

Visual form performs numerous significant and diverse functions in modern free verse poetry. The theoretical pronouncements of such poets as Robert Creeley, Charles Olson, William Carlos Williams and Louis Zukofsky recognize only its function of scoring for performance and often belittle its significance. In representative works of these poets, however, we find lineation, line-grouping, spatial arrangement and particular graphological details operating both globally and locally to make meaning and to compose text. Even though *opsis* has been, since Aristotle, an acknowledged element of literary art, not only practitioners, but with certain exceptions, literary critics and theorists have failed to assign it more than a subordinate, supportive role. Historical approaches that privilege sound because of the originally oral nature of poetry are of little help in explaining the use of visual form in modern free verse. A functional approach, entailing careful attention to how visual form affects our experience of printed poems, can contribute toward developing “a theory of graphic prosody” such as John Hollander has called for. Functional analysis of visual form in representative free verse poems and passages yields a dozen distinct functions—rhetorical, mimetic and aesthetic functions that tend to support the illusion of the poem as unified and autonomous, and on the other hand, an equal number of functions that tend to be disintegrative and intertextual. Analysis of a passage from Pound’s *Cantos*, using these functions as an analytical tool, shows that visual form helps realize this modern long poem’s simultaneous drive toward coherence and impulse toward openness.

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## Visual Form in Free Verse

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Recent work in prosodic theory has dealt mostly with traditional meters. Derek Attridge’s study of *The Rhythms of English Poetry*, for example, confines its coverage to “the main tradition of regular accentual-syllabic verse in Middle and Modern English” (vii). Likewise, in linguistic metrics, the rules proposed by the American “generative” metrists have been mainly for iambic pentameter (e.g., Halle and Keyser, Kiparsky, Youmans); and the statistical studies of the Slavic metrists, despite their comparatist orientation, have also been devoted to metrical verse (e.g., Tarlinskaja). The few scholars who have undertaken to analyse free verse have done so principally in terms of grammar (Mitchell, Wesling) and intonation (Byers). While some attention has been paid to lineation based neither on grammar nor on phonology (Hartman, Sayre, Cureton), there is still nothing like a full study of the role of visual form in free verse prosody.

Theoretical discourse about the prosody of the twentieth-century free verse has consisted largely of the apologetics and polemics of the poets themselves, and the poets’ theories have not been adequate to account for their practice—in particular, for their use of visual form. Meanwhile, “the poem on the page,” as John Hollander

has noted, “became the central mode of its existence during the Modern period” (277). In directing attention to visual form in free verse, then, I am attempting to repair a significant neglect, to make a start toward developing “a theory of graphic prosody” such as Hollander calls for, dealing with “[h]ow various modes of free verse take shape on the page, what occasional sound patternings they may or may not embrace” (277). First, however, I want to consider what sorts of things some of the prosodic innovators among twentieth-century American poets have had to say about free verse prosody.

Twentieth-century American poetry displays an extraordinary amount and variety of prosodic innovation, and many twentieth-century American poets have been consciously concerned with prosodic invention as their problem and project. This concern is expressed in manifestos from Pound’s “A Few Don’ts” to Olson’s “Projective Verse” and in the poets’ correspondence and their comments in interviews as well as in self-reflexive passages in their poems. Here are some characteristic pronouncements by Robert Creeley, Charles Olson, William Carlos Williams and Louis Zukofsky, respectively:

One wants to write the poem, put it, as ultimately one would say it; the page is his means, *not* his end. If we grant that poetry must be relegated finally, to what the eye can read, then we have no poetry....

Otherwise, one works in, to the page, as where he can score, in a literal sense, the language of his poem; he wants that as his means, the structure of his words *on the page*, in the sense that their spatial positions there will allow a reader to *read* them, with his own *voice*, to that end the poet is after—i.e., the poem in its full impact of *speech*. (Creeley, “Note” 27)

It is the advantage of the typewriter that due to its rigidity and its space precisions, it can, for a poet, indicate exactly the breath, the pauses, the suspensions, even of syllables, the juxtapositions even of parts of phrases, which he intends. For the first time the poet has the stave and the bar a musician has had. For the first time he can, without the convention of rime and meter, record the listening he has done to his own speech and by that one act indicate how he would want any reader, silently or otherwise, to voice his work. (Olson, “Projective Verse” 57-58)

[W]henver and however, either by the agency of the eye or ear, a persistent irregularity of the metrical pattern is established in a poem, it can justly be called [free verse]. The irregularity involves both the eye and the ear. Whether the measure be written down with a view to the appearance of the poem on the printed page or to the sound of the words as spoken or sung is of no consequence so long as the established irregularity is maintained. (Williams, “Free Verse” 288-89)

The test of poetry is the range of pleasure it affords as sight, sound, and intellection. (Zukofsky, *Test* 7)

All of these pronouncements are concerned with the relations of the poem as printed text on the page to the value of the poem as poetry and/or to its nature as verse. Both Robert Creeley and Charles Olson speak of the printed text as a score for oral performance, Creeley especially denying the value of the visual form of the printed poem except as a vehicle for directing the reader how to voice it.

Despite Creeley's dismissal of "what the eye can read" as "no poetry," however, the visual form of a representative poem of his operates much more complexly than as a score and, I would argue, contributes more to the "poetry" of the poem than would a mere score for performance. "The Rain" is a lyric in visual quatrains of short lines:

*All night the sound had  
come back again,  
and again falls  
this quiet, persistent rain.*

*What am I to myself  
that must be remembered,  
insisted upon  
so often? Is it  
that never the ease,  
even the hardness,  
of rain falling  
will have for me  
something other than this,  
something not so insistent—  
am I to be locked in this  
final uneasiness.*

*Love, if you love me,  
lie next to me.  
Be for me, like rain,  
the getting out  
of the tiredness, the fatuousness, the semi-  
lust of intentional indifference.  
Be wet  
with a decent happiness.*

(CP 207)

Listening to this poem voiced, even if the performer paused for a certain length of time at the end of every intra-stanzaic line and for a certain longer time at the end of every stanza, one would not be able to apprehend it as consisting of a small number of equivalent

units. But the printed poem is arranged in sight-stanzas, groups of equal numbers of lines where the line - and group - boundaries bear no regular relationship to grammatical or narrative structure or to a meter or rhyme scheme. (The sight-stanza is a free verse form pioneered by Williams [Berry, "Williams' Development"].) Looking at Creeley's printed poem on the page, one immediately sees it as a composition, tidy, four-square, a made thing. This perception cannot be derived from "the poem in its full impact as speech," but it is an important part of the aesthetic experience of the printed poem. The visual form presents itself as an image of order and objectifies the text. Further, it relates this poem to other poems in the tradition and accordingly generates certain expectations in the experienced reader—that in genre the poem will be a lyric, that its language will be simple in diction and syntax but marked with patterns of repetition, that its tone will be quiet. (These are all associations of the visual form of a page or less of short-line quatrains.)

The poem's visual form operates not only globally but locally. The first stanza, with its longer first and final lines and shorter medial lines, presents an image of containment, iconically representing the poem's theme of mental/emotional entrapment:

*All night the sound had  
come back again,  
and again falls  
this quiet, persistent rain.*

Then, in the three couplets that begin the next three stanzas, parallel elements are parceled out in immediately juxtaposed, visually equivalent units—successive lines:

*that never the ease,  
even the hardness,  
something other than this,  
something not so insistent—  
Love, if you love me,  
lie next to me.*

Here visual form reinforces syntactical parallelism and sound repetition to foreground semantic similarity and antithesis. In the final stanza, we encounter what are obviously the longest and shortest lines of the poem (the first and penultimate lines of the stanza):

*of the tiredness, the fatuousness, the semi-lust of intentional indifference.*

*Be wet*

*with a decent happiness.*

Working in conjunction with syntax and meaning, the visual expansion and contraction of the verse line helps evoke first a sense of pressure against limits and then a feeling of resolution. This expansion and contraction, followed by a return to the norm, also helps to effect closure (Smith, *Poetic Closure*). The visual form of this poem of Creeley's functions both globally and locally to achieve various aesthetic and rhetorical effects. In the case of this poem at least, if the poetry is "relegated...to what the eye can read," we still have poetry.

In the midst of Olson's discussion of the text as a score for the voicing of the poem, in a series of words designating aspects of voicing ("breath," "pauses"), appears the word "juxtapositions," which designates a spatial relationship. Juxtapositions are, in fact, but one of several features of visual form having nothing to do with scoring for performance that appear in Olson's printed poems, giving one who reads them on the page elements of experience lacking to one who listens to them performed. The following passage is typical but unspectacular in its use of typography:

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*By Filius Bonaci, his series, rediscovered Pisa 1202, we shall attack,*

*for it, too, proceeds asymptotically toward the graphic and tangible, the law*

*now determined to be*

*phi*

*Its capital role in the distribution of leaves seeds branches on a stem (ex., the ripe sun-flower)*

*the ratios 5/8, 8/13*

*in the seed-cones of fir-trees,*

*the ratio 21/34*

*in normal daisies*

(*"The Praises," Distances 22*)

Certain features of this text are purely graphic, do not serve to "indicate how...silently or otherwise," one should voice it. Most conspicuous of these are the fractions; though one can, of course, translate them into "five-eighths," "eight-thirteenths," "twenty-one

thirty-fourths” (or “five over eight,” “eight over thirteen,” etc.) in order to read the passage aloud, probably no one would do so unless, in fact, called upon to read it aloud. Reading silently, I do not even verbalize, let alone voice, them. The fractions allude to a kind of printed text—technical writing—that is virtually never read aloud, never voiced. The incorporation of such textual materials into poetic texts has been common in twentieth-century American poetry, conspicuous, a generation before Olson, in works of William Carlos Williams, Marianne Moore and Ezra Pound. Likewise, the abbreviation “ex.” is a print convention, more ideographic than alphabetic. While the parentheses signal intonational as well as logical subordination, they are also foregrounded as elements of the visual texture of the text by their positions near and at the ends of successive lines.

While the layout of Olson’s text can be taken as signaling the phrasing and pacing for a performance, that is hardly its sole function: besides alluding to other printed genres, it works both globally and locally to present the reader with a visual image of form crystallizing out of chaos. The two groups of more or less evenly short lines referring to the mathematical patterns in the forms of plants contrast conspicuously with the group of very long *and* very short lines leading up to the determination of “phi.” Likewise, the relative shortness of the third line of the passage and the isolation of the single monosyllabic word “phi” in a line of its own iconically represent the narrowing down of apparent diversity to a single solution. The conclusion seems inescapable that “only hearing such a poem is an experience essentially poorer than hearing and seeing it” (Mooij 94).

Williams’ effort to pin down free verse with the paradox of “established irregularity ... maintained” and Louis Zukofsky’s dictum on pleasure as the test of poetry both imply that the visual form of the text can be a source of interest in its own right, quite apart from cuing how the poem should be voiced. But in their other comments on form, both poets fail to give equal time to the ear and to the eye. In a poem on “The Poem,” Williams begins, “It’s all in / the sound” (*CLP* 33). And Zukofsky, enumerating “[t]he components of the poetic object,” includes “[t]ypography—certainly—if print and the arrangement of it will help tell the voice how it should sound” (*Prepositions* 17). Again, however, in the free verse of these two poets, “the appearance of the poem on the printed page” typically

does much more than “help tell the voice how it should sound.”

Look at the first six lines of Williams’ poem “Rain” (CEP, 74-77):

*As the rain falls  
so does  
    your love*

*bathe every  
    open  
object of the world—*

The deep indentation of line three and the deeper indentation of line five create a diagonal from upper left to lower right—a visual image suggestive of falling. The same visual image is produced by Williams’ famous stepped triadic line, a form he later developed in a passage of *Paterson* II, iii, beginning

*The descent beckons  
    as the ascent beckoned  
                    Memory is a kind  
of accomplishment  
    a sort of renewal  
                    even  
an initiation, since the spaces it opens are new  
places  
    inhabited by hordes  
                    heretofore unrealized*

(77)

While I would not say simply, as Stephen Cushman does, that “The Prosody of [Williams’ stepped] triadic stanza is a visual one” (84)—I think that it is primarily an intonational one, with each lobe of the triadic line (or, in Cushman’s terms, each line of the triadic stanza) corresponding to a tone-unit—I do concur that the form has a visual aspect, and that its format, as that of the much earlier “Rain,” presents an image of descent.

Besides helping create a mimetic image, the indentations in the opening lines of “Rain” function locally to lend emphasis to the phrase and word that constitute the indented lines. The isolation of “open” as a single, deeply indented line seems also a local instance of iconic representation of meaning.

In the following passage from the body of the poem, we find the format again functioning mimetically on a



archaic white spaces between stanza breaks—in order to handle complex sorts of transition that defy ordinary syntactical punctuation” (283).

Near the end of the poem, the format in which the following sentence is cast helps the reader both to see an image and to have, in reading, an experience of the process it describes:

*The rain  
falls upon the earth  
and grass and flowers*

*come  
perfectly*

*into form from its  
liquid  
clearness*

As in the earlier passages, an overall diagonal thrust from upper left to lower right presents an image suggestive of falling. But the local visual detail of the passage is further suggestive. The spatially isolated one-word lines contrast with the left-justified lines of four words each at the beginning of the passage and are disposed nearly symmetrically around a central four-word line that begins at the left margin. Like the short-line stanzas in the Olson passage discussed above, these lines, in their arrangement, can readily be seen as an image of form crystallized. Further, in reading this one sentence as it is disposed into lines on the page, a reader, revising an initial syntactical interpretation of “and grass and flowers” as an extension of the object of “upon” and following the syntactical relations of the line “into form from its” backward and forward, feels the sentence itself “come perfectly into form.”

In the passage of *Paterson II* mentioned above, which Williams later published as a separate poem under the title “The Descent,” the format of the stepped triadic line or stanza seems, Cushman points out, to function mimetically, as does the format of “Rain.” But what, Cushman rightly asks, of the other twenty-eight poems that use the form (91)? Besides descent or falling, such a format can reinforce other related meanings. The experience of reading a passage or poem in triadic-line verse entails a heightened awareness of the fact of lineation (left-justified lines, on the other hand, are automatized) and of the successiveness of reading.

Thus, the visual appearance of the stepped triadic line foregrounds the temporality of language. In “Asphodel, That Greeny Flower,” where the poet speaks “against time,” this operation of the format definitely supports the theme. Awareness of time, aging, mutability, informs many of the late poems that Williams wrote in the triadic line, and the visual aspect of the form helps convey this awareness to the reader. But in many of the poems written in triadic lines, the form simply gratifies ear and eye with its regularities and its relatively few variations.

To be a significant part of our experience in reading a poetic text, the contrastive or repetitive patterns highlighted or created by visual form need not function mimetically. Compare the role of visual form in Williams’ “Rain” with its roles in Creeley’s “The Rain,” on the one hand, and in Apollinaire’s famous calligram “Il pleut” (100-101) on the other. Williams’ format is less mimetic than Apollinaire’s (see Bradford’s Introduction, page 6, this issue), and Creeley’s is still less so. Nonetheless, visual form is as important in both of the American poems as in the French one. Besides working globally to convey a poem’s generic affiliations, format can operate locally in significant non-mimetic ways. Even where, as in “Il pleut,” the graphic form is pictorial or mimetic, it can function in other ways as well; thus, in a commentary on the Apollinaire calligram, Anne Hyde Greet claims, “The first function of the lines as graphic form is to sustain and enhance the verbal music. Effectively the visual continuity turns each line into one long rhythmic unit” (Apollinaire 402). In a discussion of the juxtaposition of prose and various kinds of verse in Williams’ *Paterson*, Marjorie Perloff sees the shifts in typographical format as “signaling a change in perspective, in tone, in mood,” and “[s]uch consistent shifting of ground, such change in perspective [as] propel[ling] the reader forward through the poem” (185). The juxtapositions “create visual interest” (183). They do much more, however, for the variously shaped blocks of text are not just gray areas on a page layout, but language. “Because abstract typography organizes language in lines,” Stephen Cushman quite rightly observes, “it produces not only subtle creations of visual order, but also subtle creations of thematic order” (75). Because visual format creates configurations of words, Perloff points out, “a semantic shift takes place” (167) from the meaning of the same sequence of words in an undifferentiated layout. This

“thematic order,” this “semantic shift,” need not be matters of mimetic form.

J.J.A. Mooij is one theorist who has asserted the importance of graphic elements in poetry. While Creeley maintains that the poet uses the page simply as his means to get the reader to voice his poem in a particular way and Zukofsky claims interest in typography only insofar as it “help[s] tell the voice how it should sound,” Mooij argues that

Writing in verse-lines...[is not] only or mainly parasitic upon... ear-appeal....[I]t may lend a higher degree of prominence and conspicuousness to repetitive and contrastive patterns in a poem, and thus substantially influence the structure of foreground and background of the work. (94)

Consider the almost diagrammatic patterns of repetition and contrast in the following passage from Zukofsky’s *A 6*:

*Thus one modernizes  
His lute,  
Not in one variation after another;  
Words form a new city,  
Ours is no Mozart’s  
Magic Flute—  
Tho his melody made up for a century  
And, we know, from him, a melody resolves  
to no dullness—*

*But when we push up the daisies,  
The melody! the rest is accessory:*

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*My one voice. My other: is  
An objective—rays of the object brought to a focus,  
An objective—nature as creator—desire  
for what is objectively perfect  
Inextricably the direction of historic and  
contemporary particulars.*

(24)

The two blocks of text contrast the poet’s two “voices,” the one calling for melody, the other for objectivism. The fact that each voice is given a block of text implies a rough equivalence between them. In contrast to the Olson passage discussed earlier, however, there is no mimetic effect in the nature of the difference between the two blocks here—that one has more and shorter lines, the other fewer and longer. The mere fact that they are differentiated, though, implies the distinctiveness of each “voice.”

Within the first block, the lineation “lend[s] a higher degree of prominence and conspicuousness” to certain phonological repetitions and corresponding semantic contrasts. Thus it helps to set “modernizes” against “Mozart’s” and the modernized “lute” against Mozart’s Magic “Flute.” The paired words are linked not only by alliteration (“modernizes,” “Mozart’s”) and full rhyme but also by their corresponding line-terminal positions in two couplets of the same shape (and the same grammatical/intonational status), with the second lines being the two shortest lines in the passage. The lineation also helps to set “his melody” against “a century” and “the melody” against “accessory,” each pair of opposed terms occurring near the beginning and at the end, respectively, of a single line. Again, the visual form highlights phonological patterns: besides assonance (in /ə/), linking their stressed syllables, and rhyme of the secondarily stressed syllables, these paired phrases/words are associated together by identical stress patterns and by their similar positions in the intonational structure of the lines in question. The repetition of “melody” is given prominence by the fact that the two occurrences line up visually; likewise, “century” and “accessory” are linked by their line-terminal positions, again roughly one under the other visually.

Within the second block, “My one voice” is set against “My other” in the first line; the repetition of “An objective,” with its two distinct senses, is given prominence by the position of the repeated phrase at the beginning of two successive lines. The length of the final line of the block, together with the visual length of the Latinate polysyllables sandwiched between monosyllabic function words, highlights the alliteration in stops and the assonance in front vowels that link those polysyllables to each other and to the key word “objective.” Evidently, non-mimetic visual form can serve to point up sound patterns and concomitant semantic relations. The result has much the same appeal as the kind of poetic syntax that Donald Davie has called “syntax like mathematics,” syntax the function of which “is to please us in and for itself,” in contrast to all Davie’s other kinds of poetic syntax, which “were at bottom *mimetic*, or aspired to be” (92).

If the poets’ primary concern were, in fact, simply getting the reader to hear their speech, to voice the poem, one would think that they would avail themselves of more than the “rigidity and space precisions” of the typewriter. Modern linguistics has developed systems of notation not only for segmental phonemes

and degrees of stress but for intonation and juncture as well. The linguist Kenneth Pike has even commended these to the poets as a means of eliminating ambiguity as to how their texts should be performed. Certainly modern poets and their readers have shown considerable tolerance and even appetite for graphic novelty in the printing of poems, so one should not expect them to object to the introduction of markings for stress, pitch and juncture on the grounds of their novelty. Modern poets and their readers have likewise shown considerable tolerance and even appetite for erudition, so one should not expect them to object to learning the linguistic apparatus for phonemic transcription. The fact is, however, that aside from possibly (however covertly or even unconsciously) setting a positive value on ambiguity in this as in other aspects of poems, twentieth-century poets work, at least in large part, within a belletristic print tradition and compose their texts in terms of its conventions; and their readers read poetic texts in terms of the same tradition and conventions. In this print tradition, phonemic notation has no place.

What the typewriter—and more recently and to a greater degree, the word processor and printer—offer the poet is greater control over the manipulation of print conventions in the text of his or her poem. It is these conventions that are defamiliarized in many of e.e. cummings' poems, such as no. 33 from *No Thanks*:

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*emptied.hills.listen.*  
*,not,alive,trees,dream(*  
*ev:ery:wheres:ex:tend:ing:hush*  
 )  
*andDark*  
*IshbusY*  
*ing-roundly-dis*  
*tinct;chuck*  
*lings,laced*  
*ar:e,by(*  
*fleet&panelike&frailties*  
*!throughwhich!brittlest!whitewhom!*  
 f  
*l o a t ?)*  
 r  
*h y t h m s*

(416)

As we read, an immediate effect is disruption of the process of interpreting the discursive syntax, such as Richard Cureton says is produced by cummings' poems that fragment words below the level of the morpheme. Here, the normally unconscious process of parsing is raised to consciousness not only by the obstructiveness of the punctuation, but also by deviation from normal word order and violation of collocational restrictions. Most significantly, the arbitrariness of print conventions of punctuation, capitalization and spacing, and the visibility of punctuation marks and of text layout, are laid bare by their non-conventional but highly patterned use. Cureton, who provides a useful categorization and illuminatingly detailed discussion of cummings' use of visual form in *No Thanks*, finds the poet's visual forms satisfying only when they are subordinate to the poems' phonological forms or leave these undisturbed. To my mind, however, the primary interest of cummings' experiments lies precisely in their demoting the aural from its position of privilege, promoting the visual from a role of mere pattern-carrying to one of pattern-making. No longer a pack-horse, as it were, bearing the poem's aural form on its back, the visual can show its own paces.

It should be no surprise to find Williams and other inventors and continuators of a visual tradition in free verse using, as we have seen above, aural terms to justify their visual forms, or to discover them inconsistent, as they are, in their exploitation of visual form in their poetry. For in the absence of prosodic theories dealing with or even acknowledging the visual aspect of verse form, and with aesthetic theory heavily dominated by organicism, it is difficult to imagine how any modern American poet could have arrived at a clear conception of visual form and its functions. The bias toward the aural, against the visual, is of long standing. The sixteenth-century English prosodist George Puttenham, who, in his "Arte of Englishe Poesie," represented not only figurative stanzas but also possibilities for non-figurative nonce forms graphically, with ruled lines representing verse lines of divers lengths, was exceptional in "see[ing] the essential rectangularity on the page of those verse forms whose shapes, even today, we overlook as being a trivial consequence of typographical necessities" (Hollander 261).

Where critics have taken the visual seriously at all, it has generally been visual imagery evoked by the meanings of the words that they have studied, not the visual form of the printed text on the page. John Hollander, a notable exception to this generalization, acknowledges

the prevailing bias when he remarks that “consideration of poetry’s visual aspect may... seem as superficial as... shaped poems have been charged with being” (270). Even John Sparrow, who, in his book-length study of inscriptions, admits that “the quality of the impact that a piece of writing makes upon our minds may be in part determined by the layout, and particularly by the lineation, of the text in which it is embodied on the page” (143), concludes finally that “the literary effect that can be achieved by visual presentation is limited” (144). Even workers in the new field of “visual poetics,” which “tries to make characteristics of visual analysis like perspective and vantage point, but also less obvious elements like indiscreteness, composition, and even color, work for literary analysis,” and likewise “to make recent developments in literary theory and philosophy work for visual analysis” (Bal 178), have not, so far as I know, turned their attention to the visual forms of printed poems.

Where critics have recognized the existence of visual form in poetry, they have generally valued it only insofar as it serves to reinforce both sound and meaning, contributing to the “organic” unity of the poem. Paul Fussell, for example, though acknowledging that “now that we are fully accustomed to using printed texts for apprehending poems, our sense of stanzas has become a very complex art of mediation between what our eyes see and what our inner ear hears,” nonetheless contends that, if a poem is good, “the visual and aural experiences of the poetic form—the eye’s measure of the physical shape and symbolism of lines and stanzas, the ear’s confirmation of the form given to sounds by rhyme—will perfectly merge” (135-6). On the other hand, Michael Cummings and Robert Simmons, who include a unit on “Graphology and Design” in their textbook on *The Language of Literature*, recognize that a poem can derive an important part of its effect from “[t]he interrelationship of the graphological with formal patterns of lexis and grammar” (67) even where, as in Williams’ “Nantucket” (their example), the two do not “merge.”

The “sight, sound, and intellection” in Zukofsky’s definition quoted above translate Ezra Pound’s terms “phanopoeia,” “melopoeia” and “logopoeia,” which, in turn, correspond to Aristotle’s “*opsis*,” “*melos*” and “*lexis*.” Northrop Frye has discussed how, in literature, *melos* and *opsis* are combined in *lexis*. In his discussion of genre, Frye ascribes to the lyric “a relation to the pictorial” as important as its relations to the musical

and to the purely verbal (274). No more than Zukofsky (or Pound), however, does he consistently treat visual pattern as an aspect equal in importance to aural rhythm. Thus, within a few pages of speaking in such egalitarian terms of the three members of the triad as manifested in lyrics, he remarks that “although of course lyrics in all ages are addressed to the ear, the rise of fiction and the printing press develops an increasing tendency to address the ear through the eye” (278). Here, like Creeley in the note quoted above, he treats the visual form of the text on the page as at most a means for conveying how the poem should sound when spoken. This view of the visual aspect of lyric follows from his taking as the basis for generic distinctions what he calls “the radical of presentation”:

We have to speak of the *radical* of presentation if the distinctions of acted, spoken, and written word are to mean anything in the age of the printing press. One may print a lyric or read a novel aloud, but such incidental changes are not enough in themselves to alter the genre. (247)

The radical of presentation for lyric Frye takes to be the poet speaking with his back to the audience and so *overheard*.

However, as Hollander puts it, “just as poetry’s sense of itself, its fiction about its own nature, remains a musical, an auditory one throughout a good deal of its history, a visual concern just as surely begins to emerge after a while” (248). “Once the inscribed text was firmly established as a standard... end-product of literary art and typical object of literary appreciation,” Richard Shusterman argues persuasively, “it was only natural that the literary artist would exploit the rich aesthetic possibilities offered by the inscribed medium,” among them, “visual effects” (87-8). By this late in the age of the printing press (and perhaps even more in the new age of video display of text), surely the overwhelming predominance of silent reading of alphanumeric characters as the way audiences encounter poems has bred eyes receptive of and greedy for prosodic pleasures of their own. And surely the poets who compose at their “machines” have developed such appetites to gratify in themselves as well as in their readers.

Findings by experimental psychologists doing research on the perception of print offer some confirmation of this expectation. Researchers have found that reading proficiency is correlated not just with general language comprehension skills but with speed of memory access for visual pattern matching (Jackson and McClelland).

And experiments have shown that readers access an internal lexicon *before* recoding words into inner speech (Banks, Oka, and Shugarman). In one series of experiments, “even for very young readers,” it proved “more difficult to read text that preserved only the sound than text that preserved only the visual outline” (Frith 379). Further—and more direct—confirmation of an appetite for printed texts affording specifically visual pleasures is found in the contemporary phenomenon of avowedly visual literature.

In his study of *Roots of Lyric*, Andrew Welsh borrows Pound’s notions of phanopoeia and melopoeia, and draws on Frye’s related conceptions as well, with the difference that he gives equal attention to phanopoeia. “To name is to have known, and to know is to have seen”—this he takes as “the fundamental premise” of phanopoeia (26). Welsh discusses both riddles and Renaissance emblem books as among the manifestations of the power of phanopoeia in the roots of lyric. Riddles, he generalizes, “can work from either of two basic elements, the metaphorical presentation of an image or ‘picture’ or the presentation of an intellectual paradox in which the sense of picture is slight or nonexistent”—or they can “combine both elements, fusing picture and thought,” with “the implied metaphor or comparison...used to create the paradox” (30).

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In the Renaissance emblem books that Welsh discusses, the emblems are works in a dual medium; the pictorial element enters the work as an actual woodcut or engraving. The printed verses that accompany the picture have, of course, their own visual form, however much it may be overshadowed by the more strongly visual appeal of the picture. (Welsh points out one instance in Francis Quarles’ *Hieroglyphics of the Life of Man* where “the poet has encroached upon the domain of the painter and given us a shaped poem” [63].) In a letter to Pound, Williams toys with the idea that the “increasingly difficult music” of modern verse may be attributable to the fact that “whereas formerly the music which accompanied the words amplified, certified and released them, today the words we write, failing a patent music, have become the music itself” (SL 126). An analogous point may be made regarding the relation of modern free verse poems to the dual-medium works in the Renaissance emblem books. In the absence of an actual picture, the printed text of the poem has itself become the picture.

The word “lyric” associates poems in this genre or mode with music, but it is remarkable that a great proportion of lyric poems are poems that fit on a page, hence, are initially encountered by the reader as a visually apprehensible shape. Indeed, “poempicture,” a coinage Cummings reportedly used to designate his own poems (Kidder 244), would be an apt term for many of the poems we call lyric poems—provided it were understood that the “picture” in question is often abstract.

Where the printed text has become the picture, the pleasure of visual form in a poem may derive principally from the experience of two distinct structures occupying the same words, that is, the experience of counterpoint. Charles Hartman defines “counterpoint” as the “significant conflict” of “multiple patterns,” a conflict on one level that becomes perceptible “as meaning on another” (25). This implies a view of form of a poem as subservient to its meaning and an aesthetic that values unity of form and meaning. Likewise Willard Bohn takes interest in visual poetry where the effect is to “remotivate the signifier” (8) but not in Dadaist work where visual form is used decoratively; he dismisses visual effects that are “entirely gratuitous” as “severely restrict[ed in] their aesthetic function” (7). But the formal aspects of a text can legitimately function independently as sources of interest, of sensuous and conceptual pleasure. As Donald Hall has said, “The sensual body of a poem is a pleasure separate from any message the poem may contain” (32). Patterns and their interactions can seem quite gratuitous in relation to what a text says and still serve to make the text an aesthetic object and to make manifest various aspects of language, typography and textuality.

Jerrald Ranta has drawn attention to the use of geometric shapes—increasing, diminishing and palindromic—by modern poets. Such geometrical forms, Ranta takes pains to stress (revealing, perhaps, a justifiable suspicion that they wouldn’t be taken seriously if assumed to be “merely” visual), may be found not only as “visual figures in the printed surface of the poem” but “on every level of the poem,” and different forms may be found on different levels of the same poem; forms may also be “differently geometrical... more or less geometrical” (“Geometry” 708,718). They may reinforce each other, but they need not.

Finally, neither a theoretical approach in terms of “the radical of presentation” nor an historical one in terms of “the roots of lyric” takes us very far toward understanding the use of visual form in modern free verse. In Hollander’s words, “Historically, there is nothing to say save that all poetry is originally oral, and the earliest inscriptions of it were clearly ways of preserving material after the tradition of recitation had changed or been lost” (250). Welsh’s plural “roots,” though, suggests that the “radical” was always already split, that neither the aural nor the visual can be assigned primacy by reference to the origins of the lyric genre or mode. “Historically,” as Cummings and Simmons tell it, “the development has been from the phonological to the graphological,” i.e., from “visual organization of phonological data... to a visual organization that carries meaning without reference to the phonological” (74). To appreciate how visual organization carries meaning in modern free verse, a functional approach is needed. For a start, I would enumerate the following functions of visual form in poetry:

1. To lend prominence to phonological, rhetorical and/or other kinds of patterns in the text. This would include scoring for performance. It would also include the use of white space to express emotion, invite contemplation, signal closure or suggest a parsing of the syntax.
2. To indicate juxtapositions of similar or contrasting images and ideas.
3. To signal shifts in topic, perspective, tone, etc.
4. To render iconically the subject of the poem, something referred to in it, the tenor or vehicle of its governing metaphor, etc. This would include the use of white space on the page as an icon of space, distance, length of time, whiteness, void, etc.
5. To present the reader with an abstract shape of energy, e.g., an image of form or chaos, crystallization or disintegration, expansion or contraction.
6. To help objectify the text.
7. To indicate a general or particular relation to poetic tradition.
8. To allude to various kinds of printed texts, including ones, such as technical writing, that are not normally voiced.
9. To create visual texture and visual interest.

10. To crosscut other textual structures, producing counterpoint between two or more structures occupying the same words.
11. To heighten readers' awareness of the reading process.
12. To draw attention to particular features of the text in question and, more generally, to defamiliarize aspects of language, writing and textuality.

Functions (1), (2) and (3) are largely rhetorical; functions (4) and (5) are mimetic; function (6), aesthetic. All tend to support the illusion of the poem as unified and autonomous; I shall refer to them collectively as Group I. Functions (7) through (12), on the other hand, tend to be disintegrative and intertextual; I shall refer to them collectively as Group II. The visual form of a poem and particular features of that visual form can realize several different functions at once, even unifying and disintegrative ones at the same time (in which case the visual form will contribute to the poem's deconstruction of itself).

We have already seen all of these functions of visual form realized, generally several at once, in the poems and passages examined above. Having discovered the functions empirically in those texts, let us conclude by looking at another text, this time with our functional categories as an analytical tool. Visual form is an inescapable and important part of Ezra Pound's *Cantos*, as it is of most modern American long poems, including Williams' *Paterson*, Zukofsky's *A* and Olson's *Maximus Poems*. When we look, for instance, at the text of Canto LXXIX (in the group of "Pisan Cantos"), we are assailed by a great number and variety of visual features—variable indentation, intralinear white space, abbreviations followed by slashes ("wd/", "cd/", "shd/," "sd/," "re/," "per/," "vs/"), Arabic numerals, words printed in the Greek alphabet, Chinese characters. (Since it is impracticable to show all of these features through excerpts here, the reader is urged to review the full text of Canto LXXIX.)

As we begin to study the effects of these various visual features, we discover that a conflict between unifying and disintegrative tendencies, between Group I and Group II functions, is central to the operation of the poem. The unifying functions of some visual features counter the disintegrative effects of some other kinds of features of the text. Thus, the variable indentation is virtually a condition of possibility for reading, given the discontinuity of the discourse; by

topic, perspective, voice, etc., as per function (3), it helps readers negotiate the discontinuities and perceive recurrent themes, such as the one of the birds on the wires. If this feature tends to unify what is otherwise discontinuous, the abbreviations with their conspicuous slashes, the Arabic numerals, the Greek letters and the Chinese characters all tend to highlight intertextuality via functions (7) and (8). Both the abbreviations with slashes and the Arabic numerals are visual features of certain non-poetic written genres such as lists and notes. The Greek alphabet and the Chinese characters obviously allude to other literary traditions. Altogether, the visual form contributes significantly to realizing the conflict between the drive toward coherence and the impulse toward openness that gives the *Cantos* and other modern American long poems their essential problematic character.

In the study of free verse, “one might very well come to the [same] conclusion” as did Barbara Herrnstein Smith in a different context—“that only by surfacing from the deep can we discover the salutary pleasures of air and light, acquire a less subterranean and more sunlit view of the continents there are to explore, and have the hope of dry land at the end of our journeys” (*Margins*, 201). Only by attending to the visual surfaces of printed poems and analyzing the effects of their features can we adequately appreciate the artistry of modern free verse poets. On this, let Pound have the last word:

to “see again,”  
the verb is “see,” not “walk on”  
i.e. it coheres all right  
even if my notes do not cohere.

(796-7)

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