

# Toward the Page

The visual poems I'm doing are toward my own understanding of the page and what can happen on it. My practice of written poetry keyed for a long time on the auditory. Many writers have little sense of what they write as something that can also be spoken. Such writers are often more adept in their understanding of the silent reading. It's important for writers to consider all aspects of the medium they choose. A quote from Gerry Gilbert comes to mind:

Poetry, the trick to read what can't be read,  
quick to write what can't be said.

I don't think of poetry as a "trick" and I don't associate it so much with the 'quickness' or witty verbal facility that Gerry is so well known for. Nonetheless, his lines, for me, brilliantly summarize some important concerns. It's important, for instance, to "read what can't be read" in getting your hands on books and magazines that are difficult to find. Also, in reading poetry aloud, we can "read what can't be read" during a silent reading. But it is also possible to "write what can't be said" aloud in that the silent reading holds possibilities that do not exist when poetry is read aloud. It's also important to attempt to "write what can't be said" in writing about subjects that we find difficult to speak of or write about for emotional or political reasons, etc.

The rich ambiguity of his lines will tend to be lost during a live reading of this poem. The lines are read and we're on to others without the time to consider multiple possibilities. However, the live reading, given Gilbert's inimitable style, will be memorable for other reasons having to do with his visual and aural presence which will only be slightly evident from a silent reading.

In the absence of the auditory and visual presence that we bring to reading or performing aloud the vitality of written work read silently must call on other resources or on the same resources in a different way. We are all familiar with live readings of poetry that satisfy us until we read the poems silently to ourselves and discover that the poet's living presence was crucial to the meaning of the poem. The written work itself is somehow an unsatisfactory husk of the living presence in such cases.

Similarly, we are familiar with the experience of hearing somebody destroy an interesting poem when reading it aloud. They lack all visual and/or auditory presence, lack any spoken sense of the musical and rhythmical dimensions of voice and presence though the silent reading may suggest its own sort of voice.

The silent reading is often accompanied with inward sound, but it *is* inward and exists in the silence of the imagination. If we consider Ur as the invisible, silent land in which the forms reside, then it seems to me that the silent reading occurs near to the realm of idealities and invisibles. What is the nature of such a land?

Looking at a block of text, we note that the uniformity of machined typefaces subdues the visual presence of particular words within the block unless they are italicized, for instance. For the most part, we desire that one ‘a’ look exactly like any other ‘a’. This makes the text easier to read and helps us to fully concentrate not on the visual but the semantic content of the writing. The emphasis is placed entirely on the semantic content of the writing. This, I think, is a fine tradition: when the emphasis is placed so heavily on semantic content, it is more difficult than it might otherwise be to baffle the reader with bullshit.

Most of our experience of pages that emphasize the visual dimension of text comes from our encounters with advertising—where there is inevitably a sizable portion of just plain bullshit. Advertisers attempt to direct the attention of the eye to their wares with no better reason in mind than to sell something. Elements of design and beauty are totally subordinated to this aim. The page and its properties are studied only within the context of a visual rhetoric of attention-getting.

The semantic content of advertising can usually be reduced simply to “buy me” regardless of the trappings of luxury or excitement, prestige or accomplishment, etc., that the advertiser will attempt to suggest accompany the product. We are wary, then, of pages that concentrate on the visual dimensions of text, so paltry and dull-spirited are the typical examples of such pages.

Nonetheless, it is plain that symbols do possess certain curious powers and that advertisers attempt to become aware of the full range of these powers—even if the ultimate exercise of the powers is directed toward a dull end: sales. I don’t wish to pursue the following question in this essay, but it’s interesting to ponder whether the paltry nature of the ends one chooses to pursue or not determine the degree to which one can actually understand the full range of the power of symbols.

When I look at old books done in calligraphy or printed but designed, for instance, by William Morris, I can admire the care and attention to the word and the visual dimensions of the word that waft smoke-like from the page, intoxicating, but I do not see how such an ornate, romantic design of text could appeal to the modern reader. The presence of such ornate pages tends to dominate the tone of the word. And the quill has been touched into the well of dreams too deeply, perhaps, for a more robust writing.

Again, the emphasis on semantic content is deflected, somewhat, by the visual presence of the text (though it may not have been so overt during the romantic time in which the books were produced). The current textual environment, with its driving emphasis on semantic content, given the uniformity and functional nature of the typefaces we encounter in books, will not approve such deflections. As I’ve said, I think that’s healthy.

Still, individual letters and words are visual entities and carry with them all sorts of historical baggage. They have auditory and visual presences that can quickly communicate even in the absence of other words with them something of their archaic power. This ‘O’ is, of course, merely an ‘O’. It is set in Garamond 11.5 point type and appears before my eyes with a simple stroke on the keyboard. What could be simpler? It has several sounds associated with it. It is a vowel. It appears in many words and the meaning of the words in which it appears is not really the sum of the meanings of the individual letters that make up the word. It may be in some cases that the sound associated with the ‘O’ in a word seems to complement the meaning of the word, as in ‘loll’ or ‘Orgasm’ or ‘open,’ but

for the most part it plays, at best, a mysterious and perhaps only inconsequential role in the meaning associated with the word. The individual ‘O’ is entirely lost in etymological history and the sometimes arbitrary assignments of meaning that language involves.

Really, ‘O’ does not have a meaning as does ‘chair.’ Or if it does have a similar sort of denotative meaning, then it’s of a sound or set of sounds. Our quest for the meaning of words and ideas and texts usually occurs at a higher level. The meaning of the individual letters is dependent upon the contexts in which they occur, the whimsical babble of history, and the pawn-like or perhaps brick-like role of letters in the complexities of language.

Still, humble as they may be, letters fascinate me. They’re the elementary symbols we use in the totally non-elementary practice of writing. How can they really be innocent? It’s said that “the letter killeth.” Presumably this means that the letter of the law is incomplete without the spirit of the law. Also, the meaning does not reside in the letter but in the word or the sentence, paragraph, etc.

“In the beginning was the word.” So presumably, then, it could not have been in a language that had an alphabet or the letter would have been prior to it. Language with letters is so man-made. It is so artful. It is late. But, for all it’s lateness, it is nonetheless very close to our hearts and minds. It is, perhaps, an example of a technology that has truly changed us in other than superficial ways.

Yesterday a little boy sat on my knee and we went through the ABC’s. His parents, relatives of mine, got a computer for Christmas and asked me to set it up for them. The storekeepers, apparently, had been kind enough to include with the computer some programs for the children. One of the programs presents the child with a big capitalized letter, a picture of some object that begins with the letter, and the word for the object. When the child strikes the correct key on the keyboard, the computer plays a little song while the lyrics appear on screen and the screen flashes rather colorfully. So the boy and I sat together saying Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaae, etc., and singing little songs.

It was pleasant to make the sounds of the letters together. It felt fundamental and close to some source to say them together. “Attention is the natural prayer of the soul.” We sat quite attentive to letters and the sounds for them. And the places of the letters on a keyboard, this modern writing instrument.

Another aspect of letters that I find interesting is the nature of the shapes they are. There is often an emphasis upon the basic shapes of Euclidean geometry in western typefaces: the straight line, the circle, the triangle, and the rectangle. Such typefaces generally possess visual simplicity yet are imbued with the atmospheres of deductive and inferential reasoning. The alphabet is a constant reminder of the basic shapes of geometry and also, for instance, western architecture. Insofar, then, as these basic shapes are ideals (the straight line is never quite straight, etc.) the suggestion of the existence of Ur is never far behind the act of writing or reading. The silent reading, in some sense, happens amid such suggestions and its very eloquent silence is itself a reminder of the realm of the unheard and the invisible, the ideal.

