Bulletin of the *Transilvania* University of Braşov • Vol. 5 (54). No.1 - 2012
Series IV: Philology and Cultural Studies

POETRY, VISUAL DIMENSION, WRITING

Romulus BUCUR[1]

Abstract: *The present paper aims at investigating certain relationships between the visual aspects of poetry, namely, visual perception, both as incorporated in the poem, and belonging to the poem's reception, writing, as a vehicle for the poem, and as an expressive means in itself. Several aspects of visual poetry, such as* ekphrasis*, ideogram, calligram, concrete poetry are briefly examined, along with some aspects of the visual written syncretism in 20th century poetry.*

Key words: *writing, visual, oral, poetry.*

The terms evoked in the title constitute a triad whose first member should, perhaps, be put in the middle. And this not because of the famous *ut pictura poesis*, but in virtue of the central place we grant it. And this is a triad whose relationships between its terms should be analysed too, because each of them entails a rapport / system of relationships with the world.

For instance, when we speak about the relationship between writing and the visual, in fact it is about the ceasing of the ear's hegemony, in order to make place to the eye. As a terminological convention, we distinguish between 'philosophical' approaches and the 'technical' ones. The first category comprises the distinction made by Plato between memory (*mnéme*) and remembering (*hypómnesis*) (Plato 485), then (McLuhan), (Ong) and others. The second category is concerned, not without overlapping sometimes with the other one, with the linguistic, semiotic, poetic (i. e., belonging to poetics) aspects of writing. In the following, 'technical' considerations will prevail, flanked, as often as possible, by the 'philosophical' ones.

To begin with, we quote two definitions, among hundred others possible, of writing:

> "une représentation de la langue parlée au moyen des signes graphiques" (Dubois et alii 175) and "a system of communication consisting of conventional visual signs, and which analyses experience into successive and conventional elements" (Allarcos Llorach quoted in Wald 171).

It is worth retaining, in both quotations, the idea of a system of communication, explicitly formulated in the former, implicitly in the latter. And, with Allarcos Llorach, we have the possibility of a complementary approach, able to short-circuit somehow spoken language, leaving open the way towards legitimating different types of writing, not necessarily referring to it, such as ideographic writing.

[1] Transilvania University of Braşov, Romania.

BDD-A20131 © 2012 Transilvania University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-16 16:58:02 UTC)

In fact, the status of writing as compared to orality is controversial, but even a sketchy presentation of the main issue would overflow the limits of the present essay. One of the main positions defended by linguists such as Allarcos Llorach, for which writing is but "un système autonome de signes, mais la transposition systèmatique à la substance graphique d'un système de signes qui se manifestent par la substance phonique" (Allarcos Llorach quoted in Arrivé 27-28) or Roman Jakobson, for which "[L]'image graphique fonctionne comme signifiant et le phonème comme signifié" (Jakobson 77), is that of the lack of autonomy of writing towards speech, having as a corollary the possibility of the former, as a standardisation, of influencing by way of feedback, pronunciation, a position held, among others, by Ferdinand de Saussure and Leonard Bloomfield (Chiss – Puech 8-9). The other significant position, that of the glossematic school, illustrated by H. -J. Uldall, by considering *air* and *ink* as *substances* versus language (which is a *form*), reaches the conclusion that "Indépendants vis-à-vis de la forme langue, la parole et l'écriture ne font que coexister sans primauté et *primarité* de l'une sur l'autre" (H. -J. Uldall quoted in Chiss – Puech 20).

From a semiotic point of view, writing belongs to the field of visual signs; as regards its typology, the main problem is that of the sign-object (in Peirce's acception) relationship; that is, of its iconic character (both sharing a certain common feature), or of its symbolic character (their relationship being established through a convention) – such as is the case of the first two signs of the first two signs of the Phoenician alphabet, whose combination gave the name of the alphabet itself, *aleph*, meaning 'ox', and *bet*, 'house' (Étiemble 1973 42).

There are a few things worth mentioning about the graphic aspect of writing. Besides its conditioning by the material and the technique employed (André-Leicknam 10, Charpin 57, Irigoin 37), we can speak about the aesthetic potencies of writing, from *stoikédon*, writing aligned to the left and right, organised by lines and columns (Irigoin 35-36), to Arab calligraphy, where the importance granted to the *letter* is so great that it appears as a rhetoric figure or as a term of simile (Aziza 54), and where we meet a true "figurative temptation" (Aziza 54-55), or to the Chinese one, characterised, among others, that "Le peintre calligraphie et le calligraphe peint" (Étiemble 1973 90).

As regards world-view, besides the already mentioned distinction between *mnéme* and *hypómnesis*[1], resulting in a *secondary orality* (Cornea 55), not anymore opposed to writing, but annexing it, braking its autonomy, it is also worth mentioning that passing from the oral to writing lead too at different models of organising (the perception of) the world, along the axes of *open* / *close* (MacLuhan 35), *inner* / *outer* (Ong 283, 284), man's position resented as *central* / *peripheral* (Ong 286), *analysis* / *synthesis* (Ong 284, 286).

Undoubtedly, the origin of poetry is oral; nevertheless, it was very early recorded in writing, at least in Western culture, to which we belong: "il semble bien que l'écriture ait été au point de départ de la littérature grecque et de ses grandes créations. Le texte des épopées homériques se situe ainsi en un sens dans la suite d'une longue tradition de poésie

BDD-A20131 © 2012 Transilvania University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-16 16:58:02 UTC)

orale; mais, alors que certains peuples, męme pourvus de l'écriture, en restent pendant des siècles à cette forme de récits, l'épopée grecque que nous connaissons est contemporaine de l'invention de l'écriture" (de Romilly 24)[2]. Their excellence, their exemplary character ensured them an unmodified written transmission, a *ne varietur* form, transforming them into a 'literature' (de Romilly 24). This is an idea emphasised also by Adrian Marino, in a larger theoretical framework variable character, "orality exists as 'literature', 'oral literature', *expresis verbis*, only to the extent it is fixed in writing, which remains – under any circumstances – the fundamental instrument and etalon" (Marino 48), not without drawing attention, a bit later, on the complex character of the *written / oral* relationship:

> "[L]iterature, in the ensemble of its structure and morphology, is actually a hybrid (oral / written) product, where separation is difficult if not utterly impossible" Marino 53).

Let us start from the assumption that writing is a neuter medium, a position shared by the 'innocent' reader, that one who does not perceive (or in not interested by) the differences between various fonts, between regular and italic letters etc., for which "in the form of poetry does not enter the visual form of the letters, and not even the sound of the words" (Călinescu 24), but "just the inner sound of notions" (24).

This is perfectly understandable: our reading (implicitly, typographic) habits are, after all, acquired; constant, prolonged usage of a material (paper, having a certain format, a certain quality), of a certain technology (print, having certain characteristics), associated with poetry, can induce the idea that the material and the message share a natural connection (Papp 198).

Although the Belgian team known as Groupe μ acknowledge the existence of graphical figures, corresponding, at the level of writing, to *metaplasms*, and name them *metagraphs* (Grupul μ 1974 68-70), they just remark a certain dissimetry between them (Grupul μ 1974 70) and conclude that metagraphs are "relatively few in number" (Grupul μ 1974 90). Probably as a reaction to this deficiency, Heinrich F. Plett expands the analysis to the graphic level, where he sees almost the same operations, namely, *addition*, *subtraction*, *permutation*, *substitution* and *equivalence* (Plett 320) – as compared to *suppression*, *adjunction*, *suppression-adjunction* and *permutation* (Grupul μ 1974 59-60)[3], constructing a rhetoric of the visual dimension of text; his starting point is the idea that there is a general norm of language, to which graphic signs are subordinated, and that the rules expressing this norm "can be thus formulated that the relationship between the written medium and various linguistic levels would be clearly evidenced" (Plett 320). As examples of inter- or suprasegmental graphemes can be mentioned the accent, the blank space, the diaeresis (belonging to graphophonology), comma, period, semicolon (marks of graphosyntax), marking the paragraphs, indentation and spacing, in the case of the typewriter and printing machines (parts of graphotextology) (Plett 321). Also, features such as the kind, size, colour fo the various types of writing could be considered free variants (allographs) (Plett 321).

BDD-A20131 © 2012 Transilvania University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-16 16:58:02 UTC)

All these organise text around various (typo)graphical oppositions *regular type / italics* (or *regular type / bold type*), *lower case / capitals*, various type sizes and fonts etc., and lead to directing reading, by creating particular topologies, particular directions of reading, different from the traditional one, left to right and top to bottom, such as one can see at Mallarmé, in *Un coup de Dés jamais n'abolira le Hasard* (Papp 195), or in the poetry of e. e. cummings, or to countersense ((“NU E neVOIE / să-ți scoți şi capul odată cu pălăria” sau “masca ta de adolescență / iUbIT-O” – Romulus Bucur[4]), or to new conventions, such as using the slash in order to mark slight pauses, or the multiple margins and indents allowed by the typewriter for marking the rhythms of speech (Olson 278-279), in an attempt of retrieving visually a characteristic pertaining to speech.

When speaking of the visual in poetry, we actually understand two things: the way poetry offers itself to perception, and its referential contents, the objects it (re)presents. Between these two extremes, one cn meet various typs of relationships – neutral coexistence (in the case of ‘normal’ poetry, be it in classical or free verse), reciprocal valorization (in the case of cummings, for whichm often, poetry is *representation*, being about “transposer le spectacle sur les plans métaplastique et métagraphique en ne recourant qu'à des moyens langagiers” (Groupe μ 1977 263)), subordination of graphics to content (caligram), or, conversely, a content subordinated to graphics (concrete poetry).

A more special situation is to be met in ‘descriptive’ poetry, and in its particular case, *ekphrasis*, from Homer's vision of the shield of Achilles to that rewritten by W. H. Auden, or the two poetical versions of Breughel's painting (*Landscape with the Fall of Icarus*, by William Carlos Williams, and *Musée des Beaux Arts*, by W. H. Auden), or the hypothetical re-creation of poetry in painting and of painting in poetry (Frank O'Hara, *Why I'm not a Painter*); imagist poetry is also a good example.

Thus, Pound, in *The Chinese Ideogram* – in spite of his knowledge of Chinese being considered questionable, he and Fenolossa being considered “victimes de l'exotisme” (Étiemble 1982 60) – has a correct intuition when refuses European thought, which, through successive generalisation processes, strays from direct experience; instead, he chooses, as more poetical, Asian thought, under the guise of ideogram, which, operating with concrete data, manipulates them according to *ad-hoc* categories. Respectively, for a Westerner, *red* is a *colour*, further defined as a *vibration*, a *refraction of light*, a *division of the spectrum*, then a *mode of energy* (Pound 1977 44), and, for a Chinese, the reunion of the ideograms signifying *rose*, *rust*, *cherry* and *flamingo* (Pound 1977 46-47).

His preference for the ideogram can be related to its visual connotations, in consonance with his notion of *Image*, “that which presents an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time” (Pound 1968 4), and which possesses also the instantaneous character of perception, or to his notion of *phanopœia*, “a casting of images upon the visual imagination” (Pound 1968 25).

The direct association between poetry and visual arts presents another interesting situation. In the Far East it is quite current, both in China, where Wang

BDD-A20131 © 2012 Transilvania University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-16 16:58:02 UTC)

Wei is respected both as a major poet, and as an important painter of the Tang dynasty (618–907 a. D.), and in Japan, under the name of *haiga*:

> "the two elements composing this kind of work are identical without being parallel. The painting does not illustrate the poem, and the poem does not comment the painting, but the two means of expression concur at creating a synaesthesia. Perception takes place almost simultaneously, writing fitting both graphically and as an idea in the space of the painting" (Kazar 25).

In the West, the process is more recent, either under a form not very different from its Far Eastern counterpart, in the works of two poets of whom I do not know to exist reciprocal influences, Ezra Pound and Victor Segalen, both having incorporated Chinese ideograms / texts in their poems, or under the form of various associations between poets and graphic artists. A few examples: the 'simultaneous book' by Blaise Cendrars and Sonia Delaunay, *La Prose du Transsibérien et de la Petite Jehanne de France*, a perfect symbiosis between the two types of artists (Callu 68), Apollinaire's *Le Bestiaire ou Cortège d'Orphée*, illustrated by Raoul Dufy's etchings, the 'illuminated manuscripts' of René Char, created with the collaboration of the most famous painters of 20th century (Callu 68), or, adding another example to the already mentioned ekphrasis, X. J. Kennedy's *Nude Descending a Staircase*, simply a virtuoso's transcription of the painting of Marcel Duchamp.

The internet and the computer have also added their contribution to poetry, in the form of syncretism, the poem ceasing to be a mere text, but rather a hypertext, and including, eventually in an interactive mode, multimedia elements (sound, animation, video, digitised or synthetic image).

Calligram, from the start, poses problems of representation, from its labelling as "servile iconism" (Groupe μ 1977 263), to denying or remarking its significative ambivalence – "Par ruse ou impuissance, peu importe, le calligramme ne *dit* et ne *représente* jamais au męme moment; cette męme chose qui se lit et qui se voit est tue dans la vision, masquée dans la lecture" (Foucault 20, quoted in Le Men 89) –, due to its fundamental ambiguity: "Selon qu'on la considère sur le plan de la référence ou de la ressemblance, du mot ou de la chose, la lettre est tantôt *signe*, tantôt *ligne*. Le calligramme joue sur les deux tableaux" (Lieber 44).

There is an essay of typology: starting from the analogies between the graphic elements of the page and the elements of visual composition, taken from Kandinsky, and according to the relationships between them, calligrams are divided into *linear* and *textural* ones (Le Men 88); the former oppose sight and hearing, looking and talking (Le Men 89), the latter, the readable and the visible, the iconic and the graphical belonging to the same visual substance of expression (Le Men 89). Those we are primarily interested in belong to the first type, and to them fully applies the ambiguity mentioned above.

From an aesthetic point of view, the stake of the calligram is that content is indifferent, that there are no words, themes etc. more 'poetical' than others (Groupe μ 1977 250)[5], the effort being that of creating literarity through writing,

BDD-A20131 © 2012 Transilvania University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-16 16:58:02 UTC)

"where it becomes significant from a semiotic-semantic point of view" (Plett 336-337).

Although not exactly fitting in this category, of the calligram, the poetry of cummings is illustrative for the tendency presented above. Thus, in *brIght*, the opposition between lower case and capitals expresses, on a semantic level, that between *bright* and *dark* (Groupe μ 1977 265), while question marks, that between *present* / *absent*, an extreme case of the opposition *present in the foreground* / *present in the background* (Groupe μ 1977 265). Another famous poem of the same author (famous in the sense that it is a preferred object of analysis) uses a series of simila techniques, among which the most pregnant is intensifying the meaning, by the identity (on the typewriter) between **1** and **l**, thus emphasising the partial synonymy between *one* and *lone* in *l* / *one* / *l* / *iness* (Groupe μ 1977 267-268, Plett 337-339).

The step towards concrete poetry, at first sight, a poetry of pure visuality, is not so great. Although in many cases the analysis of such a poem, putting to work a complicated semiotic machinery brings much more than its direct perception (but which reading of poetry limits itself to this preliminary stage?), this does not disqualify the experiment, on the contrary, it changes it into an occasion of reflection on the fundamentals of literature, on its essence and limits. Analysing a poem by Ian Hamilton Finlay, the final conclusion is that, in spite of the importance of the iconic system, the poem is not different neither in its organisation, nor as in functioning from a traditional one (Groupe μ 1977 288), while Ernst Jandl's poem *onkel toms hütte* is interpreted as "an able grapho-semantic abstract of the problematics of Harriet Beecher-Stowe's novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin*" (Plett 333).

Moreover, we are assisting to the colonising of a recently annexed territory, at the extension through construction of the domain of literature (Papp 199-206)[6], or, in the words of the same e. e. cummings, "Always the beautiful answer who asks a more beautiful question" (cummings 125).

Notes

[1]For a brief history of the status of writing in ancient Greece, see (de Romilly).

[2] See also (Irigoin 37).

[3] For the table of linguistic levels and of the operations performed upon them, see (Grupul μ 1974 64-65).

[4] An approximate translation of the two examples would sound like "No need to take your head off together with your hat" (or, in capitals, IT'S PROHIBITED TO), and "Your adolescence mask / darling" (or, in capitals, FORGET HER).

[5] In the passage quoted, the reference is to concrete poetry, but, at this level, the difference is just of degree.

[6]The author quoted speaks about various possible extensions – tridimensional poems, semi-mobile machines, "integrated visual poems".

References

1. Allarcos Llorach, Emilio. "Communication orale et graphique", *Encyclopédie de la Pléiade, Le langage* 1968.
2. André-Leicknam, Béatrice. "L'écriture cunéiforme", *Corps Écrit, L'écriture*. I, 1. Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1982. 9-22.
3. Arrivé, M. "Les Danois aux prises avec la substance de l'encre" *«Langue française», Le signifiant graphique*, sept (1983): 27-28.

BDD-A20131 © 2012 Transilvania University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-16 16:58:02 UTC)

4. Aziza, Mohamed. "Florilèges de la calligraphie arabe" *Corps écrit L'écriture* 1 (1982): 53-57.
5. Călinescu, George. *Principii de estetică*. Craiova, Scrisul Românesc, 1974.
6. Callu, Florence. "Support et écriture À partir d'exemples des écrivains contemporains", *Le texte et son inscription*, Ed. Roger Laufer. Paris: Éditions du CNRS, 1989: 63-68.
7. Charpin, Dominique. *Corrections, ratures et annulations: la pratique des scribes mésopotamiens*, Ed. Roger Laufer. Paris: Éditions du CNRS, 1989. 57-62.
8. Chiss, J.L. and Puech Ch. "La linguistique et la question de l'écriture: enjeux et débats autour de Saussure et les problematiques structurales", *Langue française, Le signifiant graphique* 9 (1983): 5-24.
9. Cornea, Andrei. *Scriere şi oralitate în cultura antică*. Bucureşti: Cartea Românească, 1988.
10. cummings, e. e. "an introduction", *Modern Poets on Modern Poetry*, James Scully, Ed., Fontana / Collins, 1977 124-125.
11. de Romilly, Jacqueline. "Le rôle de l'écriture dans la Grèce ancienne" *Corps Écrit, L'écriture*. I,1. Paris: Presses Universitaires de France. 1982. 23-30.
12. Dubois, Jean et al. *Dictionnaire de linguistique*, Paris: Larousse, 1973.
13. Étiemble *L'écriture* Paris: Gallimard NRF, 1973.
14. Étiemble. 1982, *Sur l'écriture chinoise*, *«Corps Écrit», L'écriture.* I, 1. Paris: Presses Universitaires de France. 57-66.
15. Foucault, Michel. *Ceci n'est pas une pipe.* Paris: fata Morgana, 1973.
16. Groupe µ. *Rhétorique de la poésie Lecture linéaire, lecture tabulaire*, Bruxelles: Complexe, 1977.
17. Grupul µ. *Retorica generală*. Bucureşti: Univers, 1974.
18. Irigoin, Jean. "Les Grecs et l'écriture Quelques jalons historiques" *Corps Écrit, L'écriture,* I, 1. Paris: Presses Universitaires de France 1982, 31-38.
19. Jakobson, Roman. *Six leçons sur le son et le sens* Paris: Minuit, 1976.
20. Kazar, G. "Relaţia cuvînt-imagine în arta extrem-orientală" *Arta*, XXXII, 6 (1985).
21. Le Men, Segolène. "Calligraphie, calligramme, caricature" *Langages Lettres et icônes* 19, 75, sept (1984): 83-101.
22. Marino, Adrian. *Hermeneutica ideii de literatură* Cluj: Dacia, 1987.
23. McLuhan, Marshal. *Galaxia Gutenberg Omul şi era tiparului* Bucureşti: Editura Politică, 1975.
24. Olson, Charles. "Projective Verse", *Modern Poets on Modern Poetry.* Ed. James Scully. Fontana / Collins, 1977. 271-282.
25. Ong, Walter. "Cuvînt rostit, cuvînt scris, cuvînt tipărit", *Dimensiunea umană a istoriei*. Ed. Alexandru Duţu. Bucureşti: Meridiane, 1986. 283-301.
26. Papp, Tibor. "De la page mallarméenne à l'écran poétique" *Le texte et son inscription*. Ed. Roger Laufer. Paris: Éditions du CNRS, 1989. 193-206.
27. Platon, "Phaidros". *Opere*, vol. IV Bucureşti: Editura Ştiinţifică si Enciclopedică, 1983.
28. Plett, Heinrich F. *Ştiinţa textului şi analiza de text*, Bucureşti: Univers, 1983.
29. Pound, Ezra. "The Chinese Ideogram" *Modern Poets on Modern Poetry* Ed. James Scully. Fontana / Collins, 1977. 44-47.
30. Pound, Ezra. *Literary Essays of Ezra Pound*. Ed. T. S. Eliot. New York: New Directions, 1968.

BDD-A20131 © 2012 Transilvania University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-16 16:58:02 UTC)

31. Uldall, Hans-Jørgen. "Speech and Writing", *Acta Linguistica* IV (1944)

32. Wald, Lucia. *Sisteme de comunicare umană*, Bucureşti: Ştiinţifică, 1973.

BDD-A20131 © 2012 Transilvania University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-16 16:58:02 UTC)