

It is common for modern French verse to be printed without punctuation. This raises the question of whether the rhythms of speech, as denoted by the line endings of verse, correspond redundantly to the syntactic and semantic patterns of the ideas expressed, as normally denoted by other punctuation. It is argued that in the verse writings of Stéphane Mallarmé, the suppression of normal punctuation, resulting in irresolvable ambiguities or in obscurities resolved only later in the text, obliges the reader to be especially conscious of his usual expectation of syntactic and semantic guidance and so requires him to concentrate to an exceptional degree on the tension between the physical activity of speech and the related ideational activity. In the work of Guillaume Apollinaire, on the contrary, the effect of omitting punctuation is to ensure that the reader can recognize simultaneously the varied sense perceptions related by the poet and to emphasize the immediately perceptible energetic rhythm of speech.

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Mallarmé and Apollinaire: The Unpunctuated Text

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Modern French poetry is, very frequently, printed without punctuation. The typical poem consists, to the first glance at least, of a series of words arranged across the page in lines, which sometimes start with upper case letters but without the array of commas, full stops and semicolons which usually promise articulation and comprehensible sequence. The phenomenon is not, in itself, totally alien to English readers since there are considerable passages in T.S. Eliot, William Carlos Williams and other modernist poets in which punctuation is at least sparse and sometimes totally absent. What is startling is the normality of this style of presentation of the printed page and the fact that the assumption is obviously widespread in France that being poetic somehow entails an abandonment of the normal courtesy towards the reader of guidance on sentence and phrase structure of the sort afforded by punctuation.

The reading of French verse, it seems—at least as the reader first casts his eye on the page of a volume of poetry or a poetic magazine—is meant to be an encounter with words, with words in themselves and not words ordered into an act of continuous communication. If this is indeed the aim, it is a fairly obviously perverse one; one can hardly conceive what words could be outside the

frame of comprehension and interpretation constituted by the repertoire of possible acts of communication. At most, it might seem, authors might be aiming at an impoverishment of language—symbolized, perhaps, by the austere reduction of the shapes on the page to the letters alone, unattended by their retinue of dots. They might be aiming, that is, at a reduction of language to lists of words. These words might, of course, be suggestive, emotionally fraught or semantically rich. Such an attitude would certainly be in keeping with a reverence for the word (or, quite often, the Word—since capitals have not quite lost their authority in France) which has certainly been both quite common and quite serious and productive in the aesthetics of symbolist and post-symbolist poetry; but it would express this reverence only at the cost of depriving the word of its roots in communication, by making the naming relationship (the word as label or picture of important entities) paramount or prototypical in a way which would be quite untrue to our daily experience of the continuity of language as we perceive it not least in the onward motion of the eye in reading.

An important exception ought to be noted at this stage: it is the poem in prose, a genre much more widely practiced in France than in the English-speaking countries. These prose poems normally are punctuated though even here there are many exceptions, such as Jacques Roubaud's "€". In other words, for many French people now, division into lines of verse is an alternative to the normal range of punctuation, not a complement to it. This may make the situation seem even stranger. Punctuation is an indication, primarily one assumes, of syntactic form; line division is an indication, presumably, of rhythmic form (and one may need to think here of whether we are dealing with a rhythm of reading or a rhythm of imitated speech). So how can one be substituted for the other? In what sense can they be treated as equivalents? But those questions can be put another way: In what sense can the impulses of the eye that moves in reading or of the voice that breathes in speech be equivalent to the divisions and interrelations of ideas and of speech acts?

Put that way, the question looks a little less odd. It even starts to suggest the beginning of an answer, or at least a reason why the question might be an important one. The activity of speaking—or of reading—is a physical one: the layout of the verse page, with its constant reminder of the need to move the eye back in

order to start on a new word group, demonstrates this physicality and insists on the renewed acts of energy that communication calls for. But communicative activity is also mental: it involves handling of ideas, feelings, deductions and implications. And yet there is only one activity here: Mental and physical are somehow part of the same process. Our dualistic framework of understanding may make it difficult for us to grasp this; but verse, it seems, makes it tangible.

It is beginning to seem, then, that the abnormal, even eccentric, abstention from punctuation practiced by many French poets may have something to do with the way ideas relate to utterance. This thesis—which as we have formulated it so far is still vague and uninformative—will be tested and refined in the following pages by reference to two poets of the later nineteenth and early twentieth centuries: Stéphane Mallarmé (1842-1898) and Guillaume Apollinaire (1880-1918). Of these, it is certainly Apollinaire who bears the major responsibility for the death of punctuation. The story has often been told of how, on receiving the proofs of his first major collection, *Alcools* (1913), he crossed out all the punctuation which he had previously included. “As far as punctuation is concerned,” he explained to a friend, “I suppressed it only because I thought it useless and it is in fact, the rhythm itself and the shape of the lines (la coupe des vers) that is the real punctuation and no other is needed” (A, 1040).¹ The principle, we note, extends to the letter itself, curiously; more importantly, the concern with rhythm and verse division confirms the conclusions we have been inclining towards—but still leaves much to be explained.

Apollinaire is the pioneer of the total suppression of punctuation; but he has predecessors, as has often been pointed out, and the most important of them is Mallarmé. Mallarmé similarly believed that verse can do without punctuation because it “has the privilege of offering, without this typographical artifice, the vocal rest which measures force (élan)” (M, 407). His practice, however, is not quite as radical as this suggests. Using in his early verse a full range of punctuation (albeit sometimes rather oddly), he reduces it in the course of his poetic career until in many of his late works nothing survives but the final full stop. This itself is significant of a major distinction from Apollinaire’s later practice. Mallarmé does not simply adopt the convention of not punctuating; he maintains, largely, the convention of punctuating but composes his poems in such a way that no punctuation is

called for until that very final stop. (Though the sense of “called for” here may need some reflection, given that there certainly do appear to be points in some of his poems where stops or other end punctuation might well have been expected but do not appear.) The result should be that the stop asserts that the poem really is ended. This is, of course, redundant since the blank at the end of the page often asserts it anyway—and all the more conspicuously given the very high proportion of white space which strikes the eye on approaching a page of Mallarmé—but the redundancy is an emphatic and deliberate one. The aim of poems, Mallarmé said once in a characteristically teasing spirit, is to justify silence (M,387); the silence that follows a poem, the blanks round it, are meaningful because they relate to a completed act. They differ, that is, from the silences or blanks that occur accidentally, without reference to a specific act of communication (and one of the obsessions of Mallarmé’s life was to eliminate accident). Thus, the redundant full stop is a claim to completion and so to justification.

These two poets, then, have different conventions and achieve different effects through them: What do the two of them tell us about the role of rhythm, pauses, articulation and syntactic hierarchy in poems? Both reduce the normal double system of poetic articulation to a single one. Reading a poem with traditional punctuation, our eye scans ahead to find what pattern of rhythm and logic we should be expecting and should be fitting the words into as we proceed; and we are aware, both during this process and also as we actually reach the specific point in the sentence, of the line endings marking a new impulse of sound or a new group for the eye—and of the stops, commas, question marks and the like indicating how the sentence is put together: whether it is declarative, interrogative or exclamatory, how long the sentence is, how many subdivisions it has, and other such structural guides. Often, of course, the two can coincide, the line end also being a syntactic unit and marked as such by punctuation; but they certainly need not, and a considerable part of the interest of poetry is probably given by the interplay of the two systems. Mallarmé and Apollinaire, to varying extents, suppress the marking of syntax which contributes significantly to this interest. Why? What is gained by the suppression? Why do they regard a single system as (more or less) sufficient?

In Apollinaire (as our quotation from his letter already indicates), there certainly is a sense that the single

system really is sufficient. The rhythm of speech is, it seems, enough; the vitality of the poet, the force of his utterance, the inventiveness and effectiveness of his images, the lucidity of his statements are enough to communicate to the reader the sense of a personality, of the fictive presence of a speaker who is an occasion for pathos, entertainment, admiration, respect. Apollinaire, in Derridean terms, is logocentric; he aims to create the sense of a unified and persuasive utterance.

The situation is (of course) not quite so straightforward, and we shall be considering later what limitations there are to this sense of fullness. But we can start by contrasting it with the procedures of Mallarmé, who presents the suppression of punctuation as something of a sacrifice, as an ascesis. Far from a triumphant simplification of language, the loss of easily visible syntactic articulation is an ordeal; Mallarmé's work shows by implication that the interplay of rhythm and syntax is normal and positive, and the loss of one side of this interplay makes for effort, difficulty, uncertainty on the part of the reader. The point is relevant to his thematic concerns and to the whole form of his poetry; his poems often enact a difficult discovery of certainty (a revelation of the ideal or an acceptance of the known), and the sudden emergence of clarity from obscurity, disorder or absence that the reader of the poems himself experiences is an image of what for the author is obviously a privileged moment, the moment of unhesitant knowledge. The background has to be that of disorder or of absence; the punctuation signs are one thing of which we feel the absence, rather as we might feel the absence of expected guidance in a labyrinth. It is the absence, perhaps, in the last resort, of the author we expect: the helpful, rational, considerate author who tells us what his message is going to be like; the impersonality of Mallarmé is manifest in part through this technique. But another way of looking at it would be to say that we do get a view of the personality of the author, after all; only it is an unexpected personality, a malicious, puzzling personality that escapes from the set social roles of the author-reader relationship.

Be that as it may, Mallarmé is relying on a positive act of reading to a very large extent; the reader is obliged to interpret very actively, possibly even to supply missing bits of the text (at least on the level of commas or question marks), to read himself into the text, so to speak. It seems a reasonable hypothesis that if a group of readers were asked to punctuate a poem by Mallarmé and another group a poem by Apollinaire, the Apollinaire group would produce nearly identical results but the

Mallarmé readers would diverge widely; and that this would be in part a test of literary and linguistic competence (some of the Mallarmé answers might be wrong) but also a test of personal set towards the poem or towards poetry as such. If Apollinaire is centered in personal expression and logocentric, Mallarmé is based in a questioning of reading and is, if one dare use the word, logofugal. Apollinaire depends on the continuity of his energy; Mallarmé depends on the multiplicity of connections and tensions that lie within his writing.

How precisely does this tendency manifest itself in Mallarmé? It creates two major kinds of communicative effect: irresolvable ambiguities, and ambiguities or false connections that operate for a few words but are then seen to be wrong and corrected by the reader (what are known in linguistics as “garden paths,” as in “Throw Mamma from the Train”).² He thus produces passages where for an appreciable time the reader can see no word or phrase connections in which he can feel any confidence, so that he is forced to hold the chain of words in his mind together with all their *potential* connections without losing what the poet called their “mobility of principle” (M,386). Mobility, for Mallarmé, is the essence of the word; the fixed order of the syntagm threatens it, but the verse form should preserve it.

The first of these communicative effects, the irresolvable ambiguity, appears quite often in the case of phrases which may refer either forward or back (and the problem is exacerbated by Mallarmé’s liking for unusual word order in which complements and objects are delayed to well after their normal positions). Instances occur in the first poem which appears in the collected works with minimal punctuation, the “Cantique de Saint Jean” from the uncompleted verse play *Hérodiade* (M,49). This canticle recounts the feelings of Saint John the Baptist as he waits to be decapitated.

*Le soleil que sa halte
Surnaturelle exalte
Aussitôt redescend
Incandescent
Je sens comme aux vertèbres
S'éployer des ténèbres
Toutes dans un frisson
A l'unisson*

The sun, exalted by its
supernatural arrest, immediately
descends again, incandescent;
I feel, as it were, darkness
unfolding along my backbone,
all trembling in unison.

Is this the equivalent of “the sun...descends again, incandescent”? This seems the most obvious reading. But it has drawbacks. For one thing, it requires us to add a full stop or other final sign after “Incandescent.” For another, Mallarmé is not always given to the most obvious combination. So we might think of a full stop before “Incandescent”, giving “Incandescent, I feel...darkness,” which is possibly a more poetic conception than the first. (One notes, incidentally, that it is the line end that most often provokes the sense that a punctuation mark might have been used: once again the line is an alternative to punctuating.) Or what about stanzas three and four:

*Et ma tête surgie
Solitaire vigie
Dans les vols triomphaux
De cette faux
Comme rupture franche
Plutôt refoule ou tranche
Les anciens désaccords
Avec le corps*

And my head, rising as a
solitary watchman in the
triumphant flights of this
scythe, as a clear break,
rather represses or cuts
off its former disharmony
with the body.

Has the head “risen...like a frank breaking off” (with comma after “franche”) or does it (with comma after “faux”) “like a frank breaking off suppress or cut away the discords”? The difference, admittedly, is probably secondary. Either way, the rising of the severed head is, ultimately, a denial of any duality of mind and body. But the emphasis is quite different: on the first reading, the frankness is an assertion of acceptance of the decapitation; on the second, it is an expression of determination in the suppression of division. (There is even a third reading, which is why the difference of sense was said to be “*probably* secondary”: the decapitation might suppress

“the discords as breaking off,” and here the meaning and the balance of feeling have changed quite a lot.) What is sure in all this is that the reader is presented with a haze of more or less convergent meanings and not with *a* reading. If, as readers no doubt usually do, he hopes for clarity and for a ground on which he can confidently place the progression of the text, he will be frustrated—and perhaps one of Mallarmé’s achievements is to create a poetics of frustration.

A further ambiguity that is constituted by the abolition of punctuation is the inability to distinguish between defining and non-defining relatives. In the first stanza quoted, the relative clause referring to the sun can obviously only be non-defining. (There is only one sun; we can’t be reading about that particular sun which is exalted by its supernatural halting, as opposed to the others—which is what the absence of commas before and after the clause would usually mean.) And even though we realize this on reflection, it may be quite difficult to read the line with the proper intonation (rise on “soleil,” pause and fall for the relative); we may be inclined to read the whole of the first line as a rhythmic group rising to “halte” (as the sun has no doubt risen to a halt). If we do it this way, the line is not yet meaningful; the tension and hesitancy of the poem is enacted in our performance of it. If we do it the correct way, the line contains at least a meaningful unit (“le soleil”), but we may feel uneasy about having introduced a spectral comma and a real pause. What all this suggests is something quite radical: that the poem resists being read aloud. In view of the traditional treatment of poetry as *audible* (e.g., in the commonplace references to poems as “song”), a genuinely silent poem is a novelty and one that creates a slightly uncanny sense of restraint.

A more real ambiguity, perhaps, lies in the sonnet in memory of Wagner (M,71). In it, the silence of mourning is laying a pall over

le mobilier

Que doit un tassement du principal pilier

Précipiter...

the furniture which
a collapse of the
chief pillar is to bring
down...

on, that is—if we follow a strict reading of the punctuation—that particular furniture which is to be overthrown by the composer's death, and on no other. Or might it be affecting the furniture in general, of which Mallarmé comments—omitting a comma after “mobilier”—that it is all about to be overthrown? Quibbling about the scale of the furniture affected by the loss of genius may appear disproportionate; but it isn't quite (not quite: some sense of absurdity or futility may well attach to Mallarmé's very discreetly ironic treatment of a rival art). The poem appears to adopt a grandiose, almost pretentious myth of art and deprivation; eliding the distinction between specific and general contributes to that myth—until the attentive reader notices what's been done. And the oddity of punctuation should so alert him; there is discomfort here, and it matters.

A comparable case lies in the role of certain adjectives following nouns: Are they defining terms or—what would normally be shown by commas—mere epithets? Does the opening phrase of the tribute to Wagner refer to a silence which is conceived of as essentially funereal, as the punctuation would imply (“Le silence déjà funèbre”) or—assuming a suppressed comma after the noun—to a silence of which the existence is presupposed, which is the starting point of the poem but of which the poet then chooses to comment that it is funereal? If the difference doesn't matter, as Mallarmé's failure to mark it might seem to indicate, then the difference between what already exists and what is identified by the speaker doesn't matter either, and existence appears to be a function of being named. A whole conception of symbolism would assert that that is in fact the case, that language is a record of the active and creative mind and not of exterior reality; and Mallarmé may not be averse to a suggestion of that sort. But he has made it conspicuous since the line read without intercalated punctuation is slightly odd, overheavy, containing too many rhythmic points for the meter and too many kinds of information—auditory, temporal, tactile—for prompt assimilation. (What especially is implied by that “déjà”? Was the “moiré” there before the death? Has the death merely revealed some potential of mourning that pre-existed it? Is death not an event in the full sense at all?) “Garden paths” are common in Mallarmé's writing and contribute to much of its fascination, to the reader's sense of a constant lure and of a constant discovery of possible but fantastic connections of words and concepts. These may be, one has to recognize, actually quite obviously wrong, for instance on grounds of gender.

When Mallarmé says in “La Chevelure...”(M,53) that
a woman

Accomplit par son chef fulgurante l'exploit

glowing, achieves by her head the exploit

we may be tempted to think that it is the head (“le chef”) that is glowing. “Fulgurante” occupies the slot next to “chef,” exactly where we should expect a qualifying adjective, and the semantic link would be perfect: the “chef” is characterised above all by its hair, the “chevelure” of the title, which is flame-like, as we already know, and so glows. But “chef” is masculine and “fulgurante” is feminine; it can only refer to the woman herself, and in a normally punctuated text would have been enclosed between commas. So the illusion is a momentary one; but it may have done something to tempt the reader into identifying a person with her hair—to confusing selfhood with beauty—and it may have warned him of the danger of doing so and given a little training in syntactic and moral discrimination.

Other confusions can take longer to dispel. Stanza four of the “Cantique de Saint Jean,” we recall, announces of the severed head that it

Plutôt refoule ou tranche

Les anciens désaccords

Avec le corps

rather represses or cuts off
its former disharmony with the body

Stanza five apparently starts with a relative clause formulating an attitude towards the body:

Qu'elle de jeûnes ivre

S'opiniâtre à suivre

En quelque bond hagard

Son pur regard

than, intoxicated with fasting, obstinately
following its pure gaze in some haggard leap

Things have gone wrong. If the “que” is in fact the relative pronoun “which,” referring to the body, so that the rest of the clause states that the head still longs for physical satisfaction, of which it has been deprived during life (the reunion of body and spirit thus taking the form of an assertion of the sensual), then it must be the object of the clause. But what is the “pur regard” doing in this case? In fact, it has to be the object of “suivre.” This is a pleasing thing to discover since we

now have a use for the “plutôt” in the previous stanza, which we have not yet parsed: the sentence is saying that the head rather suppresses discord *than* (“que”) follows the eye (“regard”). The reader alternates between physical and spiritual, as Saint John the Baptist perhaps does, as the poet certainly does; the reader discovers for himself the links of thought that are tempting and interesting, and he discovers the heroically strained syntactic discipline through which Mallarmé controls them.

The “plutôt” here, which cannot be given a syntactic function until several lines after it appears, is one sign of the “suspensive” quality of Mallarmé’s syntax. A fuller example is the elegant sonnet of friendship and acceptance of time, “Dame, sans trop d’ardeur” (M,60), (“Lady, without too much ardor”). I quote the second quatrain:

*Oui sans ces crises de rosée et gentiment
Ni brise quoique, avec, le ciel orageux passe
Jalouse d’apporter je ne sais quel espace
Au simple jour le jour très vrai du sentiment.*

Yes, without these crises
of dew, and gently, and
without any breeze,
although the stormy sky
passes over it, eager to bring
some space, to bring to mere daylight
the very true day of feeling.

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The opening “oui” here is already an obstacle: the poet has used in the previous line the archaic ver “ouïr” (“to hear”), and “oui” might be its past participle. We quite soon realize that it can’t be and that it must be the affirmative “yes”; we would have realized at once with a comma after the word. We are halted again by the “Ni” in the second line: it may be the beginning of the pair “ni...ni” (“neither...nor”), but the second “ni” never comes and so it obviously must follow on “sans” (“without”)—from which it is, however, separated by the parenthetic “et gentiment,” which is not marked in any way as a parenthesis. What does “jalouse” refer to? A comma after “passe” would have made it clear that it can only refer to the lady addressed.

The last two lines depend on a nice concision: she is eager to bring some space and to bring the light of feeling to mere, literal daylight. The lack of punctuation at the end of the third line makes that relationship

difficult to sort out and tempts us to look for some way the space could be brought to the mere day. But the line break has, nevertheless, led us to read the phrase about the two kinds of daylight as a single group—supported, of course, by the symmetry of the line, and both supported and confused by the half-presence of the idiom “au jour le jour” (“from day to day”), the pertinence of which is not immediately apparent but which seems to relate to the general suggestion in the poem of an acceptance of age and continuity. So what has most crucially happened, perhaps, is that we have been invited to read the lines separately as well as part of an ongoing sentence; the line, that is, becomes a unit of major importance even though it may be difficult to grasp exactly what kind of importance it has. Certainly, it is not a redundant confirmation of syntactic or rationally semantic segmentation, as with classic lines such as Baudelaire’s “Ma jeunesse ne fut qu’un ténébreux orage,” (“My youth was nothing but a dark storm”), which can be read and remembered as a complete statement. The Mallarmean line is fragmentary in sense and syntax; it has a strange, elusive coherence of sound and suggestion, and these connotative aspects of meaning are given odd prominence by the degree of autonomy the line as a unit has acquired.

We have perceived “Ni brise quoique, avec, le ciel orageux passé” (“without any breeze, although the stormy sky passes over it”) and “Au simple jour le jour très vrai du sentiment” (“to mere daylight the very true day of feeling”) as if they meant something substantial: but they only suggest something. They suggest links—breeze and storm, simplicity and truth—which are part of our general repertoire of semantic links; so they are, in the linguist’s terminology, *paradigmatic*, and they invite the reader to pause at these links. But the reader knows that the pause is temporary, that the links are part of a larger, more progressive act of utterance in which the storm is a mere qualification and the daylight is the product of personal desire.

To this view of Mallarmé we may add two notes: firstly, his strong sense of the visual appearance of the verse page—of the page as having to be *read*—is elegantly caught by a play of spelling (of repeated letters, not necessarily corresponding to the same sounds), which may catch the eye across the lines. Most witty of all, perhaps, is the pair of lines in “Le Pitre châtié” (M,31): (“The Clown Punished”):

*Qui pure s'exhala de ma fraîcheur de nacre,
Rance nuit de ma peau quand sur moi vous passiez...*

which, pure, was exhaled from my mother-of-pearl freshness, rancid night of my skin, when you passed over me...

There is an indirect semantic link between “nacre” (“mother-of-pearl”) and “rance” (“rancid”). There is no similarity of sound, but the shift to the new line is marked by an anagram—by, that is, a purely visual device which ought to check the reader’s tendency to immediately convert letters into sounds.

Secondly, we should not exaggerate Mallarmé’s hostility to punctuation. He does retain quite a lot of punctuation, and some may remain even in those poems which are barest. In order to retain the complexity of syntax to which he attached so much importance, he obviously found it impossible to abandon parentheses altogether, so the brackets in a poem such as “A la nue accablante tu” (M, 76) (“concealed from the overwhelming cloud”), which is otherwise unpunctuated, ostentatiously show his sense of hierarchy in utterance. Nor could he abandon the exclamation mark though one may find it confusing—at least in trying to allow for an intonation—that this is used to mark rhetorical questions. Some of his punctuation even is quite innovative: there is the use of italics and upper case to distinguish different levels of reality in the dream sequences of the “Après-midi d’un faune” (M,50) (“The Afternoon of a Faun”); there is the isolation of terms of address on a separate line, as in the first line of a sonnet quoted above, which is not as hastily given there, but actually:

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Dame

sans trop d'ardeur à la fois enflammant...

Lady, without too much ardor at one time inflaming...

The organization of thought and the organization of communication are displayed here—as they are, in more spectacular style, in one of his boldest works, *Un coup de dés jamais n'abolira le hasard* (*A throw of the dice will never abolish chance*), in which verse and regular line spacing are abandoned and the text scattered over the page, the position of each word or phrase indicating (according to the author) pitch, and the play of different types demonstrating syntactic structure. Textural organization matters acutely to Mallarmé, and he never loses sight of the need for the reader to be clear about it, however deliberately he may be kept in uncertainty about other aspects of what is being communicated.

When we turn to Apollinaire, we do not find complexities of the kinds that are characteristic of Mallarmé.

This is what a typical passage of Apollinaire looks like:

A la fin tu es las de ce monde ancien

Bergère ô tour Eiffel le troupeau des ponts bêle ce matin

Tu en as assez de vivre dans l'antiquité grecque et romaine

(A,39).

In the end you are weary of this old world. Shepherdess, oh Eiffel Tower, the herd of bridges is baa-ing this morning. You are tired of living in Greek and Roman antiquity.

As with Mallarmé, the verse line is a fundamental unit, and the reader is bound to be very conscious that it has an importance much greater than he might expect from other poets' practice. But here, unlike in Mallarmé, it is not in competition with other systems of segmentation; it is in agreement with them, so that the poem proceeds through a series of observations or impressions, each apparently self-contained and delineated in a single line of verse. This does not wholly eliminate ambiguities and difficulties in reading: one notes for instance the uncertainty as to the sentence ending here:

Je m'arrête pour regarder

Sur la pelouse incandescente

Un serpent erre c'est moi-même

Qui suis la flûte dont je joue

Et le fouet qui châtie les autres

(A,174)

I stop to look over the incandescent lawn.

A serpent wanders; it is myself who am the flute I play
and the whip which punishes other people

or the garden path here:

La rue ...

S'en va mais qui sait si demain

La rue devenait immobile

Qui sait où serait mon chemin

(A,311)

The street...goes away, but who knows,
if tomorrow the street became motionless,
who knows where my path would be.

(This is not, we discover "who knows whether..." but "who knows, if...") And like Mallarmé, Apollinaire is

of course incapable of distinguishing defining from non-defining relatives or other qualifying phrases:

J'aime la grâce de cette rue industrielle
Située à Paris entre la rue Aumont-Thiéville et l'avenue des
Ternes

(A,40)

I love the grace of this industrial street,
located in Paris between the rue Aumont-Thiéville
and the avenue des Ternes

But these problems look either secondary or vestigial. The problems are vestigial in the first two cases quoted, where Apollinaire is still exploring, in quite a modest way, the complexities of a symbolist style that was to get less and less important for him. The problem is secondary in the last—and more typical—case, where it hardly matters whether the location of the street is an afterthought or not. It is secondary for the important reason that Apollinaire has little sense of priority; he works by accumulation and seeks to convey more than anything else the sheer wonder that so many things exist and that they are known and felt by himself. Above all he was fascinated that so many things can go on simultaneously while language can only process them sequentially. This, in one way, makes the printed page especially tantalizing for him because it does allow the reader, to some degree, at first to perceive simultaneously the words which are afterwards to be read in sequence. The point is of course most radically demonstrated in his “calligrammes,” the ancestors of concrete poetry, in which the printed (or written) words are arranged in the form of objects—a car, a cigar, a broadcasting station with its radiating waves. These experiments are often, and rightly, thought trivial; there is no inherent link between the verbal form and the visual form, and grasping the verbal form entails restoration of a linear sequence anyway.

Rather more important is the tendency to make the verbal form of the poem itself immediately perceptible by quickly visible repetitions which establish—as soon as the reader glances at the page—that the poem consists of a list of similar things. The famous example is “Il y a” (A,280) (“There is”):

*Il y a un vaisseau qui a emporté ma bien-aimée
Il y a dans le ciel six saucisses et la nuit venant on dirait
des asticots dont naîtraient des étoiles
Il y a un sous-marin ennemi qui en voulait à mon amour*

There are six sausages in the sky and when night falls they
look like maggots from which stars might be born;
there is an enemy submarine which wished harm to my love

and so on for another twenty-seven lines—to end
however with a new look:

Car on a poussé très loin durant cette guerre l'art de invisibilité.

For we have developed very far during this war the art of invisibility.

This sort of writing, of course, is the art of visibility.
What is made visible is the mere coexistence of things
(though this is conflicting, on occasion, with an actual
sequential rationality: the boat that takes away the
beloved is a precondition of the danger from subma-
rines). The poem is a list, and Apollinaire makes it
obvious. Elsewhere, the specific form of repetition can
be made more promptly perceptible by conventions
of print: the poet's delight in places, in particular,
means that capital letters often pinpoint the repeti-
tiousness of his text:

*Te voici à Marseille au milieu des pastèques
Te voici à Coblenz à l'hôtel du Géant
Te voici à Rome assis sous un néflier du Japon*

(A,42)

Here you are in Marseilles, amongst the watermelons.

Here you are in Coblenz, at the Giant Hotel.

Here you are in Rome, sitting under a Japanese Medlar.

The problem with all this, however, is that the list, the
accumulation of undifferentiated experience that
Apollinaire practices, is, after all, essentially a written
form. Lists are barely comprehensible when spoken;
they really exist in writing (and form a model for un-
punctuated texts, along with newspaper headlines and
posters, which Apollinaire cites in one of his poems
as the source of the poetry of modernity [A,39]). The
visual form in the poems, of course, is mimicking a
possible spoken form, the form of emphatic repeti-
tion, and doesn't wholly in itself dispel the sense that
language is essentially speech. But when the vis-
ible repetition gets excessive (when, for instance, it
exceeds the three repetitions normal in rhetorical
parallelisms), we start to *see* the poem rather than to

read it in sequence. Apollinaire's prime aim would otherwise appear to be that of maintaining an oral contact with his reader, and for this reason he dreamed of publishing his work on gramophone records. But it appears here that his dramatization of personal emotion and personal utterance has to take the path of the visible text.

There is another way in which the appearance of Apollinaire's page adds to his communicative impact: that is the length and disposition of his lines. Much (though by no means all) of Apollinaire is in free verse; the length of line, that is, varies. And it varies visibly. It is not just that an acute ear will note that some lines have a syllable more or less than others (though that does happen); it is also that some lines are so short as to give a visible sense of the contraction of the rhythm while others are very long (quite often extending beyond the limits of a single line of type, and so holding the reader's expectations in abeyance as he finds his eyes moving back to the left without a new start in sense of feeling). They may be so long that they immediately suggest an expansive fullness. The last four lines of "Zone" demonstrate a weary exhaustiveness of statement giving way to tragic concentration on a symbol of death and new life, the sun that heralds a new dawn but also looks like an execution:

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*Ils sont des Christ d'une autre forme et d'une autre croyance
Ce sont les Christ inférieurs des obscures espérances
Adieu Adieu
Soleil cou coupé*

(A, 44)

They are Christs of another form and another faith;
they are the inferior Christs of obscure hope.
Goodbye, Goodbye.
Sun cut neck.

(The third line here, incidentally, brings out one way in which punctuation survives in Apollinaire: a new sentence may start with a capital, even in mid-line; on this occasion the effect may be to stress still more the brevity and lack of energy of the utterance).

Lines, furthermore, are often inset from the margin; sometimes this is to suggest a stanzaic form, but quite often it is to enact delay, hesitancy or a dramatic pause. And as the lines vary in length and disposition, so do the blocks of verse. Many of the examples already quoted show the poet's love of isolating lines completely; but elsewhere the lines may be amassed in

lengthy paragraphs enacting exuberance and pertinacity in speech. "Zone," for instance, starting with the slight, delicate, scattered observations about the Eiffel Tower and the ancient world that suggest the discovery of thought in a newly awakened consciousness, goes through a section of fertile and ingenious symbolic invention, articulated in substantial verse paragraphs, before relapsing more and more consistently into the brief and disparate notions of the sort we saw with the last line of all, "Soleil cou coupé."

Apollinaire shows in this way that speech is energy, that it is accumulation of experiences and inspirations—or that it is a record of the failure to accumulate them; the personality of the poet is the capacity to add together fragments of felt experience, or it is a yielding to the actual separateness of things. So that personality is a capacity for speech, which is apparent primarily in the rhythm of print; it is the creation of a voice which communicates in the first place by an appeal to the eye and by the invitation to read, in proper sequence, what the poet offers as synthetic vision.

For Mallarmé, writing—as opposed to speech—was to be a record of "the deeds of the Idea (les gestes de l'Idée) as it manifests itself in speech" (M,854). These deeds, it is apparent, are essentially rhythmic acts; and in both Mallarmé and Apollinaire it seems that the suppression of punctuation is a way of enhancing the rhythm of reading and so of making conspicuous the rhythm of thought.

- 1 References in the text indicated by "A" are to G. Apollinaire, *Oeuvres poétiques* (Paris: Gallimard, 1965). References indicated by "M" are to S. Mallarmé, *Oeuvres complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1945).
- 2 G.L.Dillon, *Language Processing and the Reading of Literature* (Indiana UP, 1978).