"Visual Poetry" is a technique that we normally associate with seventeenth-century pattern verse and with the typographical format of modern free verse and concrete poetry. This essay is an examination of the ways in which eighteenth-century critics treated the visual format of traditional verse as a determinant in the readers' appreciation of form and meaning. Critics such as John Rice, John Walker and Joshua Steele reprinted sequences of verse in accordance with their ideals of oral delivery, and others, such as Thomas Barnes and Peter Walkden Fogg, regarded the silent printed text as productive of effects which could be appreciated only via the interpretive faculty of the eye. The final section explores correspondences between the eighteenth-century work and modern criticism, and goes on to argue that twentieth-century appreciations of the visual format of verse are limited by their concentration upon the more extravagant typographic experiments of free verse.

Richard Bradford

The Visual Poem in the Eighteenth Century

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Visual poetry is a concept that we tend to associate with two traditions of writing: the first being the brief seventeenth-century taste for typographical pattern, whose best known practitioner was George Herbert; and the second being the tendency towards typographic effect in the formal dispositions of modern free verse, a development which has reached its most explicit and self-conscious manisfestation in concrete poetry. The eighteenth century is regarded as the age of poetic grace, order and lucidity; its most eminent critical spokesmen, Joseph Addison and Samuel Johnson, condemned the seventeeth-century pattern poems as "false wit" and the relatively respectable experiment of Miltonic blank verse as "verse only to the eye." The critical and creative atmosphere of the period between the Restoration and the emergence of romanticism seems the least likely to have either inspired or tolerated such self-indulgent peculiarities as the visual manipulation of the written word. But, as the following study will show, there existed within the eighteenth-century a series of intriguing debates on how the visual text affects the journey of the poem from writer to reader.

Sound and Vision

The genesis of literary criticism as we know it today occured in the eighteenth century. It was not then attached to a particular eduational system, but it did begin to address itself to something called the reader. Earlier critics of poetry such as Sir Philip Sidney, George Puttenham and George Gascoigne had attempted to establish some sort of formal identity for a recent discourse whose subject was English literature, but their audience was the hypothetical practitioners of these forms. In the eighteenth century, the expansion of non-dramatic literature into the more public forum of booksellers, public readings and individual libraries of contemporary writing was accompanied by a shift of critical emphasis away from the writer and towards the reader, a person who might need to have the developing complexities of form and technique explained and interpreted for him.

One consequence of the emergence of the printing press into the center stage of cultural life was an increased sense of distance between the creator of the poem and the person who might find himself faced with the task of disclosing subtle nuances of intended meaning either in the silent, contemplative atmosphere of the drawing room or in the more active context of the public reading. And in the sphere of critical writing there developed a tendency towards the treatment of the printed poem as a temporary record of the original process of intonation, rhythm and emphasis which the distanced reader would need to recreate in order to receive, or to publicly perform, the full intensity of the poet's meaning. The most surprising and fascinating aspect of this new taste in interpretation was the meticulous and often ingenious emphasis given to the fact that the first meeting of poet and reader took place on the silent printed page. The critics to be discussed below grant us, even after two hundred years of interpretive sophistication, a new insight into the function of the eye in the determination of the effects and patterns in poetry which we might all too easily associate with the receptive faculty of the ear.

Milton and the Printer's Measure

Samuel Johnson's famous declaration that *Paradise Lost* "seems to be verse only to the eye"[1] was no more than a perfunctory acknowledgment of a long established contemporary attitude towards the unrhymed pentameter as a convention of the printer. As early as 1679, a little-known country parson, Samuel Woodford, had suggested that the poem might suffer little if printed as prose.[2]

Woodford's significance in the history of interpretation should be recognized because he both addressed himself to what would become one of the major concerns of eighteenth-century critics and also raised problems of interpretation which re-emerged in early responses to the invention of modern free verse. Woodford admits that *Paradise Lost* "shall live as long as there are Men left to read and understand it," but of its style he suggests that though Milton might have been in a "Poetic rapture ... through the Disguise, the Prose appears" (Sig. B7[r]). He goes on to reprint a section of Milton's prose as verse, and although the new format is an irregular departure from the strict iambic pentameter, it does echo the uniquely Miltonic effect of the verse line cutting into and intensifying the already elaborate syntax, which many critics have found to be part of the poetic design of *Paradise Lost.*

Then Zeal, whose substance is Aetherial,
Arming in compleat Diamond, ascends
His Fiery Chariot, drawn with two blazing Meteors
Figur'd like Beasts, but of an higher Breed
Than any the Zodiac *yields; resembling two*
Of those Four, which Ezekial *and* St. John *(saw;)*
The one visag'd like a Lion, to express
Power, high Authority, and Indignation,
The other Countenance like a Man, to cast
Derision, and Scorn, upon perverse,
And Fradulent Seducers.
With these the Invincible Warrior Zeal, etc

(Sig. B7[r])

Woodford's experiment is significant because it sets a precedent for eighteenth-century critics. First it suggests that the rhythms and intonational sequences which we regard as poetic are actually present in a variety of distinct expressive contexts, including, it would seem, theological prose. And by implication, it would seem that our response to such sequences is determined essentially by our *visual* recognition of context. We read *Paradise Lost* as poetry because it *looks* like poetry, and Woodford attempts to demonstrate that we would also read the unpoetically titled *Apology in Answer to the Modest Confutation of a Libel intituled, Animadversions upon the Remonstrants Defence of Smectymnuus* as a poem if it were made to look like a poem. It would seem that our response to context and genre might be part of a Pavlovian instinct triggered by typography.

In 1709, William Coward also observed that the effect and meaning of loosely textured blank verse owes something to the illusion of its visual format.

'Tis true the Fiction's *wonderfully done,*
And the whole Clue of Thoughts *completely spun.*
But like an Image *cast in Curious Mould,*
Tho' 'tis compos'd of finely polish'd Gold,
Yet wants that Breath of Life *to make It live,*
Which should right Vigour *and true* Spirit *Give.*
For fine Romances may be made the same,
If but the Printer *please to set the Frame.*
And Declamations ty'd to Measur'd Feet,
May yield an Harmony as truly sweet
But how can such Exactness Fancy *Raise,*
More than loose Prose, and undesign'd for Lays?[3]

To have regarded blank verse as an "*Image* cast in Curious Mould" and as partly the creation of the "Printer" was by no means an eccentric opinion, and this emphasis upon the effect of the visual format upon the reader's understanding was later in the eighteenth century to become an essential concern of one branch of criticism known as elocutionism. Writers such as John Rice, Thomas Sheridan and John Walker produced extensive guides to the oral performance of written discourse, and though a certain amount of their instruction is directed toward the preacher and public orator, their most intriguing work is concerned with the interpretation of poetry. The sensitive precision with which the elocutionists addressed themselves to the subtle nuances of poetic form preempts the modern ethos of close reading, but unlike their modern counterparts, the eighteenth-century critics maintained an almost fanatical concern with the genuine identity of poetic meaning as only realizable in its oral performance.

In his *Introduction to the Art of Reading with Energy and Propriety* (1765), John Rice raises what at the time was a familiar complaint against the reader who would emphasize the monotonous unstress/stress sequence of the pentameter and consequently suppress the broader interlineal pattern of rhythm and intonation. He lays primary blame for this fault upon the shape of the poem on the page: "The lines drawn up in Rank and File, with a capital Initial at the Head of Each, look formidable, and seem to demand a peculiar degree of Sound and Energy" (p.16). His solution to this is to have poems printed as a more accurate visual record of their intended aural identity, and he does this with lengthy sections of *Paradise Lost*, of which the follow-

ing is an example.

The third his Feet
Shadow'd from either Heel, with feather'd Mail
Sky tinctur'd Grain. Like Maias Son he stood ...

V 283-285 (original)

The third his Feet shadow'd from either Heel with feather'd Mail
Sky tinctur'd Grain.

(Rice's reprinting, pp.178-179)

The new arrangements would, he says, "be of great use to common Readers who are apt to pause at the End of a Line in reciting Verse, whether the Sense will admit of it or no...nor do I believe that they [the lines] would be deprived of any Part of their poetical Beauty." A contemporary of Rice, John Walker, was also aware that the printed pentameter could generate a causal chain of expectations, with its visual format providing an artificial backbone to an incorrect interpretation of the aural poem. In his *Rhetorical Grammar or course of lessons on elocution*, (1785), Walker rearranges the first twenty-six lines of *Paradise Lost* to "present to the eye the same union which is actually made by the ear," an experiment which has the famous opening lines ending at "Disobedience," "Tree" and "Taste" (pp. 343-345).

Rice and Walker were arguing primarily against another elocutionist critic, Thomas Sheridan, who in his *Lectures on the Art of Reading* (1775) claimed that Milton had intended to have *Paradise Lost* interpreted according to its conventional printed form and that what he called the "pause of suspension" at the line ending was a Miltonic strategy to isolate the traditional pentameter, and more significantly, to intensify and make intricate both the rhythmic sweep and the delicate meaning of the verse paragraphs.[4]

The most important element of this debate is that all three critics claimed to have heard three different poems. The point of controversy was in locating the visual structure which most accurately reflects, rather than determines, the aural poem, and here the elocutionists had wandered into a sphere of analysis which we tend to associate only with the academic sophistications of modern analysis. If the rhythms and consequently the meaning of a piece of writing could be altered by changing not the words themselves, but the context in which they are understood, then it would follow that poetic effects are as much the consequence of the attitude and condition of the reader as they are the products of the poet's intention. I will examine the correspon-

dences between the eighteenth century and the modern perspectives in the closing section, but at present I shall look more closely at how the eighteenth century version of reader-response theory found itself dealing essentially with the effect of visual patterns.

The results of the acceptance of the visual text as a kind of musical score, a guide to the oral recreation of the original poem, ranged from the tediously meticulous to the downright bizarre, but the most sophisticated adaptation of the musical analogy can be found in Joshua Steele's *Prosodia Rationalis: or an Essay Towards Establishing the Melody and Measure of Speech, to be Expressed and Perpetuated by Peculiar Symbols* (1775), a work which rejects the bland relativity of unstress/stress values and presents a technique of scansion and performance which could claim as much precision as our own structural and generative linguistics.

It is generally assumed that the study of poetic form and prosody was revolutionized by George L. Trager's and Henry Lee Smith's paper, "An Outline of English Structure" (1951).[5] Trager and Smith argue that the notion of English as a language with only two degrees of stress is a gross simplification, and that the positive and negative degrees of accentuation in, say, an iambic sequence should be more accurately recorded upon a relative scale of one to four. This concept of multiple stress relativity has since been a central component of linguistic prosody, but a glance at Steele's explanation of his symbolic apparatus should establish that modern prosody is two hundred years behind the times.

1st ACCENT. Acute ⁄ grave ⁄ , or both combined in a variety of circumflexes

2nd QUANTITY. Longest , long , short , shortest

3rdly PAUSE or *silence.* Semibrief rest , minim rest , crotchet rest , quaver rest

4thly EMPHASIS or *Cadence.* Heavy △ , light , lightest

5thly FORCE or *quality of sound.* Loud , louder , soft , softer

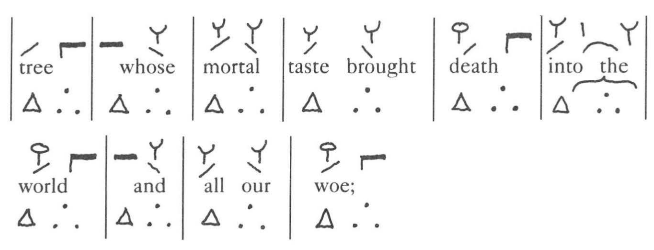
Swelling or increasing in loudness , decreasing in loudness

or dying away , Loudness uniformly continued

(p. 24)

In Steele's application of this apparatus to the opening three lines of *Paradise Lost,* we find the conventional printed poem transformed into a diagram of its aural identity.

Of	man's	first diso	bedience	and the	fruit of	that for	bidden



(p. 77)

Whatever our opinion of the accuracy of Steele's interpretive technique, we must accept that he succeeds in exposing a number of tacit assumptions about the poem on the page that we, in the later twentieth century, still often take for granted. It is difficult to determine precisely how the cognitive function of recognizing a "poem" as a printed format influences the more complex procedure of understanding its effects or reading it aloud, but as Rice and Walker have demonstrated, the two processes are by no means discrete. Steele goes even further than his contemporaries in his complete rejection of the printer's measure and his replacement of this by a format which is designed to record the precise duration, stress value and demarcation of formal components.The poem, in lines, has been effectively rejected in favor of a visual format where written language and symbols are predicates of its ideal aural presence.

The hypothesis of having all poems printed as musical scores is rather difficult to contemplate, but Steele's dedication to the visible format is no more than a logical extension of Woodford's claim that the silent recognition even of the poetic line can have a serious influence upon sound and meaning.

Paradise Lost offered the most complex points of controversy in the visual/aural debate because of its status as the first major English poem to deploy varied and extended rhythmic sequences unregimented by rhyme or regular syntactic closure—its true rhythmic and prosodic identity thus became a matter of opinion. But critical discussion of the relationships between visual cognition and oral performance extended far beyond the problems raised by blank verse.

Steele's musical score is the most precise and meticulous attempt to recreate the aural poem in visual form, but the whole tradition of aural/visual speculation is underpinned by the implication that during the journey from creation to reading, the poem might well

acquire and discharge several distinct, and possibly irreconcilable, patterns of rhythm and meaning.

In his 1789 "Essay on Rhythmical Measures," Walter Young considers the relationship between the reader and the written text to be an essential determinant in these matters.

A very gentle hint will incline a hearer to count off such feet by combinations of the smaller even numbers. For this little more is necessary than to write them out in separate lines. The tones of the voice, with which a person is disposed to read lines of such even measure, are often sufficient to direct the hearer to the number according to which they are framed.[6]

Young raises the question of whether it is the poem or the shape of the poem which conditions the reader's awareness of its structural form. It is a very short step from this implicit recognition of the power of visual form to the acceptance of silent reading as a process of appreciation quite separate from the ideal of oral performance, and this is exactly what we find inThomas Barnes' 1785 essay, "On the Nature and Essential Characteristics of Poetry as distinguished from Prose."

The musicalness and flow of numerous composition, which charms the ear of every judicious reader, is certainly felt most strongly, where it is *read aloud*, with taste and expression. But when read *with the eye only*, without the accompaniment of the voice, there is a *fainter association* of the sound, the *shadow of the music*, as it were, connected with the words; so that we can judge exactly of the composition as if it were audible to the ear. This habit of composition associating *sound* with *vision*, is formed gradually by habit .... And some Gentlemen are said to have acquired this art of mental combination so perfectly, as to *read*, even the *notes* of a musical composition with considerable pleasure...[7].

Barnes draws out one element of the visual/aural relationship which critics such as Rice and Walker either take for granted or deliberately suppress. Walker's objective, to "prevent the eye from imposing upon the ear," is something of a contradiction in terms, since his own technique of typographic redisposition gives tacit priority to the power and function of the eye.

There must be many readers who are as fascinated by the changes in form and meaning which can be produced by changes in shape as they are concerned with the ideal style of oral delivery. And this slightly illicit process of silent, visual appreciation finds its most extravagant manifestation in Peter Walkden Fogg's *Elementa Anglicana* (1792/6). In his section on the appreciation of English verse form, Fogg reflects upon how the mind of the reader finds pleasure in the harmonies and discontinuities of rhythmic verse.

The traces of these delightful movements frequently remain in the mind, and serve as a kind of inspiration, allowing them no rest till they have filled up the craving void of these blanks of harmony with compositions of their own. The varied and yet regular maze affords numberless objects of comparison, which to perceive is

unspeakably pleasant, though to point them out might seem tedious. Nay, as was before remarked on the *melody* of pauses, pleasure may be derived from a view of straight lines in the same variety and proportion.

(Vol. II, p. 198)

It would seem that Steele's concept of musical form in language has been drawn out beyond its status as an analogy, to the extent that the substance, the material, of language can present us with a sphere of appreciation quite separate from its meaning—wordless music. The following is a short section from Fogg's rewriting of a poem by William Hayley:

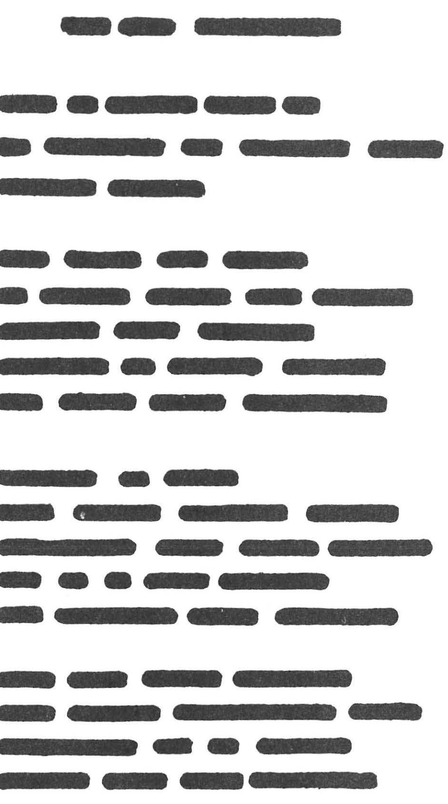
Of humbler mien, but not of mortal race,
Ill fated Dryden, with imperial grace,
Gives to th'obedient lyre his rapid laws
Tones yet unheard, with touch divine, he draws,
The melting Fall, the rising swell sublime,
And all the magic of melodious rhyme

(Vol.II, p. 200)

Fogg comments: "Then the mind glances over the whole with a rapidity that enhances the delight; and the more as we suppose many other proportions still unperceived" (II, p.199). If his experiments leave us with a message, it is that it is all too easy to regard the processes of reading, seeing and understanding as distinct aspects of our cognitive and aesthetic response to poetry. We would surely not appreciate the proportions of harmony if we did not know that they interconnect with the more familiar medium of language, but as Fogg argues, our sensitivity to the beauty of language is conditioned to some degree by the literal shape and movement of language as material.

Fogg's experiments were a remarkably exact anticipation of Man Ray's 1924 poem[8] consisting of a title and four stanzas, with lines arranged in a straight vertical sequence on the left and a less predictable one on the right, but with no words. Man Ray called the poem "Lautgedicht," and the joke is rather more serious than it seems since Ray's reader would recognize a poem but would not be able to read it. Ray's pseudo-concrete experiment obliges us to admit that we understand

aspects of poetic writing which are outside its meaning, but the joke was a century and a half too late.



Man Ray: Lautgedicht. 1924

Rhyme

We still tend to regard the eighteenth century as a period of literary history dominated by the rhymed couplet, and we would certainly find it difficult to accept that the ethos of Dryden and Pope was accompanied by a critical attitude to rhyme as a dangerously irrational departure from the ideal of poetic clarity. But, as I shall show, such opinions existed, and they offer one more dimension to the eighteenth-century concern with the identity and effect of the aural poem.

W.K. Wimsatt has produced the most penetrating and influential modern readings of Pope's rhymed couplets,[9] but he was once caused to consider a peculiar dichotomy between his own attitude to rhyme and the image of the eighteenth century as the age of reason, and to ask why "sense, basically ordered by the rational schemes of parallel and antithesis" should rely so much

"on so barbarous and Gothic a device as rhyme?"[10] Wimsatt finds it odd that poetry which maintains an ideal of order and precision should depend upon a structural keystone which reminds us that the surface of language, its sound, is littered with connections and coincidences which relate only arbitrarily to its sense. William Mason, an elocutionist, preempted Wimsatt's question in 1749. Mason argued that the rhymed couplet,

lays [poetry] under the most miserable Restraint, hampers it with the most unreasonable Fetters, cramps a true poetic Fancy, and whilst it keeps the Attention fixt on the structure and sound of the Words, takes it off from that which is the very Life and Spirit of all true poetical Composition, viz sublime thought and strong Language, it pleases the ear at the expense of our Understanding, and puts us off with Sound instead of Sense.[11]

Rhyme presented a number of eighteenth-century critics with a problem which is obtusely related to the shape of the poem on the page: both are capable of bringing the reader closer to the materiality and away from the meaning of language. In the case of rhyme, it is the phonemic rather than the typographic material which is the more disruptive. John Rice pursues Mason's sound/sense theme:

The English, and all those Tongues which retain any considerable share of the Teutonic Stock and Idiom, are remarkably addicted to Rhime; The numerous Similarity of Sounds frequently causing us to fall into it in common Conversation.[12]

Rice goes on to argue that poems which emphasize the random coincidental nature of rhyme, by using off-rhymes or by placing a rhyme word at a point which interrupts the flow of syntax, actually make poetry resemble the unstructured peculiarities of "common Conversation." The rhymes in these poems "are certainly disgustful, as they break in on the natural Expression." William Cockin, in his *The Art of Delivering Written Language; or, an Essay on Reading* (1775), shifts the emphasis toward the role of the reader, who might deliberately stress the rhyme words at the expense of the ordered linguistic sequence.

By this method they not only destroy one source of pleasure intended by the composer (which though not great is nevertheless genuine) but even often supply its place with what is really disagreeable, by making the rhymes, as they are interruptedly perceived, appear accidental blemishes of a different Style, arising from an unmeaning recurrence of similar sounds

(pp. 138-39).

Cockin's comments on the danger of readers being deceived into "accidental blemishes of a different Style" echo Rice's and Walker's discussions of the visual format as capable of distorting an accurate oral delivery of the poem. The tendency for rhyme to momentarily detain the reader so that the straightforward sequential progres-

sion of the language is interrupted was regarded as the equivalent of the printer's line's imposition of artificial form upon the true rhythmic sequence.

In his *Rhetorical Grammar* (1785), Walker brings the phonemic and typographic media together in his discussion of the type of couplet which allows syntax to run over, and thus isolate, the rhyme word. He locates several instances of this in the work of Pope and suggests that the confusion of the double perspective could be resolved for the reader by the familiar technique of reprinting the poem.

Which, without passing through the judgement, gains
The heart, and all its end at once obtains.
(original)

Which, without passing through the judgement,
Gains the heart,
And all its end at once obtains.
(Walker's reprinting, p. 333)

Music resembles poetry: in each
Are nameless graces which no methods teach
(original)

Music resembles poetry:
In each are nameless graces which no methods teach
(Walker's reprinting, p. 335)

There is a consistency in Walker's "rewritings" of both Milton and Pope because in both cases he attempts to present the text as a linear sequence of rhythm and meaning and to exclude those intensifications of form which deepen the texture, or as Rice put it, "break in upon the Natural Expression."

These eighteenth-century critics were by no means arguing for the total exclusion of rhyme from poetic writing, but they were attempting to limit its capacity to create "effect" outside the sphere of transparent meaning. And it is here that we can locate the crucial distinction between eighteenth-century readings and the codes of interpretation which are part of the conditioned reflexes of the modern reader, or to be more accurate, the modern critic. The following appreciation of rhyme is from Edward Stankiewicz's 1961 essay on "Poetic and Non-Poetic Language":

Successful rhyme is illogical and canny, striking and familiar, prominent and subsumed; it provides the condensed formula of poetic language: identity and variation, obligatoriness and freedom, sound and meaning, unity and plurality, texture and structure. [13]

Stankiewicz's catalogue of polarities, particularly the archetypal paring of "sound and meaning," run in complete opposition to the eighteenth-century ideal of clarity which would give full priority to meaning *over* sound. As the concluding section will show, our sense of poetic form as an explicit synthesis of surface and meaning, of the materiality and the transparency of language, place us in a very different category of reader from that shared by the eighteenth-century commentators discussed in this essay. The link point, and the point of controversy, is in the relationship between the aural and the visual poem.

The Modern Perspective

In 1964, Yvor Winters published an essay called "The Audible Reading of Poetry."[14] As its title suggests, much of Winters' essay echoes the objectives and priorities of the eighteenth-century elocutionists, but it also strikes a note of loss and desperation, a feeling that he is working in a cultural environment in which the process of "audible reading" is redundant.

He begins with an apology for the possibility that his title might "have in it something of the jargon of the modern Educationalist," and he goes on to tiptoe through a chaotic battleground of terminology. His purpose is to "indicate the reading of poetry not merely for the sensual ear, but for the mind's ear as well; yet the mind's ear can be trained only by way of the other, and the matter, practically considered, comes inescapably back to the reading of poetry aloud." He goes on, very honestly, to confront the attendant problem of defining "reading," invoking, among others, those who "hear nothing when they read silently, and who are helpless in their efforts to read aloud"; those "trained by the psychological educationalists to merely read more rapidly," and the "scholar who appears to have read everything" but whose "failure to hear" has made him "understand very little." Winters' notion of audible reading is apparently "a matter of which there is no understanding at the present time" but which is "a matter of utmost importance to the proper understanding of poetry, a matter fully as important as the philosophical speculation and learned paraphrasing of the New Critics." Winters goes on to state that rhythm is central to the identity of all poetry, and without hearing a poem we are denied a vital key to its more complex meanings: "without audible reading, and adequate audible reading, you simply do not have poetry."

Winters was, and is, swimming against the tide because the tentative acceptance by Fogg of the visual text as of equal significance as its oral delivery has, in the twentieth century, become a tacit but fundamental component in

the process of interpretation.

One of the few modern critics to explicitly confront this fact was Samuel Levin in his essay on "The Conventions of Poetry";

Obviously, the line has typographical identity...the typographical groupings (and concomitant pauses) are not random; some organizing principle must be at work behind them. This is the principle of meter.... In fact, most meters are not in themselves transparent over the larger span; they provide no recurrent distinctive metrical configuration to mark the end of the line. In such meters the feature that functions to signal the end of the line is usually some sort of sound-euphony-rhyme or assonance.... When the line is defined for the hearer it is defined by conventional features of poetry and is thus itself a convention; it has no linguistic relevance.[15]

Levin restates, in very clinical terms, the problem which Woodford, Rice, Sheridan, Walker and Steele fought so conscientiously to resolve: the poetic line, unless signaled by typography, grammar, rhyme or by the meticulous care of the reciter, is a shifting and arbitrary category, a convention, or as the earlier critics put it, the printer's measure.

Stanley Fish, a reader-response theorist, extends such thinking to what must be regarded as its conclusion:

Line endings exist by virture of perceptual strategies rather than the other way around. Historically, the strategy we know as 'reading (or hearing) poetry' has included paying attention to the line as a unit, but it is precisely that attention which has made the line as a unit (either in print or of aural duration) available.... In short what is noticed is what has been made noticeable not by a clear and undistorting glass, but by an interpretive strategy.[16]

In one sense this shift of emphasis towards convention and the power of the interpretive strategy might seem to threaten only the assumptions of metrical theory: Are the rhythmic alternatives of *Paradise Lost* the product of the different strategies of Rice, Walker and Sheridan and not of the formal subtleties of Milton? But the possibility of reversing the accepted balance between linguistic fact and interpretive variation is even more important because it can also undermine the elaborate process of criticism and understanding which *begins* with the identification of poetic form. The formal structure of a poem has to be identified as constant in order for a critic to explicate the ways in which it may organize, absorb or restructure surface meanings. For the modern reader the problem might seem less than threatening because an acceptance that a poem can be read in two or three different ways and thus discharge several distinct subtleties of meaning is fully accommodated by a critical ethos which has come to regard ambiguity, tension and paradox as central to all poetry. But in the eighteenth century, the form and meaning of the poem was the *single* objective of critical analysis, and to question the status of a unitary balance between form and meaning

would also threaten the more sacrosanct ideal of one person, the poet, *speaking* to another, the reader. The question of why critics from two periods of literary history should address themselves to very similar issues and come to different conclusions is not too difficult to answer when we consider the significance of the one major aesthetic and cultural watershed which separates us from the eighteenth century: modernism.

It is clear that the sort of poetry which most consistently and forcefully proclaims its uniqueness as literature, its disdain of the familiar conventions of ordinary language, is that which began to be written in the twentieth century. So there is at least circumstantial evidence to suggest that twentieth-century criticism developed as it did in order to provide an interpretive model which could account for the initially disturbing discontinuities and peculiarities of modern literature, a model which went on to locate the opacities and ellusiveness of modern poetry as properties of *all* poetry. One important element of the sense of distance and disorientation in modernist technique is the absence of a stable voice or perspective to which the reader feels able to relate, and as a consequence of this, criticism has become more vividly aware of its own role in the disclosure, or to be more accurate, the production of patterns of coherence and continuity. The voice of the critic has now become as powerful as the voice of the poet.

The new role of the critic becomes most evident in essays such as Stanley Fish's "How to Recognize A Poem When You See One,"[17] in which he illustrates his thesis that literary form is a pattern established by the interpretive strategies of the reader. In this essay, Fish tells of how a group of "competent" English literature students are asked to criticize and elucidate a modernist religious lyric which is on the seminar room blackboard. They proceed to do so and employ an impressive repertoire of analytical techniques and scholarly awareness. The point of this exercise is that the words on the board are actually a list of names left over from the preceding class on linguistics and that the students are able to make them sound like a poem because their analytical methodology is triggered by the illusion that it is one. The "poem":

Jacobs - Rosenbaum
Levin
Thorne
Hayes
Ohman (?)

There is clearly a similarity between the illusion offered by Fish to his students and Woodford's experiment with Milton's prose. In neither case were the words *intended* as poetry, and in both cases the readers are asked to accept them as poems because of the context in which they appear, a context whose recognition is crucially dependent upon the shape of the words on the page. But there is also an important difference. Fish's students would no doubt find precedents for their critical procedures in the work of e.e. cummings, William Carlos Williams, or more specifically, in the writings of ideogram poets such as Charles Olson or Robert Duncan, where the typographic isolation of individual words and phrases has come to constitute something of a grammar, a technical tradition. Woodford's readers would be able to compare the typographically arranged prose with patterns and idioms of dramatic blank verse, and it is here that we find the crucial distinction between the responses to the two typographic experiments and between their critical contexts: eighteenth-century readers and critics *disclosed* a variety of formal sequences from a single text, but their twentieth-century counterparts possess a repertoire of formal models which they are able to *impose* upon practically any random sequence of typographic marks.

The distinction becomes more emphathic in an experiment by Jonathan Culler where he rearranges a section from Quine's philosophical essay, *From a Logical Point of View*, as a free verse lyric:

From a Logical Point of View

A curious

thing

about the

ontological

problem

is

its

simplicity

The typographical arrangement produces a different kind of attention and releases some of the potential verbal energy of thing,' 'is' and 'simplicity'. We are dealing less with a property of language (intrinsic irony or paradox) than with a strategy of reading, whose major operations are applied to verbal objectives set as poems even when their metrical and phonetic patterns are not obvious. [18]

Several pages later, Culler performs the same critical operation on William Carlos Williams' "This Is Just To Say," but we should note that neither he nor Fish

attempts to illustrate his reader-centered thesis by dividing up a piece of Dickensian prose and comparing it with a section from Wordsworth's *Prelude.* Had they done so, they would have been forced to acknowledge the fact that there is a subtle complicity between modern criticism and modernist writing because the rhythmic and intonational patterns are, to adapt Culler's phrase, "a property of language: in both of those pre-modernist texts, not merely a consequence of the reader's ability to respond to context."

John Herries, in his *Elements of Speech* (1773), found a discernible interchange of poetic form in distinct categories of writing: "As we often find a line of hexameters, sapphic periods unknown to the author, so it might be easy to produce a variety of the most perfect iambic or anapestic verses in Addison, Bolingbroke and other harmonious English writings" (pp. 187-188). And in his *Essay upon the Harmony of Language* (1774), William Mitford claimed to have found a considerable number of regular pentameters in Bishop Tillotson's sermons (p. 203). These two critics share with their contemporaries a belief that poetic form is tangible and intrinsic to the text, something which can be heard, and whose visual format will either disrupt or enhance the essentially aural identity of the poem. For the modern critic, the visual format has become a trigger mechanism for the silent process of criticism.

In an article on the phenomenology of the poetic line, Richard Kell inadvertently reveals the true nature of the modern perspective.

We can safely claim that more often than not poetry does require verse layout, either because its rhythm is measured or because its rhythm is so subtle and so closely related to its meaning that versification is necessary to ensure that nothing is overlooked or distorted.[19]

This is an illuminating example of semantic morphology because Kell uses the word "versification"—first used by Dryden as a synonym for the meter and prosodic form—to mean nothing more than "lineation" or "typography." Kell's recognition that "verse layout...is necessary to ensure that nothing is overlooked or distorted" is itself a rather distorted echo of Rice's complaint that, "The lines drawn up in Rank and File, with a capital Initial at the Head of each look formidable, and seem to demand a peculiar Degree of Sound and Energy." Kell and Rice exemplify the distinction between two attitudes to the visual format. Kell relates form to content; he regards versification (or lineation) as a primary signal of the establishment of the artifact as a poem and as the starting point in the process of explication, a process which

involves the clarification of meanings "overlooked or distorted." Rice and his contemporaries regarded the visual format as a record of an oral event, an event which in itself can resolve potential distortions of meaning.

I would not argue that the desire to perform and appreciate the aural poem has been excluded from the cultural life of this century, but it seems clear that the processes of performing, hearing and criticizing verse, which in the eighteenth century were closely interrelated, have now become radically divergent. The tendency for modern criticism to work within the depth and complexity of multiple meaning is dependent upon the silent, clinical analysis of the witten text. In John Hollander's famous essay, "'Sense Variously Drawn Out': On English Enjambment," we find the modern critic savoring the "positional ambiguity" of "Fruit" in the opening lines of *Paradise Lost.*

Of Man's first Disobedience, and the Fruit
Of that Forbidden Tree

For Hollander, the lines exhibit a tension between syntax and meter: "These two impulses...are the warp and weft of the verse fabric of *Paradise Lost.*"[20] The "warp and weft," to John Walker's 1785 ear, has the lines ending at "Disobedience," "Tree" and "taste." It would oversimplify matters to regard this as a straightforward critical disagreement because Walker's objective is to "present to the eye the same union which is actually made by the ear," to seek out the hidden aural text as the final realization of meaning and style. But, for Hollander, the visual format becomes the entry point for critical analysis: if the lines were reprinted at random, he would still be capable of imposing a plausible critical formula, just as Fish and Culler demonstrate their ability to do so with non-poetic language.

The centralization of the visual format in modern criticism is, in my opinion, the consequence of our ability to explicate free verse. One of the primary objectives of modernist poets was to free themselves from what they found to be the stultifying conventions of traditional form, a category which included the continuities of regular prosody. Critics were thus denied the recognition of a stable rhythmic or phonetic framework, such as the iambic pentameter, from which they could proceed to relate the form to the meaning of the poem.The tempting alternative to rhythmic form was visual pattern, and as Hollander, Fish and Culler demonstrate, this shift of

emphasis has been assimilated into critical perspectives on all visual arrangements of language.

It has not been my intention in this essay to discredit the assumptions and practices of modern criticism in favor of the eighteenth century. Critics from both periods are equally capable of ingenuity and precision, but it is in the tension between the two radically different perspectives upon aural/visual poetry that we might find a new and illuminating framework for the exploration of what we mean by seeing, reading, hearing and criticizing.

Endnotes

1 Samuel Johnson, "Life of Milton", in *Lives of the English Poets*, ed. Birkbeck-Hill (Oxford, 1905), 193

2 The Preface to Samuel Woodford's *A Paraphrase Upon the Canticles* (1679).

3 William Coward, *Licentia Poetica discuss'd* (1709), 65-66.

4 See Thomas Sheridan, *Lectures on the Art of Reading* II (1775), 246-257, and Richard Bradford, " 'Verse Only to the Eye?' Line Endings in *Paradise Lost,*" *Essays in Criticism*, 3 (1983), 187- 204.

5 George L. Trager and Henry Lee Smith, "An Outline of English Structure," *Studies in Linguistics: Occasional Papers*, 3 (Norman Oklahoma, 1951).

6 Walter Young, "Essay on Rhythmical Measures," in *Transactions of the Royal Society of Edinburgh*, Vol.II, part II (1786), 72.

7 Thomas Barnes, "On the Nature and Essential Characteristics of Poetry as Distinguished from Prose," in *Memoirs of the Manchester Literary and Philosophical Society*, I (1785), 54-71.

8 Man Ray's "Lautgedicht" is reprinted in *Between Poetry and Painting*, (Institute of Contemporary Arts, 1965).

9 See W.K. Wimsatt,"One Relation of Rhyme to Reason: Alexander Pope,"*MLQ* 5 (1944), 325-38.

10 W.K. Wimsatt, "Rhetoric and Poems: Alexander Pope," *English Institute Essays* (1948) References are from the reprint in *The Verbal Icon* (1954), 169-87; see p.72.

11 William Mason, *Essay on the Power and Harmony of Prosaic Numbers* (1749), 47.

12 John Rice, *Introduction to the Art of Reading with Energy and Propriety* (1765), 170.

13 Edward Stankiewicz, "Poetic and Non-Poetic Language," in *Poetics Poetyka—Poetika*, ed. D. Davie et al. (Warsaw: Mouton, 1961), 16.

14 Yvor Winters, "The Audible Reading of Poetry," *Hudson Review*, 4 (1951), 433-47.

15 Samuel Levin, "The Conventions of Poetry," in *Literary Style: A Symposium*, ed. S. Chatman (New York, 1971) 177-93; see p.177.

16 Stanley Fish, *Is there a Text in This Class?* (Harvard UP, 1980), 165-66.

17 Stanley Fish, *Is There a Text in This Class?* 322-337.

18 Jonathan Culler, *Structuralist Poetics* (Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1975), 163.

19 Richard Kell, "A Note on Versification," *British Journal of Aesthetics*, 3 (1963), 341-345.

20 John Hollander, " 'Sense Variously Drawn Out': On English Enjambment," in *Vision and Resonance: Two Senses of Poetic Form* (Oxford University Press, 1975), 94.