

TYPOGRAPHIC MANIPULATION OF THE POETIC TEXT IN THE EARLY TWENTIETH-CENTURY AVANT-GARDE

Experiments with typography proliferated in the early decades of the twentieth century in the works of poets and artists involved with the various movements of the early avant-garde. For artists of the Dada, Italian and Russian Futurist, and Vorticist movements, these manipulations were an integral part of their aesthetic and political concerns. The source which inspired these works and the central issues which motivated these visual pyrotechnics varied considerably from poet to poet. This article traces the relations among aesthetic principles, linguistic meaning, political strategies and visual representation in the typographic work of F.T. Marinetti, Guillaume Apollinaire, Tristan Tzara, Wyndham Lewis and Ilia Zdanevich in the Period of 1909 to 1923.

Johanna Drucker's interest in the visual representation of language in typographic form manifests itself in both academic and artistic pursuits. She has been printing artist's books in experimental typographic form since 1972 and her recent productions include *History of the/my World* (1990) and *Simulant Portrait* (1990). She received a degree in *Ecriture* from University of California, Berkeley, in 1986 and her dissertation dealt with typographic experimentation in the early 20th century avant-garde. She has recently completed work on a biography of Ilia Zdanevich and is working on a book length manuscript dealing with avant-garde typography and early modern art.

Visible Language, 25:2/3

Johanna Drucker, pp. 231–256

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Rhode Island School of Design

Providence, Rhode Island 02903

Typographic manipulation of the poetic text is a conspicuous feature of early twentieth-century avant-garde literary activity. The small press journals, ephemera and posters of the 1910s, in particular, are activated by graphic experiments whose stylistic features have come to characterize the period: a melange of sizes and styles of typeface, varied orientation of lines on the page, the inclusion of small cliché images, and the generally eccentric visual presentation of verbal elements upon the page. While other equally conspicuous features of early avant-garde activity in both literary and visual arts—such as techniques of collage, abstraction in both figurative and geometric mode, or free verse forms and stream of consciousness prose writing—have been bequeathed from this period to become mainstays of twentieth-century arts, typographic experimentation seems to be largely consigned (at least as a component of mainstream activity) to these early decades.

In addition, a relatively small amount of critical and historical attention has accrued to these works by comparison with the volumes of material produced on the experimental practices which are more readily identified as belonging to either the category of strictly defined visual art or literary production. It is arguable, and within the confines of this article hopefully also demonstrable, that the reasons for the relatively minor place of these typographic experiments in retrospective critical literature can be explained in terms of the threat which such an immodest display of visual manipulation poses to the presumed authority of the literary text and by the equally threatening invasion of the domain of pure visuality posed by the literary content of the typographic poem. Corollary issues such as the demarcation between high arts practices and advertising, between public and private forms of language, between lyrical and confrontational modes of writing, contribute to this argument as well.

TYPOGRAPHIC EXPERIMENT IN AN ART HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The historical legacy of typographic experimentation has, as mentioned above, been relatively small. Dada and Futurist typography have not given rise to a proliferation of such experiments and, more pointedly, have not succeeded in achieving an interpenetration of such experiments with mainstream literary forms. This may be explained in part by the sequence of historical events

which led to the ascendancy of Surrealism and to the impact of Andre Breton's influence within the arena of European art and poetry in the late 1920s and 1930s. Breton signaled his break with the literary movements associated with the war and his own adolescence in part by a radical change in graphic style. He adopted the look of scientific journals, a return to the unmarked texts which provide authority to the written word, and banished, in explicit and certain terms, the typographic variety of the Dada style.

In the domain of anglophone poetics, the influence of typographic experiment was always considerably smaller than it had been in either the Russian or European avant-garde, and the literary legacy of Ezra Pound, T.S. Eliot and Hilda Doolittle, for instance, was without a conspicuous typographic component (except for those elements of structural presentation which fall within the normal parameters of poetic composition). Not until the post-war movements of Lettrism, Situationist International and Fluxus, as well as the Concretist activities of Brazilian and German poets, was there a resurfacing of typographically complex or conspicuous activity, and this work has not been granted an integral place within either mainstream poetics or visual arts. The graphic character of a movement like Fluxus, itself considered somewhat marginal, is hardly granted full critical attention as an area for critical inquiry—while the work of Concrete poets is predictably ghettoized as some aberrant and exotic form of poetry parlor game. Only fairly recently have examples of typographic experiment begun to find their way into the pages of mainstream poetry journals and been granted probationary status within the ongoing activity of a literary community, indicating a slightly more receptive (though still limited) attitude toward such work.

THE TYPOGRAPHICALLY MANIPULATED POETIC TEXT

This discussion will focus on a particular kind of typographically manipulated poetic text: specifically, works in which the use of typography is *integral* to the poetic conception, and where the link between authorial intention and typographic form makes the two inseparable. The typographic form in these works is not incidental to the writing, nor is it worked out after the fact of textual production; instead, these are pieces which contain the conception of their visual presentation from the very

outset. These criteria allow for an important distinction between, for instance, the Lissitsky/Mayakovsky collaboration of *For the Voice* in 1923 and the work of Ilia Zdanevich, *Ledentu*, of the same year, since Mayakovsky's relation to the design and production of the visual format of the text was minimal whereas Zdanevich's conception of *Ledentu* included typographic and format concerns in its initial writing. Such a distinction also allows the discussion of the work of graphic designers such as H.N. Werkmann or Herbert Bayer to be put into perspective. The activities of these avant-garde designers had—and continues to have—a profound influence on the look of contemporary publications, especially in the realm of commerce, advertising and mainstream mass media. But their work was of a very different conceptual order than that of their contemporaries who were poets first and foremost.

Stephane Mallarmé

Serious consideration of the origins of the modern typographic poem must begin, of course, with the work of Stephane Mallarmé. The radical changes he proposed in the visual presentation of poetic text took their complex, though much mutated, form in the qualified version of *Un Coup de Des* which was published in 1897.¹

Mallarmé's attitude toward the conventional visual presentation of language, literary or quotidian, is well known. Here are the oft-cited passages in which he criticizes the mechanization of reading which occurs with the daily habit of the newspaper:

Let us have no more of those successive, incessant, back and forth motions of our eyes, tracking from one line to the next and beginning all over again—otherwise we will miss that ecstasy in which we have become immortal for a brief hour, free of all reality and raise our obsessions to the level of creation.²

Mallarmé's criticism of the newspaper was modified by his enthusiasm for its potential to produce fabulous surprises when folded, causing unexpected juxtapositions in the manipulation of the conventional spatial and temporal ordering by which its reading was normally bound. Calling for innovation in the visual presentation of poetic texts, he also condemned the conventional book:

To the question of books which are read in the ordinary way I raise my knife in protest, like the cook chopping off chickens' heads...

The severity of his criticism was complemented by the radicalness of his solution—*Un Coup de Des* invented a mode of typographic poetics, integral format and spatial disposition through the conceptual space of the book which was without precedent. Many of the examples of twentieth-century avant-garde typographic poetics take their point of departure from other, earlier conventions—either pattern poems in the form of recognizable images (urns, animals and love knots) which date to the first centuries A.D., or the display techniques of advertising typography. But Mallarmé achieved a radical poetic typography which did not derive from any of the formulaic patterns which existed as precedents for typographic manipulation. As one critic notes, “His attempt to give poetry the dimensions of cosmogony through typography and word suggestion was more daring than any poetic endeavor up to the twentieth century.”³

Mallarmé’s constellation of phrases, dispersed so as to emphasize the gesture of human action in the face of the void of the universe, is a far remove from the iconic forms of lyric verses commemorating the memory of a beloved in the form of an urn or celebrating romance through the twisted strands of a love knot poem. The reductive simplicity of the pattern poem, whose typographic treatment imposed the referential frame of an iconic value onto the text, is completely different in sensibility from the amorphous dispersal of syntactic and sequential integration offered by the complex format of Mallarmé’s presentation, which, as Penny Florence neatly states, “moves thought towards the simultaneity of perception.”⁴

Un Coup de Des differs from commercial practices as well: rather than exploit the hierarchical marking of information for publicity purposes with clear communicative emphases—larger, bolder lines announcing product names and virtues, smaller faces carrying more detailed information—Mallarmé makes use of size, weight and style of typefaces in a manner which makes it *impossible* to return them to a narrative syntax, and in fact, the movement and changes in typographic mode within the work are what provides its dizzying visual effect. The dramatically open field, the elaborate obscurantism and the disjunct visual operations are all unique to this work and remain so. Mallarmé had evolved a style of poetic

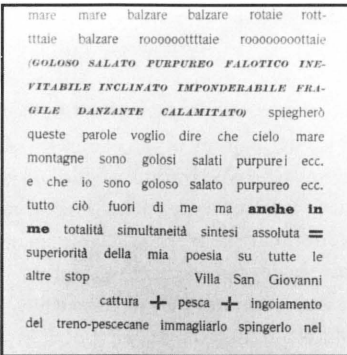


Figure 1

F.T. Marinetti, from Zang Tumb Tuum, 1913.

composition in which transitional elements were reduced to a minimum, highly concentrating the emotional charge of his phrases. The dense poetic work was designed as much for perception and refraction as for reading. Suggestive evocation, a mysterious quality, almost hieroglyphic in the presentation of imagery, became the keywords of his poetic practice. Mallarmé proposed that poetry was a serious instrument of *ascesis*, the means by which the transition from daily world to spiritual universe might be achieved.⁵ The act of poetry was the “throwing of dice,” the making, recreating of a universe through the suggestive means of language. The role of typography was critical; it was the means of emphasizing the spatial void around the work, the intonation indicated by placement on the page, and the temporal effects of the work as if it were, in the familiar analogies, a musical score, a constellation, and the listing form of a ship being wrecked.

It would be a mistake, however, to go directly from Mallarmé to the poets of the early avant-garde whose typographic manipulations connect to the symbolist poet merely through an essentially superficial connection of visual style. The important examples of typographic investigation which proliferate in the 1910s, in fact, come out of a variety of traditions and attitudes in spite of their evident visual similarity. These differences are describable in terms of the formal differences through which typographic manipulation takes place. The poets to be examined here were engaged with typographic manipulation at the level of the letter, word, line and page with a range of different intentions vis-a-vis the conception of poetic language. Filippo Marinetti, Guillaume Apollinaire, Ilia Zdanevich, Tristan Tzara and Wyndham Lewis—each of these writers made works whose integrations of typographic format into the poem was an immediate part of the poetic activity.

Filippo Marinetti

In their forms and their intentions, Marinetti and Apollinaire could not have been more different from each other—or from their symbolist predecessor. Marinetti’s 1909 *Futurist Manifesto* contained no specific references to typographic innovation, but his later manifestos, especially the *Words in Liberty* of 1911, directly exhort his fellow Futurists to reinvent language in its visual, syntactic and semantic aspects. Marinetti’s contributions to this domain

were not equal to the inflated enthusiasm of his rhetoric, but they made ingenious examples of the attempt to invent from extant forms.

The first, and in some ways most intriguing, experiment carried out by Marinetti was the substitution of mathematical symbols into normal sentence structure in the place of conjunctions. A number of these inventions appeared in the 1913 publication of *Zang Tumb Tuum* (figure 1). The linking of grammatical terms, particularly nouns and verbs in the infinitive (in accord with his injunction against inflected endings or conjugated forms of the verb, all considered too bourgeois and frivolous for inclusion within a streamlined language of the modern future), fractured the metonymic conventions of grammar, and the effect was to put the elements of each sentence into more (rather than less) ambiguous relations to each other. In his attempt to make scientific and mathematical and render more precise the connective elements of the linguistic chain, Marinetti, in fact, through this graphic substitution, achieves an atomization of language which redoubles the emphasis on words as individual elements whose meaning is rendered more elusive and difficult to pin down as it is freed from the defining context of use. The plus and minus signs release the words into flux so that the meaning value is radically altered by these conspicuous visual symbols. Instead of the defining *and* or *but* or *or* or *not* there is the nonspecific + or – hanging in the mid-air, both figuratively and effectively, of the sentences.

totality simultaneity synthesis absolute = the superiority of my
poetry to all the rest stop⁶

or

the igniting of a sloop = a petroleum lamp + 12 white shades +
a green rug + a circle solitude serenity family⁷

Is there authorial intention here? Does this constitute a deliberate attempt to use the visual properties of typographic representation in a manner integral to the writing process? Absolutely. The conception of the word already presupposes the use of these symbols, and the linguistic effect is not one of mere substitution or replacement, but the production of meaning in a manner which is essentially untranslatable back into a single verbal term. The “Pallone Frenato Turco” piece goes even further in this

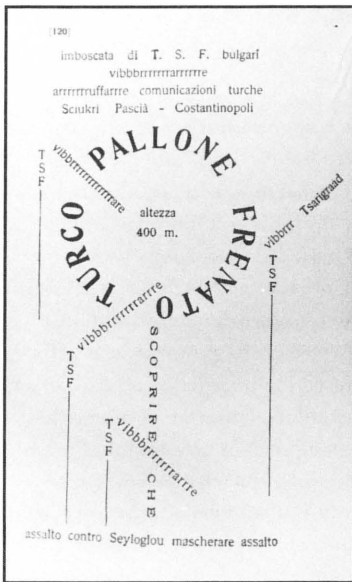


Figure 2

F.T. Marinetti, from *Zang Tumb Tuum*, 1913.

respect, moving towards the elaborate spatial iconography employed in the *Bataille* and *Words in Liberty* pieces. This small work from *Zang Tumb Tuum* represents a hot air balloon, and the type is disposed to form the box and lines of floating form in the manner of an icon (figure 2). Simplistic as it is, the poem has the visual conviction of its form, carving a dynamic space out of the page with the long arms of vibrating cord and escaping air. The linguistic character of the words is strongly subordinated to the visual arrangement; they function as elements of a drawing serving to inscribe the image, rather than using the visual arrangement to reorient the process of reading. The actual effect of the reading is comparable to reading labeled parts of a structural diagram rather than any dynamic of linguistic reordering.

The iconic properties of *Bataille*, a work produced in 1916 and intended for simultaneous reading in performance, are far more developed, though essentially following the same logic (figure 3). Marinetti's typographic imagination was circumscribed within a fairly conventional pictorial mode. Here, the image of Mont Altissimo, roughly indicated with the sharp diagonal slope of pieces of rule, sits on the page in accordance with the most banal traditions of landscape painting. The course of the battle is recorded with measured accuracy against the marked altitude of the slope. While the sequence of linguistic elements is linear, the elements themselves are largely onomatopoeic registrations of sounds of the weapons of war, and the effect is a dark orchestral score for the scene of violence as noise erupting through the descriptive phrases of military activity. Once again, the effect is one of redundant reinforcement of the linguistic value through the visual distribution, a kind of verbal painting in which the painting forms are themselves fairly normative.

The work of Marinetti which appeared in 1919 in *Words in Liberty* is the most daring of his inventions since it takes the visual quality of the typographic and handwritten elements into a more dramatic graphic play than any of his previous works (figure 4). The earlier pieces all observe the good manners of letterpress ordering—single lines of type, even when diagonally placed, marching in a well-behaved sequence of letters or following the commercially used molds of rounded forms. Here the letters visually explode, marking the noise and disordered violence of a

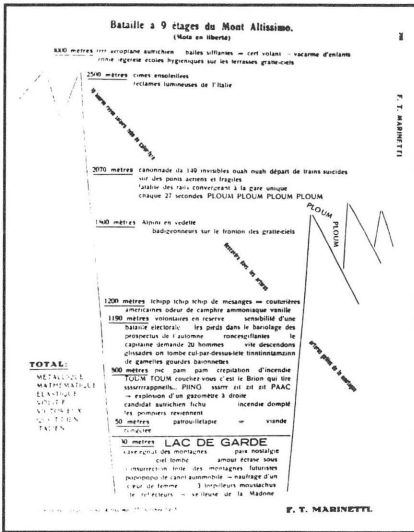


Figure 3
F.T. Marinetti, "Bataille,"
from Words in Liberty, 1919.



Figure 4
F.T. Marinetti, from
Words in Liberty, 1919.

battle recorded as a letter from the front. The reposing female form in the bottom right of the image serves as the conceptual frame, the point of identification for us with the enunciation of the work, since she is the vehicle for its reception. The girlfriend of the artillery man, she lies in bed reading his account; the image which floats above her may be taken either as the mental image conjured by his words or as the visual page itself, superimposed on her space. In either case, the nude female is the voyeuristic focus for our gaze in keeping with the most, again, banal traditions of Western image making. In any case, the visual impact of this piece goes far towards creating its value; the residual information provided by the words as elements of communicative language is minimal by contrast to their function as dramatic fragments of visual representation.

Marinetti's experiments with liberating language from typographic conventions were limited both in number and in conceptual range. He depended largely upon a mode of pictorial image making which is itself highly conventional though he pushed the thematics of those images into domains dear to his futurist enterprise: machinery, violence and battle scenes. *Zang Tumb Tuum* is the only book which attempts any sustained typographic manipulation; *Words in Liberty* contains the typographic pages as fold-out sheets, reproduced as photographed drawings/collages whose visual complexity was not achieved merely through letterpress means. Marinetti does not sustain a book-length investigation and seems not to have thought of the book in any terms beyond the single gesture of the metallic cover transforming the antique binding into a "futuristic," modern, machined object. But the conceptual space of the book remains unexamined in Marinetti's work, and the authorial extension of typographic manipulation as an integral aspect of poetics is restricted to these few—though highly significant—experimental pieces.

Marinetti's manipulations manifest his thematic concerns with giving written language a modernized style. The agenda is a fashionable operation on language rather than any more profoundly thought through consideration of either a social or poetic role. Insofar as poetry contributes to the larger project of Futurism, it bears the same contradictory impulses—a conservative embrace of the *new* as evident motif of radical change, itself constrained

within the totalizing (and proto-totalitarian) myth of a changed world. Marinetti's Futurism is a utopian dream which goes only as far as the destruction of the old order, without clear vision of what might follow: the limits of this vision show up nowhere more clearly than in the poverty of his typographic imagination.

Guillaume Apollinaire

Guillaume Apollinaire, on the other hand, displays a wider range and versatility of typographic possibilities in his work. Where Marinetti limited himself to certain mechanical inventions and insertions (mathematical pseudo-scientific signs and rigid pictorialism), Apollinaire investigates the various spaces of the page in a manner which is closer to that of Mallarmé by virtue of its abstract character. The visually marked poems of Apollinaire cannot be described under a single rubric; they range from the calligram form to the non-iconic spatialized arrangement of *L'Antitradition Futuriste*.

The *Calligramme* experiments of Apollinaire borrow from a tradition which is positively archaic and counter to the progressive stylistics of Marinetti's aggressive modernism—namely, the manuscript tradition of calligraphic poetry. Apollinaire also restricted much of his experimentation to particular pages, or even poems, rather than taking up the Mallarmean concept of the book as a spatialized conceptual entity.

The iconic shapes of the calligram quickly subordinate their poetic substance to the visual image which definitely fixes their linguistic value. *Il Pleut* can be about nothing but rain; *La Cravate* will never escape the tight definition of the tie, nor will any of the other visually identifiable shapes let the signifying activity of the verbal elements free from the domination of the signifying value of the icon (*figures 5 and 6*). These works have the virtue of reflecting the casual, almost doodling, quality of hand-written diversions composed on the cafe napkin, and they have the additional virtue of fairly immediate and widespread appeal. Not in the realm of the esoteric, but rather, in the realm of the popular, these poems communicate forcefully and playfully. They add very little to the tradition of pattern poems or shaped poems, which goes back to Greek times, except for the fact that, like much of Apollinaire's poetry, they are concerned with the vernacular and quotidian rather than the mythic or allegorical

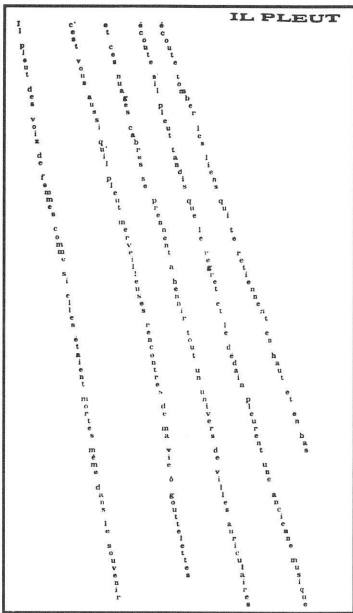


Figure 5
Apollinaire, "Il Pleut," from *Calligrammes*, 1916.

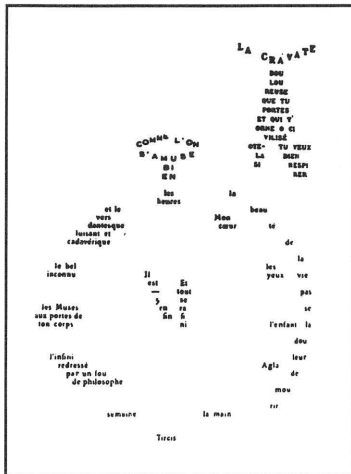


Figure 6
Apollinaire, "La Cravate," from *Calligrammes*, 1916.

vocabulary of French literary tradition. Emblematically, then, these calligrams signal Apollinaire's poetic and aesthetic stance, one which was revolutionary by its direct accessibility rather than through some negative dialectic of difficulty.

There are a number of other works by Apollinaire, however, which raise more complex conceptual issues simply in terms of the disposition of visual elements upon the page. One of these is a double-page "postcard." Another is a three-page sequence (as it first appeared in *SIC*) of *L'Antitradition Futuriste*. Both of these works force the issue of spatial relations through typographic manipulation into a realm where the linguistic activity of phrases is redefined. The postcard piece, *Lettre Ocean*, borrows from the calligrams a certain iconic relation to that which it represents—mimicking the postcard form and, on the card, mimicking various modes of communication (figure 7). Here Apollinaire is concerned with language as social mode, mediated through various methods of telecommunication which are themselves represented as spatialized forms. As Willard Bohn has pointed out in explicit detail, this poem

consists of three distinct figurative poems...linked together by theme and concept: a postcard, a bunch of keys on a ring, and the Eiffel Tower transmitting a telegraphic message.⁸

The physical record of the postcard bears visible traces of its movement through space and time as a vehicle of linguistic exchange. Thus, the materialized and dematerialized transmissions of language are represented both metaphorically and (as) literally (as possible) on the page. The two sides of the page face each other across that very gulf which is being traversed by the postcard in its path from Paris to Mexico City and back. The postcard poem activates a field of the page in a manner which is basically without precedent, in spite of its mimetic character. The words relate to each other without a fixed or determined sequence of the phrases. A spatialization of the text goes beyond even the daring *espace* of Mallarmé, whose blanks terrify the reader with their inexplicable void. The space Apollinaire uses in these pages is social and geographic, mapped onto a surface rather than emptying the page of its coordinate points. Rather than destabilize the reader, these pages position the reader in particular relations to the topos of the text.

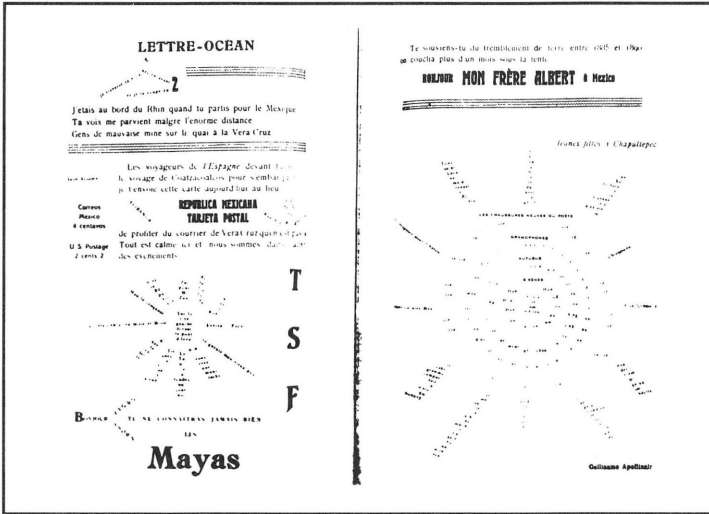
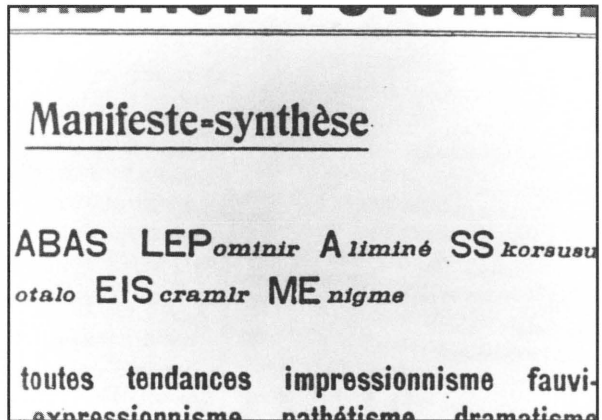


Figure 7
Apollinaire, "Lettre Ocean,"
from Calligrammes, 1916.

Figure 8
Apollinaire, from "L'Anti-
Tradition Futuriste," 1913.



On the first page of *L'Antitradition*, Apollinaire makes use of two sizes of type to pick a phrase out from another set of words in which it is embedded: "A Bas le Passeisme" is marked out of "ABAS LEPominir A limite SS korsusu otalo EIS cramir MENigme" (*figure 8*). This device, also well known in advertising typography of the period, makes specific use of a visual device which is not redundant to the linguistic activity. The rising face of this ghost sentence—subtext becoming sur-text, as it were—suggests

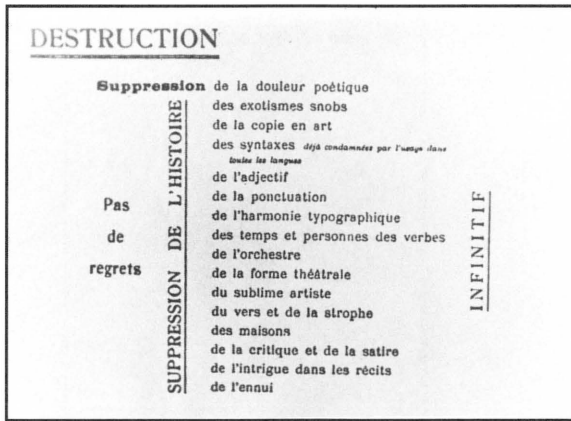


Figure 9
Apollinaire, from "L'Anti-
Tradition Futuriste," 1913.

a lurking message, a constant possibility of new messages being formulated within the extant order of the symbolic, as if language contained the seeds of that which could reinvent its terms from within. At the bottom of this same page, under the heading "Destruction," Apollinaire makes a list of all of those outmoded clichés and tiresome aspects of poetic activity which deserve, in his scheme, to be suppressed (*figure 9*). Apollinaire stages this proposition by framing the terms between two poles: the named suppression of history and the open-ended right hand margin in which the term *infinitif* (the infinitive) demarcates a second limit. In physical terms, this allows the list of elements to be suppressed to *all* be framed by a single phrase, contained under its influence, as it were. A contrast can be made between the list of elements as a subset of "Destruction" or "suppression" and the activity of the *suppression de l'histoire* which makes each phrase an active participant in (not merely an elucidated member of) a generative field of meaning.

Tristan Tzara

While Apollinaire made use of certain typographic techniques which had been popularized or rendered conspicuous through commercial use, Tristan Tzara is remarkable for having conceived his very technique of Dada typography directly from the advertising mode. There is no prior poetic onto which this activity is grafted; rather, the activity of appropriation, cut up juxtaposition of elements, is both mode and expression. The concept of a public poetic is pushed farther in Tzara's work than in Apollinaire's; these Dada pieces seem partly to be the place from which he begins, conceives, the very exercise of writing.

Tzara's poetics are clearly anti-lyrical from the very outset of his French language publications. *The Realities Cosmiques Vanille Tabac Eveils*, for instance, refuses the authorial voice of an internal monologue, opting instead for the juxtapositions and eclecticism of an outward-directed observer recording linguistic material from the available field. Not surprisingly, Tzara's famous prescription for the manufacture of a Dada poem includes just such appropriative tactics, mechanized into a formula for cutting up newsprint materials and pasting them down in the order in which they occur as picked back out from the heap of scraps.

The sense of poetry as a by-product of the public realm of already spoken, printed, articulated language is explicitly marked in his typographic activity. The relatively tame production of *Realities* contains at least a few words whose appearance render them irreconcilably other than the typographic field into which they are dropped (*figure 10*). But it is in the pieces produced in the pages of *Dada* magazine, most specifically, *Bilan* and *Bulletin*, that Tzara's sense of the typographic marking of language carries its strongest weight (*figures 11 and 12*). The pages are composed of single lines with the visual appearance of having been snipped almost randomly from pages of journals or other publication. The language is that of advertising, rail schedules, consumption and cosmetics, confections and tabloid headlines. The visual character aggressively embodies this random appearance, and the haphazard quality extends even to the placement on the page, a ragged right and left margin bearing no particular relation to voice, breathing, timing or the conventional

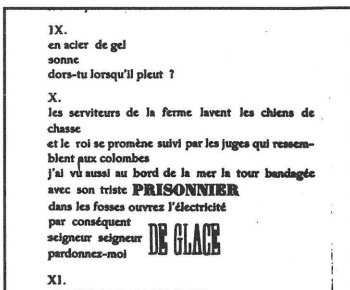


Figure 10
Tristan Tzara, from *Realities Cosmiques*, 1914.

espace of poetic structure. There is manuscript evidence to support the supposition that Tzara exerted tremendous energy to manufacture these works—in at least one instance there is a hand-drawn manuscript version of such a poem which copies the letterforms in calligraphed quality as clearly as possible. Whether this served as a dummy for a typesetter or as a study of effects is hard to say, but it makes clear that Tzara's engagement with typography was studied and deliberate, not incidental or offhand.

The effect of this typographic marking is twofold: it first of all identifies the poetic piece with a realm which is

BILAN

travail, cratéele long bleu régime
 s'ajp le paradis et touche **A BAS**
 vide baléant la faille paradis **A BAS** **cataphalque**
 élève sur les rails à travers hypocrisie recours rassurants
 sur ses dents sur les dents l'écoute sentis bases les -
 qui telle actual extraction de hampeurs ou corridor incoloré
 haine perle et les insérés du vide (soude)
 des nombres on réveille le nombreil (soude)
 tel le paragraphe et la seringue pour phosphore

ZZ

Reclame de la travers apocryphe balustrade
les chiffres astronomiques accimatisées
 SUR BILLARD A TOUS LES VENTS
gratuitement
après fabrication homologuée marine
 AVANCE LA COULEUR EN LANGUE DIFFERENTE
vivisection
 EX-CATAPLASME PLAIT AUX AMOUREUX
 A 3 fr. 50 ou 3 h. 30 invincible martyrologiste
sur ordre et sans titre régissent le nébuleux des atropes en l'air
 ophthia blanchissant sur les bancs des glaciers
joli TAMBOUR crépuscule
auto gris autopsie cataracte
 A néologues prophylactiques des crânes astronomiques régimes

Tzara

Figure 11

Tristan Tzara, "Bilan," from SIC, October, 1919.

conventionally determined to be utterly other than the poetic—i.e., the realm of commerce. The significance of this gesture cannot be underestimated: the very legitimacy and authority of poetic activity was called into question through this blurring of boundaries, since the positions of the reader and the poet, and the mediating function of language are all changed by this act. Poetry here threatens to participate in the instrumental linguistic activity of *reclame* rather than to remain in the aesthetic realm. An equal (or even greater) immodesty attaches to the visual

display of varied typefaces and sizes, whose flashy irregularity and visual dynamics activate the page with all the brazenness of back-page advertising or broadside sheets.

But the second effect, more subtle, is more profound—it demonstrates the extent to which language circulates through the supposed boundary between a public and private domain, and that language indeed *does* change in that circulation. There is a point of demarcation—and it may even be argued that this point is marked in typographic conventions—between the domain in which language is assumed to be *private*, that is, capable of formulating or articulating the subjective realm of experience, and the domain in which language is assumed to be public, that is manufactured for a use value which is other than the personal.

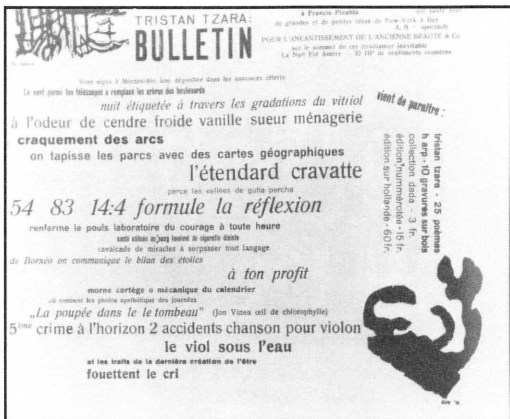


Figure 12
Tristan Tzara, "Bulletin,"
from Dada #3, 1918.

Typically, typographic conventions reserve the unmarked, even, grey page for those authoritative discourses which either pass themselves off as personal/subjective or as authoritative by reason of their efforts at linguistic precision, accuracy, or truth claims. These texts are generally, historically, in contrast to the marked texts of salesmanship, of display, of seduction, in which a hierarchical distinction among elements of the linguistic material is already coded into the typographic presentation in a manner which advertises its manipulations. Here, information is not necessarily coded as truthful, but it is coded as manipulated rather than purely, modestly; authoritative. Marked texts mark both the voice of enunciation and the

site—historical, temporal, social—all in material terms. The lines in Tzara's *Bulletin* are, in principle, traceable to their "source"—but there is not necessarily a real source. These lines, captured though they may have been, have been transformed and reset from the cases of a single typographer, which obliterates the possibility of recovering their "original" place. Not only is it not significant to recover the original, but it is important that it is the way the presentation insists upon the suggestion of original sources which so provocatively makes the point of this typographic work.

By using this language of public display, Tzara allows the traces of real sites and modes of production to be manifest in the typographic text. The issue of authorial intention also shifts its center in his work to a concern with identifying that point of mediation between a personal subjective reception and the publically produced material encountered and recycled back into a poetic text. It is this latter activity which so forcefully divorces Tzara from the lyricism which precedes his work—a lyricism which, by the way, Breton will for all his supposed appropriation of the Dada approach, forcefully reinsert as central to the poetic practice of surrealism.

Wyndham Lewis

Another poet within the early avant-garde who struggled to make use of this externally oriented voice and method of marking it typographically was Wyndham Lewis. The pages of *Blast*, which appeared in 1914, have all the directness of visual structure conventionally reserved for broadside sheets designed for rapid public consumption (*figure 13*). The hierarchy within the work is designed to serve up the polemic rhetoric for ready assimilation. There is no coy floundering or ambivalent tactic of seduction in the bold face sans serif type or in its assaultive promotion of the phrase "Blast....England" in the first line. The subordination of the qualifying phrases even within that opening statement, "First (from politeness)," to the typographically emphasized central statement allows for no confusion as to intention.

The political position, its alignment with radical critique of monolithic British governmental authority, is unequivocal at this particular moment of Lewis's development. The graphic style is that of the most basic

and simply produced affiche, utilitarian and direct, like those of the workers' unions or parties which appeared in ephemera, broadsides and handouts. There are no frivolous or extraneous diversions in this work; it does not have either the arcane hermeticism of Symbolist work or the whimsical variety of Dada or Cubist games. The seriousness of presentation emphasizes the seriousness of intention, though as the piece progresses, its linguistic reach also extends through the playbill poster range by which particular spectacle events advertise to their audience.

The implication of an audience, a public group identifiable as audience already available to receive this language and this language in this form, is marked, also,



Figure 13

Wyndham Lewis, from Blast, 1914.

in this typographic treatment. The work is not intended as a poem in the classical sense, but as a manifesto, a call to action, a goad to engagement, and as such its concerns with materiality have been focused to serve those ends. This is a poetic which is highly devoid of personal voice and information, aimed like a handmade verbal bomb at the complacent populace. These are words engaged in a

wild stab at liberty, attempting to use the visual impact of their presentation as liberating energy. In this they succeed, at least by their approach and site, far more than the works of Marinetti, which remained largely concealed within the pages of otherwise conventionally formatted journals.

With its bright cover and large, brash, typographic announcement of its radicality, Lewis's *Blast* presents a radical face to the public realm. That this radicality rapidly imploded into pro-fascist conservatism is well known, but neither form nor format carry clear political affiliations; rather, they announce the intention to act in a public and often political realm. The domain of typographic experiment tends to be confined to the left-oriented and utopian-dreaming radicals, rather than to extend to those retro-conservatives whose very aesthetic constrains them to repeat endlessly the visual models whose legacy is associated with tradition, quality, and entrenched status quo. The call to radical action announces itself with all available means, whether typographic or poetic or visual/graphic.

Ilia Zdanevich

And finally, no discussion of the avant-garde manipulation of typography would be complete without at least a nod towards the Russian poets active in this field. The single most outstanding contribution comes from Ilia Zdanevich, whose typographic work was both more extensive in quantity and more systematic in its integration with writing practice than that of any of the other, even better known practitioners (Lissitsky most especially comes to mind).

Zdanevich's conceptual underpinnings link him directly with the *zaum* poets of the 1910s, especially Krutchenyk, with whom he had both close personal and professional relations. The influence of Khlebnikov and the writings done by Khlebnikov and Krutchenyk, "The Word as Such" and "The Letter As Such" in 1912 and 1913, had strongly articulated a position which, if Zdanevich did not know it directly through these texts, was part of the general ambience of Russian avant-garde literary and visual activity. A characteristic element of this sensibility was a concern with materiality, that is with the *faktura* or making of a work in all its textural, physical, formal means. Partially a result of the legacy of Symbolist synaesthesia, with its overemphasis on the materiality of the sign as the

means to induce that transcendence toward the symbolic realm, and partly the transformation of that sensibility into the modernist concern with a codification of various formal properties as if they might be ordered with the scientific discipline of languages, this attitude toward materiality extended itself through the *zaum* poets and also, according to a radically different set of motivations in the constructivist designers, into typographic work. The constructivist sensibility which surfaces in the Bauhaus, through the strongly influential visits of Lissitsky, takes its point of departure from a design position and utopian agenda, rather than directly from poetics. The work of poets concerned with the typographic manipulation of

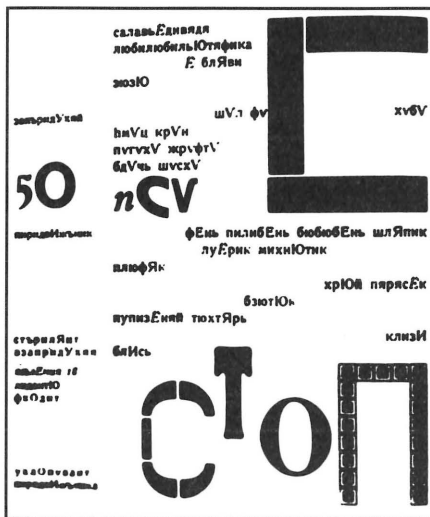


Figure 14

Ilya Zdanevich, from *Ledentu*, 1923.

their texts was far more limited, both in influence and in actual manifestation than was that of these graphic visionaries. In spite of Khlebnikov's interests in material visual expression, for instance, his work is hardly, barely typographic in its printed treatment. The circumstances which contribute to this are partly biographical, and one of the reasons Zdanevich's work was able to be realized in such typographically complex terms was that he had apprenticed to journeyman printers in Tiflis in the late 1910s and had direct experience with the composing of type. The labor-intensive production of his pages and those he designed for the books of Terentiev and Krutchenyk, among others, during the period 1917 to

1920 relied heavily on his direct input, not merely in terms of design suggestions, but in actual setting of at least some of the work.

Zdanevich's typographically dazzling texts belong in large part to a cycle of *zaum* plays he wrote between 1916 and 1923. Intensely personal, they describe an autobiographical progression toward sexual maturity with all sorts of attendant power struggles and conflicts of gender identity. Romance, sexuality, representation and the investigation of language on all levels—material, physical, verbal, enunciative and psychoanalytic—are all both thematically and formally investigated through the cycle of five plays. The typographic treatment becomes increasingly dense and complex as the cycle progresses, from an attempt at scoring the pages as if they were musical or orchestral works to a degree of visual specificity untranslatable into verbal delivery (*figure 14*). By the time Zdanevich is setting the final play, the theater of its enactment is in fact the book itself; the page, the dramatic space of encounter by reader with the event of the book. Its sequences, timing, revelations and ordering are all designed to provide, not a surrogate experience, but the experience of the drama.

Zdanevich's work is a far cry from the politically marked texts of Tzara. The *zaum* of his plays is hermetic, personal, remote and almost inaccessibly idiosyncratic. The sense of authorial intention as integral to typographic form has rarely been so thoroughly explored, and certainly among the typographic poets of the early avant-garde, there are no instances of a more developed *typopoesis* than that which appears in Zdanevich's *Aslaablitchia* cycle. In this endeavor, he approaches Mallarmé more closely than any of the other poets of the avant-garde, because he conceives of the *book* as a space, as an integral whole, and because he depends on and believes in the effective power of the visual form of typographic language as communicative—not because it can be translated into linguistic values, but because it cannot. Here the eye is the receptive instrument to be massaged through typographic work, in the firm belief that the material form will be in itself substantive as an element of the poetic expression.

It seems important to at least make one point of contrast with the collaborative work, *For the Voice* of Lissitsky and Mayakovsky from the same period, if only for the sake of

distinguishing between the notion of graphic design and that of *typopoesis*. The stunning clarity in the presentation of *For the Voice* derives from the exceedingly happy agreement between the forthright quality of Mayakovsky's short works and Lissitsky's graphic boldness. Deceptively simple, the bright two-color configurations exploited the resources of the typographer's drawer—but after the fact of the writing. The designer's transformative activity is what permitted Lissitsky to describe his part in the book as analogous to the relation between “a violin and a piano.” By contrast, the work of Zdanevich is analogous to the production of a score by a composer, and the difference resides in a distinction between a formative conception of the typographic mode and a representational or design conception. Lissitsky designed *For the Voice* as a book, as an integrated and fully active space delimited by the textual parameters of Mayakovsky's text, but working back into the production to articulate a relationship among elements internally. The design *serves* the text, while in *Ledentu* the design derives from the text, evolves simultaneously with its writing, so that the corpus of the typographic and format elements are already present within the literary composition: the design is *formed with* the text.

This distinction is significant only in so far as it allows a descriptive differentiation to separate those works in which a visual component works as a surplus and even extraneous or eliminatable factor and those in which the integration occurs at so fundamental a level that it requires taking the visual into account in any interpretation which attempts to assess the production of meaning in the text as a whole. The implications of this distinction may be traced further in the emergence of a tradition of literary interpretation which grounds its authority in the claim to investigation of a transcendent or absent signified, apprehended through a process which necessarily depends upon dismissing the physical, material and visual presence of the signifier. Such activity, outmoded as it may have become in the last decade, leaves a residual trace in both the terms on which visual and literary art practices are assumed to operate as signifying practices, and on the bases which have been used to trace a history of each of these practices through the dominant modes of modernism in the twentieth century.

TYPOGRAPHIC PRESENCE AND POETIC MEANING

In brief, the distinction effectively consigns the visual to operate within a phenomenological mode of what eventually becomes defined by mid-century as an “aesthetics of presence,” i.e., that which assumes that the materially present may be effectively grasped and experienced as a “pure plenitude.” Privileging the materiality of the signifier, this approach characteristically devoids works of visual art of any social or historical specificity beyond the instance of their own occurring. The literary corollary to this, as is well known, was New Criticism’s attempt to grant the poem equally autonomous status, but as a set of linguistic terms available for interpretation within the most rigorously formal of terms. In such a practice, the notion of materiality was always assumed in terms of the surrogate function of the written form—elements such as rhyme, meter and accent, which were by definition missing from, but indicated by, the visual presentation. The concept of the absent signified as the fundamental premise of linguistic operation was nowhere more successfully implemented as an interpretive strategy than in such activity. But the legacy of this distinction hardly disappears with the fall from favor of the New Critical approach within literary studies or of the High Modernist critic in art theory.

My intention here has been to make some assessment of the variety of ways in which materiality in typographic practice inscribes attitudes vis-a-vis the formation of the authorial subject in both aesthetic and political ways. That there is no unified description available of these many practices is merely testimony to the argument that the typographic diversity of early modernism has a relation to the equally heterogeneous field of modern art practice in general. The implications of a typography which is directly and vividly concerned with materiality are several, but most importantly they involve a clear inscription of attitude toward demarcating (or, contrarily, blurring the boundaries between) public voice and private language, toward marking the site of enunciation in both historical and social terms (rather than with effacing it for the sake of claiming a transcendent authority in the text), and toward negating the transcendent character of logos by refusing to allow the linguistic sign to be represented in a supposedly transparent visual mode. This last, the refusal

of linguistic transparency, is perhaps the point which has most poignantly entered the critical discussion of poetics in the late modern reassessment of early modern art practices.

The instances of typographic or visual poetry which have occurred in the post-1945 period have largely been consigned to the ghetto of concrete poetry or perceived as the lunatic fringe of Lettrist extremism. The developed theoretical writings of the Concretists remain largely unintegrated into a late modern canon, and the Lettrists continue, like the avant-garde typographic poets of the early twentieth century, to fall through the cracks of either literary or visual arts narratives of the historical period in which they flourished. The attitude of contemporary poets and editors towards typographically manipulated works, at least within my own experience of the last fifteen years, has been one of suspicion bordering on hostility. This response is hardly incidental, grounded as it is in the writer's fundamental attachment to the authority of language as *logos*, an authority which suffers relativism and subversion of its absolutist claims nowhere more directly than from any activity which calls aggressively for attention to the visual materiality of the text as significant, not merely incidental, to its meaning. There is continued attachment to a visual format in which the poem, prose or essay seems to "speak itself" without marking the site or moment of its enunciation, and a continued perception that visual manipulation of the poetic text is irrelevant, messy, immodest and distracting to the "serious business" of real writing.

In the last twenty years, however, a significant number of writer/artists have systematically worked to explore the domain of the typopoetic or the authorial *espace* of the book, escaping the legislating force of "good form" and venturing into this ambiguous territory. I am thinking here—rather randomly—of such varied writers as Tom Philips, Hannah Weiner, William Gass and Tina Darragh. The range of projects in their work is already considerably broader and very differently conceived of than that of the Lettrists and Concretists whose contributions in the 1950s and 1960s have yet to be fully reconsidered. All of these are far from the works and concerns of the poets of the early avant-garde, and yet, though the field of typographic and visual poetics has proliferated, it has remained largely

outside the domain of mainstream critical perception. This only demonstrates the persistence of certain high modernist biases toward distinguishing *image* and *logos* as distinct orders of representation, rather than as signifying practices which both participate in the play of presence and absence as they may operate through the simultaneous apprehension of materiality and meaning in a poetic text.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ Cohn, Robert Greet. 1949. Mallarmé's *Un Coup de Des, an Exegesis*. New York: Yale French Studies, AMS Press, p. 3. Cohn makes the point that the 1897 version was "printed in normal page sequence and therefore did not render Mallarmé's full and final intentions, which were represented only posthumously in the NRF edition of 1914, following the proofs of an edition Mallarmé was preparing when he died."
- ² Mallarmé, Stéphane. 1982. *Selected Poetry and Prose*. Edited by Mary Ann Caws. New York: New Directions, pp. 77–84.
- ³ Michaud, Guy. 1965. *Mallarmé*. New York: New York University Press, p. 162.
- ⁴ Florence, Penny. 1986. *Mallarmé, Manet and Redon*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p. 116.
- ⁵ Michaud. *Mallarmé*, p. 138.
- ⁶ Marinetti, F.T. 1913. *Zang Tumb Tuum*, p. 36.
- ⁷ Marinetti. *Zang Tumb Tuum*, p. 36.
- ⁸ Bohn, Willard. 1986. *The Aesthetics of Visual Poetry, 1914–1928*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p. 20.