

Léger evolves from the early La fin du monde (where he imaginatively appropriates Cendrars's text) to his picture-poems in Les illuminations (where he merely selects passages from Rimbaud's text) to his own created text in Le Cirque, freely calligraphed and lithographed. He avoids the mimetic use of literary elements in order to subvert the conventions of the illustrated book and he subordinates meaning to a graphic interplay where word and image can, on occasion, become interchangeable. Already in La fin du monde, movement, especially of a circular nature, endows his book with a dynamics of its own. In Le Cirque, certain repetitive motifs develop mobility on a more structural level. Léger has thus subverted the borderline between readable and non-readable, lyric and painterly. The scene of representation, verbal and visual, has undergone so drastic a transformation that the poetic and painterly signatures of the artist have become undistinguishable.

The Books of Fernand Léger: Illustration and Inscription

Renée Riese Hubert

*Ecrire, c'est prendre la peinture au mot. La peinture ne
serait-elle pas une forme particulière de l'inscription?*

Michel Sicard¹

(Writing consists in taking painting at its word. Isn't painting a particular kind of inscription?)

Numbers, letters and words, as Michel Butor has shown in his *Les mots dans la peinture*, belong to the visual arts simply by being inscribed in artifacts.² Butor raised the fundamental problem. Others have made searching studies on more specific areas of investigation, for instance Louis Marin's "Toward a Theory of Reading in the Visual Arts: Poussin's *The Arcadian Shepherds*," Jacques Derrida's "+ R" and Roland Barthes' "Erte ou A la lettre."³

Ever since the cubists first introduced letters, words and numbers in their *papiers collés* and canvases, new problems have arisen at each radical use.⁴ These signs tend to be integrated into the composition of the art work and have as much or as little autonomy as other elements, such as an object's stylized contours or lines denoting musical instruments, or the geometrical shape of the table. These shapes, whether they pertain to the alphabet or to still-life objects, become, in a sense, interchangeable in cubist artworks. Directly or indirectly, they refer to a reality which they serve to undermine: such is the role of newspapers, wine bottle labels and even more painterly objects, for instance guitar strings and vases. Projected onto a two dimensional surface, fragmented as far as referentiality is concerned, integrated into new patterns somehow related to the forms produced by juxtaposing material objects, letters and numerals can hardly lay claim to any other function than that of their formal presence within the pictorial surface. This typical practice of the cubists in dealing with letters and numerals is not, however, regularly followed by other avant-garde artists, even in the early days of the present century.

1106 Cambridge Lane
Newport, CA 92660

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Rhode Island School of Design
Providence, RI 02903

Stuart Davis, Paul Klee, Sonia Delaunay and Fernand Léger, related in one way or another to cubism, have inserted in their canvases parts of the alphabet, ranging from fragments of letters to meaningful sentences. We need only place these artists in a single category to realize how widely they differ in their experimentation. We can actually measure the full range of these differences by exploring in each of these artists the function of the letter and the manner of its inscription. Davis, and more occasionally Léger, take as their implicit model the poster, a blatantly public text that automatically excludes intimacy and that is spatially structured for visual impact, usually at the expense of verbal subtlety. While Davis and Léger give their canvases qualities found in posters, they avoid narrow imitation of them. Their paintings radically undercut realism by two dimensionality, sectionalization and stylization—and by deconstructing the outer world and reconstructing it, thanks in part to the inclusion and participation of writing, into a pictorial surface embodying conflicting lines, shapes and colors. The letters in such paintings as *The City* (1919) provide, along with other elements, a response to the impact of contemporary culture, its transformation of the cityscape, its proclamation of a new vision.

Letters in Klee's paintings such as *Villa R* (1919) and *The Vocal Fabric of the Singer Rosa Silber* (1922) are put to a far different pictorial use. Klee's frame of reference involves humor as well as childish playfulness: a world where analogies to music and poetry play a far more important part than graphic statements endorsing a modernist perception. His titles, rarely descriptive, often inscribed in elegant handwriting within the painting itself, require a double deciphering on the part of the viewer/reader. The "R" in *Villa R* and the letters in *The Vocal Fabric of the Singer Rosa Silber* belong to a world of signs and signals, and the presence of the alphabet deliberately makes this aspect of Klee's art recognizable.⁵ Delaunay's alphabetical presence can be usefully linked to, if not determined by, her long experience with textiles and fashion, which enabled her to discover some of the fundamental properties of everyday objects. She stresses the shapes of letters and endows them with luminous qualities. By illuminating the entire alphabet, she has personified it.⁶

Answering the question of whether the painter's inscriptions come from the impact of modern life or, as in Klee's the *Song of Songs* (*Er küsse mich mit seines Mundes Kuss*, (1921),

from fantasy would hardly, in the context of our study, solve the problem with which we are mainly concerned: inscription as communication. Does the painter emulate the printed word of the newspaper or the book? Will she or he, in order to show that these letters belong to the the world of painting, blur to a certain extent their textual origins?

If we return for a moment to Stuart Davis, we will soon discover the variable nature of the letters used and the inventiveness of his alphabetical transcriptions, measured by the standards of conventional typography. Their shapes, colors and sizes vary not only from canvas to canvas, but within a single painting. *Blips and Ifs* (1963-4) or *OWH! in Sao Paolo* (1951) include several fragments of text. Although one might find a horizontally or vertically inscribed line conveying, in the manner of a street sign, some kind of message, the bulk of the textual information does not follow the directions to which we are accustomed. By reversals of letters as well as cut-offs, in which the accustomed order is respected within the same canvas, Davis privileges the pictorial domain, showing that it is not reducible to a single point of view or perceptive vantage point.⁷ Although the shaping of some letters would make us believe that Davis has merely copied a street sign or a traffic signal, other letters, within the same canvas, initiate, so to speak, a typographical transfiguration, substituting a harmony of curves and interlacings for the stylized geometrical contours and discreteness of conventional lettering. Nevertheless, these alphabetical inscriptions always remain within clearly defined spatial confines. "*Ecrire dans un tableau,*" as Michel Sicard so appropriately remarks, "*pour mettre la peinture en mouvement. L'écriture est un branlement.*"⁸ (Writing in a canvas so as to set painting in motion. Writing is pulsation.) Davis' lettering may be transfigurative; but it is certainly not transgressive, for its most daring aspect is none other than his signature, his handwriting, never twice the same, which he situates, according to the demands of composition, in various areas of the painting, often craftily undermining its legibility.

Davis' painterly example may serve to introduce some of the complexities of the problems raised by inscription in the visual arts, particularly their dual nature in relation to origin as well as shape. Fernand Léger, who only occasionally introduced single letters, words and numbers into his canvases: *The Red Statuette*, 1930; *The City, The Disks*, 1918, more frequently includes handwriting in his book illustrations.

Most of the relevant documentation is contained in Saphire's interpretive study, which actually opens up the field for an investigation dealing with Léger's use of lettering in his illustrations.⁹ A prolific illustrator, Léger has provided graphic commentaries on a great variety of texts by such writers as Malraux, Rimbaud, Cendrars, Eluard and Frénaud.¹⁰ Over the years, he collaborated with prestigious bookmakers as diverse as Kahnweiler and Tériade.¹¹

As illustrator, Léger has produced a number of plates (pochoir, drawings, lithographs) featuring textual elements. Within these illustrations, he intermittently inscribes single letters as well as words, either alone or grouped, providing either a direct transcription of an author's actual text or an addition, tantamount to a commentary. Words may also have an essentially decorative role. Most of these practices occur in *La fin du monde*, in some of the plates of *Les illuminations*, and in *Le cirque*, for which Léger composed his own text.¹²

Although Léger's art, as we have suggested, can be considered a cultural response to social, political and intellectual necessities of the time (a contention which we could easily support by quoting several texts from *Fonctions de la peinture*), as a book illustrator he becomes a critic of texts whose poetic and narrative qualities he has carefully taken into account.¹³ His graphic interpretations, unlike those of the prolific Picasso, stem directly from his close readings. In the previously mentioned books, drawings or lithographs pertaining to a particular section of the volume illuminate, amplify or undercut the text, compounding the expected verbal/visual confrontations by allowing verbal elements to invade the territory of the visual or, conversely, to be held in bondage by the pictorial.¹⁴

To varying degrees, Léger practices transgressions of a spatial nature which have repercussions on other aspects of the work. In *La fin du monde*, letters and words are borrowed from the text and inscribed in the drawings, stressing and subverting meaning. In *Les illuminations*, as I have shown in "Graphisme poétique et poésie graphique, *Les Illuminations* de Fernand Léger," illustrations include painterly plates, hardly differing from Léger's paintings, as well as mere transcriptions of the text by means of handwriting or hand-printing or a combination of both.¹⁵ By this device, the same letters can function equally as text and image. Unity results

from the act of transcription. *Cirque*, faithful in this respect to Tériade's policy, does not include letterpress but exclusively a handwritten text composed by the artist/author. Handwriting serves to heighten the gestural qualities featured in the figures. The book evolves different types of inscription as it dynamically moves toward a consolidating unification and integration of its components. The unity of the artifact arises mainly from a system of graphic and verbal analogies.

The illustrations for *La fin du monde* are regarded as a landmark in book illustration because of Léger's inventiveness in providing graphic novelty in each plate and in completely renewing the relationship between image and text. The vitality of Cendrars' scenario, with its staccato sentences, its breathtaking peripeteia, its undercutting of descriptive lingerings, its unbelievable humor, could only have provided an irresistible challenge to Léger. How can a painter represent a tale which steadily accelerates so as to compete with, and even become the equivalent of, a movie?¹⁶ How can he possibly deal with its narrator and scenarist, a sculptured gothic angel capable of sounding a definitive trumpet while expertly handling a movie camera? Admittedly, the very first illustration hardly offers a one-on-one relation to the text. But if we consider that the latter tells a story, presents a character—God the Father—busily engaged in specific actions taking place at a specific time, nothing will prevent us from discerning echoes of these elements in the plates.

So far, we have pointed to conventional or narrative elements of the text which, curiously enough, are by no means overlooked by the painter. God the Father, with his cigar and its smoke, emerge on the two-dimensional pictorial surface. We may also detect other objects, such as a cash register. They do not, however, constitute a sustained representation, for they are displaced, disrupted by other outlines, often geometrical, projecting their patterns in various directions. This is a pertinent reaction to Cendrars, who, when he seemingly tells us an amusing story at once bourgeois and cosmic, Parisian and cosmopolitan, constantly undermines his promised realism. From Cendrars' narrative emanates an extraordinary incentive toward movement, a constant thrust forward by which he subverts hierarchical and institutional conventions, including those of writing, of story telling. Léger focuses on this particular aspect and inscribes by various devices Cendrars' departure from, and transformation of,

conventional narrative. In his illustration he studiously avoids sustained mimesis.

It has been said that Léger's illustrations belong to both cubism and dadaism. While analytically proposing outlines subservient to traditional perceptions of the outer world and reconstructing them according to a new pictorial order, he embraces disruptive, even tumultuous borrowings from a modern urban vision reminiscent of posters and street signs. These aspects, present without being predominant in the first illustration, correspond to some of Cendrars' textual innovations. The multiple use of lettering in the pochoir provides a rather unique example of text and image relationship. On the lower left, the beginning of Cendrars' text is reproduced and, thus, becomes a page within a page (figure 1). As it displays the image of the page, it initiates the first step toward a new image-making process within the text itself instead of complying with standard mimetic rendition. The first sentence, in large print, detached and separated from the rest of the image, shows this transformation by the inscription, *Le 31 Décembre*, seemingly reproducing the final page of a calendar. As the viewer's eye moves from the bottom left to the top right, he perceives a fragment of

FIGURE 1

Fernand Léger from *La fin du monde*.



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Cendrars' text identified, so to speak, with a commercial enterprise. The demonstrative *C'est le* marks an effort toward identification; and with these spatial displacements, pictorial time is introduced, for the end of the year coincides with the beginning of the text.

Within the complex interplay of geometrical black shapes, rows, stripes, dots and circles showing multiple directions, suggesting even the possibility of other shapes surging, growing, overlapping, we can detect a quotation from the text, not inscribed as letterpress, but as gestural, handprinted letters: *Il se lève allume son gros cigare*. (He stands up, lights his thick cigar.) This intrusive text, equivalent to a caption or a stage direction, provides a running commentary while suggesting still another perspective; for, by being broken up differently and slanted diagonally, it frustrates our reading habits and helps destroy the order of the standard page. In pink, regularly shaped letters, each however consisting of several components also running diagonally across the page, we can decipher the partially obliterated words English spoken, occupying two by no means parallel lines. Léger makes the viewer hover between a recognizable order and its perturbation. These English words are not present in the French text: added by the painter, they imply that God and, perhaps, capitalistic authoritarianism are American. Dwarfed by the smoke columns that he puffs, God is recognizable, for his own name, printed in modest letters, appears on his shirt front. This paradoxical world cannot survive without labels, inscriptions and other forms of designation.

The straight outline depicting God holding his cigar as well as his name tag is interrupted by the word *RIEZ* (laugh) slanting over toward the inscription of the word *DIEU* (God). Once again, the painter has added to the Cendrars text, which he usually quotes and displays verbatim. *Riez Dieu* (Laugh at God) introduces an ambiguity, for this truncated rendition of *Priez Dieu* (Pray God), produced by intersecting and overlapping elements, overtly points to the mockery inherent in Cendrars' text, in which God turns into an American businessman. The words simultaneously imply an encouragement to God to smile instead of showing his nervousness, and a possible curtailing of riez de Dieu. By enhancing the humor of the text and assuming the function of commentary, these words point to the modification that spatial displacement can bring to language and particularly to its semantic shifting. To the black and white colors of the

page Léger not only adds *English spoken* in pink letters, but *cais[sse]* in yellow letters: a fragment not present in Cendrars' text, alluding to the capitalism of God the father not only by its lettering, but by the dispersion of golden tones over various sections of the page.

It would, however, be wrong to separate arbitrarily letters from other outlines and to distinguish too narrowly between the readable and non-readable elements of the illustration. Curved and undulating lines, swinging and dancing here and there, evoke shifting constellations capable of producing more writing, more letters, more numbers, all of them seeking new shapes. Indeed, these constellations suggest lines in the process of being drawn or written. Their imprecisely circumscribed letters appear mobile on the page and in their relation to other words, other inscriptions participating in this decentered image which defies closure.

In other illustrations, Léger assembles words and images in other ways. Throughout, he inscribes words taken from Cendrars: single words and expressions alternate with schematized structures. In the sixth illustration, which merely displays the name of the chapter, *cinéma accéléré et cinéma ralenti* (accelerated movie and slowed down movie), Léger is content to inscribe letters. The page provides no other references, anecdotal, fractured or disruptive to the text, no other words, letters or figures. Instead of a linear verbal arrangement in parallel lines with standard typography, Léger displays letters in the primary colors he so often favors— red, yellow, blue—arranged according to a circular or spiral motion (figure 2). In the second illustration, he had already introduced in a manifest but not exclusive manner round contours alluding to wheels and to the rosace of Notre-Dame, which circularizes and to a certain extent centralizes the multifaceted image of Paris.

Throughout the series, Léger subverts the conventional image of the page. Horizontality, its governing principle, is steadily contested by other directions in the various inscriptions. On the cover page, the artist builds, so to speak, his cathedral of word and image. And his arrangement of Cendrars' words makes the title the equivalent of an architectural unit. By assembling letters so as to simulate the outline of a Gothic cathedral and, above all, its tower, verticality becomes a dominantly phallic factor.

FIGURE 2

Fernard Léger from *La fin du monde*.



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In the sixth plate, a blue vertical stripe dividing the page introduces an element of continuity and stability contrasting with the dancing letters inscribing *cinéma accéléré et cinéma ralenti*. In illustrating the title, Léger achieves a sense of balance by combining static elements with rotary movement or, more precisely, with rotary devices showing a penchant for

acceleration. By inscribing the title in capital letters, he insists on the book's impetus to emulate the cinema. The creator of *Ballet mécanique* (1924) celebrates this modern invention. In his film, he constantly plays motion against narrative, anecdotal and descriptive conventions. In the final pochoir, Léger not only inscribes the circular movement as the ordering principle of the page but shows letters which, far from being inscribed or immobilized, turn to and from the page, dancing in relation to each other and using its surface as the locus of a choreographed performance.

In order to display fluctuating elements in relation to word inscription, painters often tend to introduce spiral, wavy, looped and scribbled lines. These Léger has completely avoided. His letters are inscribed as a set of geometrical and weightless forms, each one composed of several colors, corresponding to multiple lines. His alphabet is in a constant process of recomposition, alternating between flatness and three dimensionality.

Does the artist thereby suggest that we should both view and read his pochoir? The spectacle obviously imposes itself on the viewer, projecting its colors and movements, while the reader's task, by having to take into account the round white center, requires greater effort than a simple contact or perception. Within the circular lines emerges a shift toward spiral forms. The reader's eye will have to make jumps; it cannot merely follow passively, surmising that letters belong only to a single word. In these cinematic inscriptions, the question of textual beginning and end becomes problematic and forces us to remain attuned to conventions. As Léger makes us move from bottom to top, from periphery to center, he undercuts meaning. Readers must finally insert themselves, invited to do so by round inscriptions, by lettering verging on abstraction. Throughout this book, Léger uses the alphabet ostentatiously, inventing his own writing or borrowing from ultramodern alphabets.

As we have suggested in our introductory remarks, the illustrations of *Les illuminations* differ widely from those of *La fin du monde*, for Léger's iconography has obviously evolved in the thirty years which separate the two books. Inscriptions occur in many illustrations, a few of which remain free of color. Some of the black and white images present an ironic concession to the page he so radically transforms. We shall limit our discussion to two examples, *Phrases* and *Est-elle*

aimée?, most relevant to the problem of inscription. Both contain, simultaneously, Rimbaud's text in Léger's handwriting and pictorial elements. In one case, text and image are juxtaposed; in the other, they overlap within the same space. Similar use of inscriptions prevails in "H," a poem I have previously discussed in "Graphisme poétique et poésie graphique."

Like "H," *Est-elle aimée?* (as Léger believes) or *almée* (as several others prefer) is a poem concerning mystery and enigma.¹⁷ The poem conveys the impression of a reality distant yet powerful, a vision, threatened by obliteration, that the poet wants to retain and express. The passage from night to day increases evanescence. Beauty of space, of pure elements, of light, of festivity constitute a dream powerful in its impact but bound to turn rapidly from presence into absence and to transform present into past. Appearing as masks replacing faces never seen before, they fade into the night. Yet through intertextual allusions, proposing affinities with the fisherwoman's and the corsair's song, the poem suggests a resurgence, a continuity rather than a plunge into the void. A new poem will be born from and to mystery or enigma; a poetic force will replace vanishing festivities.

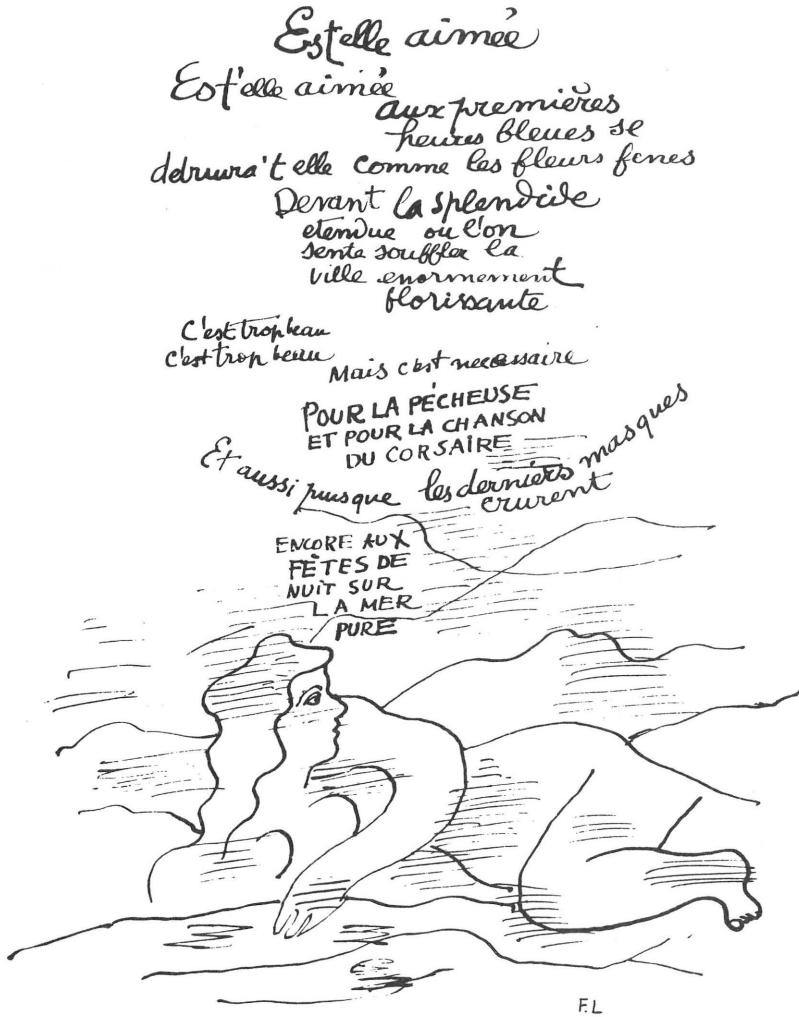
Our purpose is, of course, not so much to provide a commentary on a Rimbaud poem as to indicate that the text in itself does not have the obvious characteristics that would invite visual interpretations. A painter seeking to appropriate this text could continue the poem's thrust toward the retention of a vision rather than seek to parallel it. Léger's illustration consists, in its upper part, of a handwritten inscription of the text; in its lower part, of the figure of the swimmer breasting the waves (figure 3). Calligraphy and graphic representation merge into one another by the passage from straight-lined calligraphy to curves, by the presence of short and curved lines within the pictorial part and by a certain amount of spatial overlapping. The calligraphed and the drawn part of the illustration are more gestural than those of the pochoirs of *La fin du monde*.

Léger by no means transcribes the text as it might have appeared in any printed version he might have seen. Moreover, in transcribing it into his own calligraphy, he changes the printed text by suppressing all punctuation signs. Exclamation marks, question marks and dots play a significant role in the text, stressing its enigmatic qualities as well as hesitation and

FIGURE 3

Fernand Léger from *Les Illuminations*.

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poetic invocation. Punctuation in this poem contributes to the establishment of rhythmic patterns emphasized within a system of rhymed verses. The musicality of the poem is enhanced by the very punctuation that Léger suppresses, substituting for these standard signs and the recognizable, but free, system of versification his own arrangement on the

page: short lines which are not dictated by the meaning of the poem and do not correspond to Rimbaud's verse alignments. They begin at different places on the page, directed, perhaps, by the movement of the hand, the visual equivalent of poetic inspiration.

The first stanza produces the outlines of a wavelike cluster. Its spontaneous quality is enhanced by irregularities in the handwriting, unevenness of letters and thickness of ink. Before writing *la splendide*, the painter could hardly avoid dipping his pen. Corrections, for instance in the word *nécessaire*, are included. Apparently capricious in the inclusion or omission of accents, he replaces hyphens by apostrophes. The second stanza in no way repeats the first in regard to calligraphic transcription. Nor does the stanza convey the same impression as the first, that of an unevenly outlined but tight-knit cluster, for it merges gradually into the image of the sea and the swimmer. One line, consisting of handwriting that ties the letters together and printed sections that keep them separate, culminates in a wave-building curve which almost reverses the direction of the others. The printed sections establish a close contact with the image; and Léger turns certain verses into descriptive words, into a reality differing from that of the rest of the poem, thus providing a transition between Rimbaud's dream, his longing, his questioning, on the one hand, and concretization and visualization on the other. The outlines of the landscape reach the upper printed words whereas the concluding line (Rimbaud's last line, divided into five parallel parts, constituting an island), sinks, so to speak, under the waves, thus partially obliterating the barrier between text and image.

Although text and image are linked by the nature of the lines, by the fact that contours are not filled out or solidified, and by their undular, sketchlike characteristics indicative of fluctuation rather than closure, the outline of a female figure (dancer—*almée*—or swimmer) provides a strange response to Rimbaud's poem. We may wonder to what extent this way of consolidating the poet's vision represents a move away from an unfathomable beauty, from an impression too powerful to be voiced. By making the words of the poet his own through writing, through graphic gestures, Léger's delineation ultimately gives birth to an image where all elements are intricately linked. He adds a visual dedication to the poetic text he has selected, a page that he transforms, in the viewer's presence, into a canvas. The painter, in this illustra-

tion as in others of *Les illuminations*, creates a picture poem.

Pierre Restany's definition of a *poème-objet* becomes relevant in this context. The *poème-objet* is not bound to the restrictions of the traditional illustration, which is merely an accessory to literature:

Le poème-objet est essentiellement un, l'expression de la cohérence interne de ses divers éléments. Il restitue dans un champ visuel qui est sien une totalité concrète particulière. Il existe en soi, fruit d'une expérience rigoureusement inscrite dans le développement spatial du texte, ce tout surgit soudain du prolongement sans rupture de la phrase et du trait.¹⁸

(The poem-object forms an essential unity, expressing the inner coherence of its varied elements. Within a visual field of its own making, it restitutes a particular concrete totality. It exists in itself, the result of an experience rigorously inscribed in the spatial development of the text, this totality that has suddenly emerged from the interrupted extension of the sentence and the line.)

The distinction that we make between the *tableau-poème* (subservient to the two dimensionality of the page) and the *tableau-objet* (which can be three dimensional) does not play a part in Restany's discussion.

The painter selects one section of the illumination *Phrases*. This poem, like the previous one, alludes to festivity and, even more clearly, to a form of transgression. By means of well-established festivities, chains rise from elevated regions to the stars while the poet detaches himself from his earth-bound life and becomes weightless, his physical existence being hence-forth synonymous with poetic creation. Léger again transcribes a poetic text in handwriting (figure 4). Here the handwriting corresponds, even more closely than in the previous text, to a kind of image making. From the ordering of words emerge chains that are invoked in the poem. Especially at the beginning, convoluted letters, rich in loops and spirals, allude once again to spatial ties which decrease in the course of the text until the final *DANSE*. This word is printed so that all letters remain separate, as if to signify liberation.

Even more than in the previous poem, the painter modifies the text. He has repeated words, *fenêtre à fenêtre* (and pluralized them) and *des chaînes d'or*. He has omitted *d'étoile à*

FIGURE 4

Fernand Léger, from *Les illuminations*



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étoile. We may ask why he takes such liberties with a “sacred” text? By the sheer act of transcribing Rimbaud’s words, he no doubt feels that he has appropriated the poem. In his visual enterprise, he can therefore make modifications, accentuate words. He must repeat them to increase visualization, especially the presence of an interweaving action. He

literally trusses together words which seemingly reappear on the other side of the chain. The absence of *étoile à étoile* does not really curtail the text, as these words remain present in the depiction of stars. Léger frees himself from the word, from the terrestrial, as Rimbaud's persona has liberated itself from physical confinement. The stars are not the only visible image in Léger's illustration of *Phrases*. Red and blue cone-shaped steeples point upward in a landscape produced by curving lines, dancing stars, ropes and chains as well as by poetic inscriptions. These steeples also reach for the stars and contribute to the upward thrust which characterizes the poetic text. Two chains complementing each other in their directions, in their patterns, consolidate the representation of a text which aspires toward unification and creativity.

In *Cirque*, the painter, in quite different ways, transgresses the conventions of the illustrated book and the assigned role of typography. This 109-page folio volume includes 63 lithographs plus 22 illuminations and decorations of a text composed by Léger himself and inscribed in his own lively handwriting. In addition to vividly colored and black and white full-page lithographs, propagating the same themes and formal motifs, rapidly traced vignettes occupy here and there a section of the written page, emulating at once the lithographs that faces them and the writing that accompanies them as though to modulate the rhythmic pattern of the page. Contrary to the illustrations of *La fin du monde* and to an important group of *Les illuminations*, the lithographs of *Cirque* only incidentally include lettering (for instance a lottery wheel displaying numbers), and their presence is always thematically justified. Although the disposition of the numbers is integrated into the very structure of the plate, it does not have to be accounted for in the manner of his previous illustrations as a special intrusion or as a pictorialization of letters replacing an absent figure, for it does not create semantic ambiguities or mysteries. We shall discuss briefly the recurrent structural motifs of the lithographs, discern the echoes in the writing which we consider a visual rather than a textual or poetic presence.

The text names the protagonists appearing in the lithographs. It seeks by the repetition of diegetic words, such as *cela*, *c'est*, *voilà*, to rival the visual in order to make them visible to the reader. Repetition seeks to increase numerically the tribe of participants and to intensify gestures. Colors play a subordinate role, whereas light, allusions to sun, stars and

moon abound. The bicycle, an active participant in the words and in the lithographs, is transformed into a sunlight figure. In the verbal as well as in the visual, the bicycle generates energy and creates a link with other objects; it repeatedly transforms and disguises itself. For these reasons, each sentence offers surprises, exceeds expectations. Without ever lingering, they jump and dance. Lightness of touch characterizes the poetic style rich in metaphors such as *faire la roue* (Peacock displaying its plumage—equating bird and acrobat) while multiplying the many scenes of the spectacle. Léger, who signs the book as author, is present in the text, which includes many autobiographical elements as well as allusions to the painter's egalitarian dream. This egalitarianism not only includes performers but also animals, and it even extends to objects. This humanitarian ideal performs a role reminiscent of the word and image of the wheel.

As Léger invariably introduces by circular contours the scene of acrobatic performance, "circus" refers both to the scene and to the performers. Such staging by no means inserts a stasis in order to counteract acrobatic movement since the participants often appear within a dynamic natural setting rather than in the ring. Among nature's repeated forms, clouds play the most significant role, mainly because their fluctuating circular forms prevail in compositions where straight lines are relatively rare. Since an acrobat's arms or legs are never straight, but always bent or partially eclipsed by various devices, they too contribute mimetically, semantically, formally and structurally to the circular mobility omnipresent in the book. Leaves, however, by outlining predominantly meandering and intertwined lines, promote the multiple interconnections and relations that recur in the combined visual aspects of *Cirque*. They modulate the rhythmic pattern of the page's interloping lines and thus discourage us from viewing performers, circus numbers, and landscapes separately. By their circumvolved outlines, leaves lend support to acrobatic gestures. The triumphant teamwork of circular and spiral lines liberates all elements from their given context and, thus, implicitly declares the artist's freedom. An acrobat riding on the front wheel of a bicycle holds the other wheel on his shoulders so that it, too, can participate, but as an obstacle, in the acrobatic act. The two wheels are thus given almost incompatible functions.

In the entire succession of pages, nothing recurs mechanically. Text and lithographs alternate in an ever-changing

rhythm. This unstable alternation, where writing and image are often allotted more than a single page at a time, does not, however, foster discontinuity, for text and image ceaselessly give impetus to each other, propagating, on another level, the undulating lines, the dancelike rhythm, the celerity of acrobatic performance. The letters are penned irregularly, particularly from the standpoint of thickness. Some letters seem to float; others prolong themselves until spiral, curled animal tails, floral patterns can be induced to invade the writing. The upper part of a *d* twists like a snail; the *v* of the word *vélo* evokes zigzagging paths its rider has followed. The lines of both lithographs and writing seem to have been subjected to a common, though my no means morbid, contagion produced by the same gesture. Any regular form of typography would have produced a far greater cleavage between text and image.

The image also invades the text in other ways. The incipit *C* evokes simultaneously a moon crescent and a caterpillar. It links the upper and lower parts of the sky to the earth. When images of acrobats and dancers multiply (in either Léger's words or visual representations), the strokes of writing seem to thrust themselves forward or upward. They do not seem to be transfixed on the page like printed words. Letters never follow what appears to be a prescribed or a foreseeable course. Although he refrains from creating poetically recognizable rhymes or rhythms, Léger's spatial arrangement of the page is designed to suggest versification. Compensatory displacement prevails, for the painter transforms incipits into landscapes or beasts and, conversely, insets frontispieces, *culs de lampe*, in the very midst of a written page. He also inserts capitals in the middle of sentences or even words. By such techniques and devices, he succeeds in interlocking the different aspects and modalities of the book. And thus a landscape, reduced to its essential outlines, displays its affinity with writing, while writing constantly verges on figuration.

The first and last pages feature in a very special way the system of exchange between writing and image, between illustration and text. The title page belongs essentially to writing in so far as it provides the name of the author, the title of the book and the necessary indications concerning the nature of the illustrations (figure 5). Graphic spontaneity prevails, however, over information. Far from putting his effort into forming regular, well-spaced, carefully aligned letters, Léger lets a dynamic system of performative circles

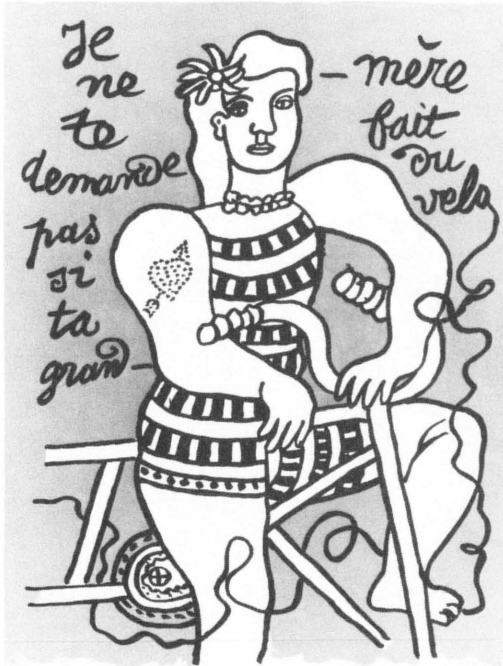
Fernand Léger from *Le Cirque*

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and spirals unleash the energy required for setting the entire spectacle in motion. The signature of the painter, linking Fernand to Léger, ends in an ambiguous tail which almost animalizes the writing while evoking the ringmaster's whip. It blends into the open circular lines dancing around the word *Cirque*, written in very thick letters bent so as to suggest an acrobatic number. They conform even less to the linearity characteristic of ordinary letterpress than the equally informative words that follow. Circularity, as already noted, constitutes a predominant force in the book. The *C* insists on bending down, the *R* on outlining a step, the *U* on contorting itself. The letter has already initiated its metamorphosis into a graphic sign, a figure. This parade of six letters also programs the spectacle which will begin as soon as we turn the page. Léger's alphabet functions as a constellation in a landscape composed of a network of half-circles directionally forming a spiral. Indeed, they outline the first of a

FIGURE 6

Fernand Léger from *Le Cirque*



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series of clouds. Spectacle and landscape, letters and drawings, disport together on the title page, which already functions as a first illustration, where visibility does its best to disclaim immobility.

The last page of the book represents a cyclist who, unlike the others, substitutes a pose for the gestures of incipient action (figure 6). She leans on a bicycle where a metonymic chain represents two wheels. The book ends with schematization and deconstruction of the bicycle, which, as we have pointed out, has set the world in motion. The dominant color is yellow, final echo of the sun and star whose multicolored design is featured in many other plates. The cyclist wears a flower in her hair, the last appearance and final bow of the flora blooming all over the book. This last page is not merely the final variation of a manifold series, the last turn of the bicycle and lottery wheels, for the woman's figure is sur-

rounded by a calligraphed text that requires a vertical reading. As each line is composed of a single word, horizontality is reduced to a minimum. Replacing ambiguous verbal and visual landscapes, this last page brings us back once again to the domain of textuality, for the inscribed words, unlike all other calligraphed signs, appear nowhere else. Relating only to the figure of the cyclist, they assume the functions of both text and image.

We may of course ponder the purpose of the cyclist's provocatively inviting question: *Je ne te demande pas si ta grand-mère fait du velo.* (I am not asking you if your grandmother is a cyclist.) It may, of course, be reducible to an entertaining bit of everyday prose. But nothing prevents it from functioning besides as the only proposal worthy of accompanying (in both senses of the word) the cyclist pausing for a moment on the road to freedom. The quip should show the way, at least implicitly, to the unknown rather than fall back on everyday existence. Léger has composed a text that raises a question or rather a non-question, even though it lets the reader supply an answer of sorts. Its negative thrust and its utter reduction of discursive language leave the door wide open, particularly for a youthful poetic response. Suggestions of freedom and companionship are, thus, conveyed here by both text and image, which intimately share the same lithographic space. In this final plate, Léger produces, as in "H" and in *Phrases*, a picture-poem; but this time the text belongs to him, or rather, to his provocative cyclist.

The painter's attempt at integrating both text and image actually goes full circle, for the lithograph also fully functions as a page in the book. Not only does the writing, by its loose ends, its chains, its loops, promise further messages or verbalizations, but it promises to participate in the generation of new outlines and figures. Conversely, the lady cyclist, because of the stripes on her costume and the love-sign on her arm, has inscribed herself in the manner of a printed or typographed page. The chain of the unfinished letters, akin to that of the bicycle, merges in this final plate so as to propose an alluring and clearly sexy path to freedom, all of which had been programmed in the frontispiece, for Léger had inscribed his characteristic signature as painter in a place usually reserved for the printed name of an author.

In 1953 Léger completed a cover design with pochoir illumination for a new edition of Paul Eluard's *Liberté*.¹⁹ Lucien

Schéler rightfully calls the illustration a *poème-objet*.²⁰

Eluard's poem is printed in four vertical columns, none of them outlined with mechanical regularity (figure 7). The linear arrangement, stressing the rhythmicity of the text, is further enhanced by curved, fluctuating green, blue and red zones. They replace the straight white space which would normally separate the columns of verse. The text is thus presented as simultaneous to the reader, enabling him to see it in its entirety without having to turn pages.

The spatial arrangement with its encroaching color zones suggests that Léger presents it for public view as a poster. This in itself provides a valid interpretation of Eluard's poem which had become at the end of World War II a text known by and belonging to all. Poetry has finally given up the privacy and mystery which had characterized it during the surrealist period. Devoid of any pronounced surrealist qualities, *Liberté* embodies the theme that *la poésie est faite par tous* (poetry is made by everybody). The poetic text itself suggests a form of display, for Eluard writes the word "freedom" everywhere and all the time. He repeats, hyperbolizes and perpetuates this act of nomination, proof of his poetic presence and his function as bard. To sing the word "freedom" manifests the power of the word together with the spell of the song. By declaring the ubiquity and timelessness of freedom, the poet transgresses the narrow confines of the everyday. Freedom needs the appropriation of the ordinary as well as of the imaginary, the language of clichés as well as that of sublimity and sophistication. By writing her name (*La Liberté*) everywhere, the poet equates liberty with both a traditional muse and a modern inspiration. The message that her presence asserts is that of a sustained act of writing and inscription. Every time the pen names liberty, it renews the meaning of life. Eluard's long inventory banishes silence and invisible words. This unusually repetitious way of writing—naming, giving face and identity to words—shows that public lyricism cannot arise from a momentary personal impulse but must be sustained.

Léger has participated lyrically and visually in the poet's verbal display. On the left and on the right, Léger has added two colored panels with figures and lettering differing in size, and of course coloring, from Eluard's printed text. He has thus prolonged the formulation of the word "liberty" by the ingenious device of substituting a colored equivalent for the poetic voice. He does not at all render the anecdotal side

of the poem and its strong emotional impact. He transcribes visually and in essence the poem's lyric appeal and the force of its communication. The painter joins in the celebration, responding by means of a ritualized inscription. Although the poster-like structure of the poem invites simultaneous viewing and presents a total spectacle, reading can proceed only in the usual way because of the poem's spatial arrangement. It would, therefore, hardly increase ambiguity if we consider the left panel as the beginning and the right one as the end of the poem-object. The face of freedom is represented at the onset together with the fingers of the writer. The transformation of the verbal into the visual constitutes an initial step and would point to a rather standard form of illustration: the representation of key elements capable of putting it into context. The presence of colored sections and stripes, all monotonous, all separate, illuminate in a literal sense, enlighten physically and spiritually, the poem. And this presence displays all the visibility with which the painter can endow it. The most essential words, *Liberté, j'écris ton nom*, form separate entities. They are not united in a single line; they are not printed in the same way as the rest, and, unlike the printed poem with its regularly designed shapes, they do not remain transfixed on the page. The words *j'écris* belong to the hand, *ton nom* to the face, so that at this initial stage the verbal and visual supports depend on each other.

On the right hand panel, the face and the words *j'écris* are no longer present. *Ton nom* is inscribed in blue large-sized letters, suggesting rhythmic patterns, musicality, aspiration. They formulate a songlike invocation. Beneath these words, *Liberté* is handwritten, making *j'écris* superfluous. The verbal and visual are united by the same signs in the same inscription. The names of both the painter and the poet, one on the right, the other on the left, are both present, printed, and not signed, to indicate collaboration rather than separate identities. They have formulated the same word, which becomes synonymous with artistic creation. They have transformed the universe into a most meaningfully inscribed page.

- 1 Michel Sicard, "L'Esprit de la lettre," in *Écritures dans la peinture*, Villa Arson Nice, April-June, 1984, p.108.
- 2 Michel Butor, *Les Mots dans la peinture*, Genève, Skira, 1969.
- 3 Louis Marin, "Toward a Theory of Reading in the Visual Arts: Poussin's *The Arcadian Shepherds*," in *The Reader in the Text: Essays on Audience and Interpretation*, ed. by Susan Suleiman and Inge Crosman, Princeton University Press, 1980, pp.293-324; Jacques Derrida, "+R" in *La vérité dans la peinture*, Paris, Flammarion, 1978, pp.169-211; Roland Barthes, "Érté ou A la lettre" in *L'obvie ou l'obtus*, Paris Seuil, 1982, pp.99-122.
- 4 Susan Marcus, "The Typographic Element in Cubism, 1911-15: Its Formal and Semantic Implications," *Visible Language*, vol. VI, 1972, pp.32-40.
- 5 cf. Renée Riese Hubert, "Paul Klee: Modernism in Art and Literature," in *Modernism: Challenges and Perspectives*, ed. by Monique Chefdor, Ricardo Quinones and Albert Wachtel, Urbana, Illinois, University of Illinois Press, 1986, pp.212-238.
- 6 Sonia Delaunay, *Alphabet*, New York, Thomas Y. Crowell Company, 1972.
- 7 Karen Wilkin, *Stuart Davis*, New York, Abbeyville Press, 1987.
- 8 Michel Sicard, op. cit., p.110.
- 9 Lawrence Saphire, *Fernand Léger: His Complete Graphic Work*, New York, Blue Moon Press, 1978.
- 10 Blaise Cendrars, *J'ai tué*, with pochoirs by Fernand Léger. Paris, La Belle Edition, 1918; Blaise Cendrars, *La fin du monde filmée par l'ange N-D*, with pochoirs by Fernand Léger, Paris, Editions de la Sirène, 1919; André Malraux, *Lunes en papier*, with woodcuts by Fernand Léger, Paris, Galerie Simon, 1921; Arthur Rimbaud, *Les illuminations*, with lithographs by Fernand Léger, Lausanne, Grosclaude, 1949; Paul Eluard, *Liberté*, with colored illuminations by Fernand Léger, Paris Seghers, 1953.
- 11 cf. *Daniel-Henry Kahnweiler, marchand, éditeur, écrivain*, Paris, Centre Georges Pompidou, 1984; *Hommage à Tériade*, Paris, Grand Palais, May 16-September 3, 1973.
- 12 cf. note 10; Fernand Léger, *Cirque*, handwritten text and lithographs, Paris, Tériade, 1950.
- 13 Fernand Léger, *Fonctions de la peinture*, Paris, Denoël-Gonthier, 1965.
- 14 Léger provides illustrations for each chapter of *La fin du monde*; he illustrates a selection of poems, some from *Les illuminations*, in the volume that bears this name.
- 15 Renée Riese Hubert, "Graphisme poétique graphique, *Les illuminations* de Fernand Léger" in *Rimbaud maintenant*, Paris, Sedes, 1984, pp.149-59.
- 16 cf. Renée Riese Hubert, "Cendrars et Léger," in *Blaise Cendrars*, Sud, 1988, pp.103-23.
- 17 For instance, Arthur Rimbaud, *Oeuvres*, ed. by Suzanne Bernard, Paris, Editions Garnier, 1961.
- 18 Pierre Restany, "Écriture-peinture: un vieux collage qui a la vie dure," in *Écritures dans la peinture*, p.96.
- 19 cf. note 10.
- 20 Paul Eluard, *Oeuvres complètes*, ed. by Lucien Schéler, Paris, Editions de la Pléiade, vol. 1, 1968, p.1, 639.