the newspaper is the pejorative term of comparison that has been used to depreciate Apollinaire's poem "Il Pleut." Leon Roudiez criticizes the too mimetic quality of that calligram, which gives an excessively literal visual interpretation of rain dripping down the page in liquid lines. He notes, in contradistinction, that in Michel Butor's *Mobile* "lists of birds are disposed (...) in such a manner as to suggest a flight rather than picture it"; he suggests that the more subtle use of typography imbues Butor's text with a "visual evocative power" and confers on it a poeticity that would vanish, along with semantic features, should the words become pictures.²⁰ In "Il Pleut," too overtly mimetic factors cause the text to disappear in the image, thus interfering with a multi-levelled reading of the text: Roudiez *sees* "a representation of rainfall while the language of the poem disappears from [his] sight as readily as that of a newspaper item." (234)

As for vertical letters and worded columns — Mallarmé had already given a pejorative slant to the vertical line, associating it with newspapers and the banality of that discourse. In John Furnival's press art, the newspaper does not serve as a point of stylistic comparison, but is the actual model imitated, and transformed. Larger than life, his monolitho-graphic visual text doubles its referent in the mass-produced printed text with *the* manuscript original, and newsprint becomes the equivalent of Scripture. Thus is (hand)writing repersonalized through the detour of machine-assisted or -inspired creation. The selection of newspaper clippings that find their way into Furnival's towers are used to undermine the political stances they reflect; his imitation of the newspaper format is also subversive and is perhaps an even more effective weapon against the printing press than Marshall McLuhan's head-on attack. Imitation — mimicry, rather — is the stuff of art and the gesture by which this "typographic man" reclaims mastery over the machine. He does not seek to shake off the chains of his literate past; he is exuberantly linked to it.

1. Marshall McLuhan, *The Gutenberg Galaxy; The Making of Typographic Man* (University of Toronto Press, 1962), pp. 3-9.
2. "L'Esprit nouveau est celui du temps même où nous vivons. Un temps fertile en surprises. Les poètes veulent dompter la prophétie, [...] Ils veulent enfin, un jour, machiner la poésie comme on a machiné le monde. Ils veulent être les premiers à fournir un lyrisme tout neuf à ces nouveaux moyens d'expression qui ajoutent à l'art le mouvement et qui sont le phonographe et le cinéma. Ils n'en sont encore qu'à la période des incunables." Guillaume Apollinaire, "L'Esprit nouveau et les poètes," published in *Mercure de France*, 1-XII (1918), p. 376.
3. I am speaking of texts which remain within the traditional framework of works to be seen or to be read; literary creations destined for performance, such as Lettriste spectacle or recorded phonic poetry recorded on tape or in print, fall outside the scope of this discussion.
4. See the catalog for the exposition organized by the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden on collaboration among visual artists (June 9-August 19, 1984): Cynthia Jaffee McCabe, ed., *Artistic Collaboration in the Twentieth Century* (Wash. D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1984).
5. The five calligrams were: "Paysage," "Voyage," "Coeur couronne miroir," "La Cravate et la montre," and "Lettre-Océan."
6. Stefan Themerson, *Apollinaire's Lyrical Ideograms* (London: Gaberbocchus Press Ltd., 1968), p. 23. The implication that Apollinaire was insensitive to the effect of typographic disposition has been disputed: Greet and Lockerbie argue that the printer's version (Figure 1) remained faithful to the major design lines sketched out in the original manuscript of the ideogram. See Guillaume Apollinaire, *Calligrammes*, trans. Anne Hyde Greet and edited jointly by Greet and S. I. Lockerbie (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980), p. 402.
7. Roger Läufer, "Texte et typographie," *Littérature* 31, p. 106.
8. Francis Ponge, *La Fabrique de pré* (Geneva: Skira, 1971), p. 197.
9. Roland Barthes, *Le Grain de la voix* (Ps: Editions du Seuil, 1981), p. 184. Unless otherwise indicated, this, and all translations are mine.
10. For accounts of visual discrepancies occurring in the translation of Apollinaire's manuscripts into typeset ideograms, see Themerson, p. 27 ff., or David Seaman, *Concrete Poetry in France* (Ann Arbor, Mich.: UMI Research Press, 1981), pp. 179-83.
11. Pierre Albert-Birot, *Poésie, 1916-1924* (Ps: Gallimard, 1967), pp. 404 and 406.
12. "Je gravai sur bois un grand SIC central dont l'encadrement était fait à peu près de deux F, ce qui donnait le OUI central, plus SONS — IDEES — COULEURS, le tout contenu dans la FORME." [I engraved in wood a large SIC in the center of a frame formed more or less by two F's, which produced the central YES, plus SOUNDS — IDEAS — COLORS, the whole contained in the FORM.] Pierre Albert-Birot, "Naissance et vie de SIC," *Les Lettres Nouvelles* no. 7 (Sept. 1953).

13. Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," in *Illuminations* (N.Y.: Schocken Books, 1969), p. 220.
14. Michel Butor, "Eloge de la Machine à écrire," in *Repertoire IV* (Ps: Minuit, 1974), p. 428.
15. Pierre Garnier, *Spatialisme et poésie concrète* (Ps: Gallimard: 1968), p. 9. Pagination for further references given in text.
16. Sue Walker, "How Typewriters Changed Correspondence: an Analysis of Prescription and Practice," *Visible Language* XVIII 2 (1984), p. 103.
17. Michael Riffaterre, *Semiotics in Poetry* (Bloomington, Ind.: Ind. University Press, 1978), ch. 1 ("The Poem's Significance").
18. The six panels have been reproduced (with selected close-up details) in Richard Kostelanetz, *Imaged Words and Worded Images* (N.Y.: Outerbridge and Dienstfrey, 1970).
19. Richard Kostelanetz, *Metamorphosis in the Arts* (N.Y.: Assembling Press, 1980), p. 182.
20. Leon Roudiez, "Readable/Writable/Visible," *Visible Language*, Vol. XII, No. 3 (Summer 1978), p. 236.