# Modernizing the Ideogram: Apollinaire and Visual Form

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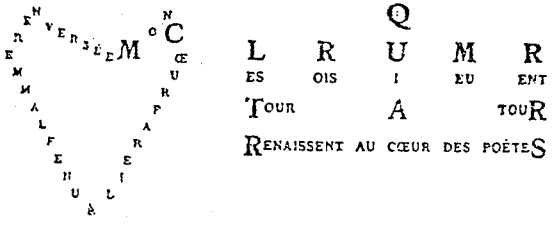
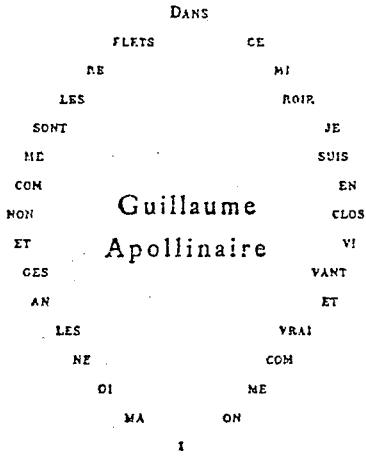
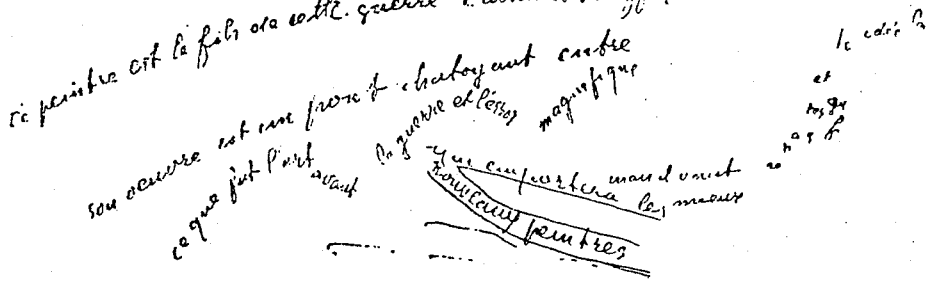
As much as anything, the rise of modern visual poetry reflects a new awareness of the printed page. For various reasons recent criticism has stressed the physical dimension of the text, seeing its words as autonomous entities. According to Jacques Derrida the written word is an object in its own right, its different meanings detached and deferred indefinitely.[1] Wolfgang Iser and others consider modern literature to be a series of self-conscious exercises designed to engage us in the process of reading. For Iser the increased emphasis on reader participation marks the demise of the classical quest for the meaning of the text, the significance of which is located in our interaction with the words on the page.[2] What characterizes modern literary experience, then, is the reader's attitude toward the printed page, the reader's consciousness of its formal qualities. The same observation applies to the text's attitude toward itself. In the twentieth century as never before, form calls attention to itself; the text flaunts its means even as it pretends to ignore them. Words no longer are perceived as transparent signs, but assume the shape and destiny of objects. To be sure, the current interest in the phenomenology of the written word has its roots in observations by earlier authors. So too the concept of the page as visual statement has had an interesting and varied history. As early as 1864 a young Stéphane Mallarmé strove to "paint, not the thing, but the effect it produces."[3] This statement, which reveals the close affinity between his works and painting, was to culminate in a famous (if isolated) experiment with visual form thirty-three years later: *A Throw of Dice Will Never Abolish Chance.* Describing the poem as a "simultaneous vision of the Page," Mallarmé noted the visual impact of the white spaces and stressed their rhythmic function:

> The white spaces indeed take on importance, are initially striking;

# *Cœur couronne et miroir*



言 屯 伙

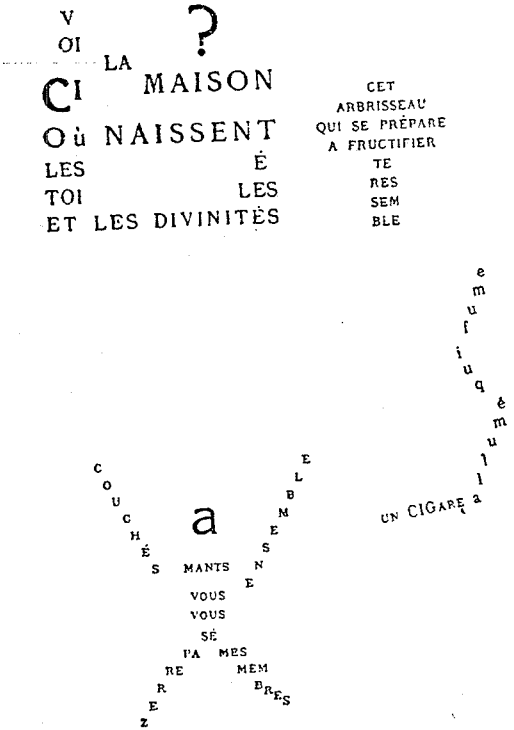
人 見 馬

*Man* *Sees* *Horse*

日 昇 東

*Sun* *Rises* *(in the)* *East*

*Paysage*



> ordinarily versification required them around like silence . . . I do not transgress this measure, only disperse it. The paper intervenes each time an image, of its own accord, ceases or withdraws, accepting the succession of others.[4]

Mallarmé's concept of visual silence, which creates a privileged space for the text and its individual images, has been adopted by a wide variety of authors since its appearance. Between 1900 and 1904, for instance, Paul Claudel contributed the following meditation on the printed page: "Oh my soul! The poem is not composed of these letters that I plant like nails, but of the white space that remains on the paper."[5] The poem is not only black on white but white against black.

By freeing the typographical characters from their background, which he forced into the foreground, Claudel prepared the way for the visual poets who were to follow. With his blessing – and Mallarmé's – they were free to twist letters into different shapes and to experiment with their placement on the page. Lecturing at the University of Geneva in those days, Ferdinand de Saussure added his authority to the growing visual trend by relating the latter to the reading process itself. "We read in two ways," he remarked. "A new or unknown word is spelled out letter by letter, but a common, ordinary word is embraced by a single glance, independently of its letters, so that the image of the whole word acquires an *ideographic* value" (emphasis added).[6] These remarks, which stress the iconic shape of the written word, are part of a lengthy debate that took place in Europe during the early years of this century. One contingent, best exemplified by Ezra Pound in London, sought to develop an "ideogrammic method" that would retain traditional poetic forms but intensify their verbal imagery.[7] Rebelling against poetic diffuseness, which he associated with "cosmic poetry," Pound and his fellow Imagists created a style whose visual precision was modeled on that of the Chinese ideogram. William Carlos Williams's "Poem" is typical of the genre:

As the cat
climbed over
the top of

the jamcloset
first the right

forefoot

carefully
then the hind
stepped down

into the pit of
the empty
flowerpot

What the poem lacks in expansiveness it more than makes up for in the precise sweep of its lines. Like the ideogram, the secret of its expressiveness lies in the concision with which the images are evoked. Like a Chinese calligrapher, Williams deftly sketches the most important details with a few quick strokes of the pen. In both cases the power of the image is directly proportional to its economy of means. We are presented not with a particular object or objects so much as with their outlines. In the Imagist poem as in the ideogram, then, the act of representation is foregrounded. How it signifies is at least as important as what it signifies.

In contrast to the practice described above, another contingent experimented with pictorial forms. Headed by Guillaume Apollinaire in Paris and the Italian Futurists in Milan and Florence, the two factions strove to increase the visual impact of the poetic image and to provide the reader with a moment of epiphany. The Futurist model was almost entirely abstract. By dislocating letters and modifying their size and shape, they concentrated on creating "visual analogies." Apollinaire, on the other hand, preferred visual forms that were more concrete. Depicting the contours of a wide variety of objects, these poems are essentially realistic and derive their effect from mimetic conventions. In 1918, when Apollinaire decided to publish a collection of poetry, he chose the name *Calligrammes* to describe this form. in 1914, however, when the genre was actually born, he referred to the poems as "lyrical ideograms" (*idéogrammes lyriques*). Whereas he could have borrowed the word "hieroglyphic" or "pictogram" to characterize his invention, Apollinaire chose the Chinese written character as his model. While his visual poetry is indebted to a number of different sources, the ideogram must clearly be counted among them. Interestingly, Apollinaire's original terminology tells us as much about his view of Chinese writing as it does about his visual texts. Since the original poems were all figurative,

i.e., realistic in nature, the poet obviously conceived of the ideogram as a miniature portrait. Although he may have been aware of its value as an abstract sign, he thought of it first as a visual picture. This is important in view of the largely negative critical response accorded the publication of a book by Ernest Fenollosa entitled *The Chinese Written Character As A Medium For Poetry.*[8] Whereas the Imagists accepted this book as their gospel, it has been attacked by numerous scholars for ignoring or underplaying the abstract aspect of ideographic signification. Originally a system of pictograms, according to Fenollosa, the written Chinese language still bears the traces of its origins. Not only is its etymology constantly visible, it has, "through its very pictorial visiblity, been able to retain its original creative poetry with far more vigor and vividness than any phonetic tongue" (p. 24). Critics have objected that the Chinese reader is not aware of the ideogram's etymology as he reads nor even of its status as a pictorial object. For our purposes there is no point in entering the lengthy debate. For one thing, as Fenollosa himself notes, "such a pictorial method, whether the Chinese exemplified it or not, would be the ideal language of the world" (p. 31). From this point of view whether his actual description of Chinese is accurate or not is immaterial. For another thing, as the term *idéogramme lyrique* attests, Apollinaire's concept of the Chinese written character coincides with Fenollosa's. For him each ideogram depicts an object.

Before we examine Apollinaire's visual practice it is helpful to consider the critical response to his first calligrams, or rather his response to this critical response. Replying to a series of objections by Félicien Fagus, in *Paris-Midi*, July 22, 1914, he insisted both on the originality and on the aesthetic validity of his recent creations:

> M. Fagus is right: in my poetry I have simply returned to basic principles since the ideogram is the fundamental principle of writing. However, the examples he cites [from the Renaissance] lack expressiveness... whereas the relations between the juxtaposed figures in one of my poems are as expressive as the words that compose it. And this at least, I think, is a new invention.

We will return to this passage in a moment. As we have seen previously, according to Fenollosa "Chinese notation . . . is based upon a vivid short-hand picture of the operations of nature" (p. 8). This means that the entire

written language functions as "concrete poetry" (the term is Fenollosa's). Ideographic expression depends on the juxtaposition of several pictographic signs, which may combine to form a single word or a sentence. Although it is difficult to do justice to Fenollosa's argument, which is both subtle and far-ranging, we may divide his examples into two main categories: intrinsic and extrinsic. Within the ideogram there are several different forces at work. In seeking to identify the different sets of internal relations that govern the individual character, we encounter three basic situations. The first involves what we might call the monolithic ideogram, where the picture depicts a static object. All we learn about the object is what we see; it has no depth or complexity, only a certain visual charm deriving from its physical contours. However, one soon discovers that many individual signs are more complex. Not only are they more dynamic, they often comment on or qualify the subject that they represent. If the signifier and the signified are identical in the first instance, here they are miles apart. Fenollosa claims that "a large number of the primitive Chinese characters, even the so-called radicals, are shorthand pictures of actions or processes" (p. 9). This describes the second situation. "For example," he continues, "the ideograph meaning 'to speak' is a mouth with two words and a flame coming out of it. The sign meaning 'to grow up with difficulty' is grass with a twisted root." In these two cases the verbo-visual link is metaphorical, which is why the two images are so expressive.

At this juncture it is interesting to note that many of Apollinaire's visual poems conform to these two ideographic categories. Limiting our survey to only a few of the calligrams, we recognize numerous examples of both the monolithic and the dynamic characters. In "Paysage," for instance, the small tree plainly illustrates the first structure. The same is true of the individual pictograms in "Coeur couronne et miroir" which, as the title indicates, consist of a heart, a crown, and a mirror. In all four cases the figures are static, and their relation to the objects that they depict is tautological. It soon becomes apparent, however, that many other figures correspond to Fenollosa's second type of ideogram. Indeed "Paysage" is practically swarming with activity. In contrast to the small tree encountered previously, the house's chimney is smoking away furiously at the upper left. So too the little man at the lower left is portrayed in an active pose. Not only is one leg lifted off the ground, as if he were running, his arms and legs are spread far apart. Even the cigar – an unpromising subject if ever there was one – is doing something, in this case emitting a constant

stream of smoke. Since the man and the cigar are juxtaposed, moreover, we can identify yet another activity: despite his unusual pose, the man is smoking the cigar suspended in front of him. Apollinaire has simply separated these two figures in accordance with the Cubist doctrine of fragmentation and rearrangement. Another, more obvious, example occurs in one of the visual poems dedicated to the painter Léopold Survage. In "Le Pont" (the title is my invention) the poet juxtaposes two structures, a bridge crossing a river and a tugboat. Like the objects in "Paysage," the latter is noteworthy for its dynamic configuration. Not only is the boat about to pass under the bridge, its smokestack is puffing out huge clouds of black smoke. With a little effort we can hear the sound of its mighty engine and imagine the shrill cry of its whistle.

Fenollosa's third type of ideogram derives from the observation that many of the characters include more than one pictogram and thus portray more than one object. "In the process of compounding," he remarks, "two things added together do not produce a third thing but suggest some fundamental relation between them" (p. 10). In this case the ideogram embraces several different signs whose juxtaposition is crucial to its total meaning. It is not the objects themselves that are important so much as the way they are related to each other. From this brief description it appears that we are concerned with what might best be termed a "dialogic ideogram." The example Fenollosa gives is the character for the concept "messmate," which juxtaposes the sign for man with the sign for fire. In this instance all the relationships are metonymic. A messmate is someone whom one encounters near a cooking fire, someone with whom one shares ones meal. In this way the visual signifiers serve to define the verbal signified. This type of ideogram is not a portrait so much as a definition. While similar intra-calligrammatic structures are relatively rare, one related configuration is fairly common. This is to say that many of the visual poems – or rather the figures within these poems – rely on a sort of visual punning. Thus in "A Lou hommage respectueusement passionné" the small flower at the lower right is simultaneously a pansy and a heart.[9] Since this poem is primarily a love-letter, the double image comments on the verbal text in much the same manner. The same visual polysemy occurs in a poem entitled "La Colombe poignardée et le jet d'eau" (Po, p. 213). In this text we see an identical process at work. Above all the calligram corresponds to the dynamic Chinese character. Jetting far above a concrete basin, a fountain spurts high into the air before falling back into the water at its base. The

basin itself, however, is elliptical in shape and clearly represents another figure – in this case a human eye. Together the image of the fountain and the weeping eye help to define the subject of the verbal text, which expresses Apollinaire's concern about the safety of many of his friends who were fighting at the front. At one level, clearly, the narrator is weeping copious tears.

Shifting our attention now to the external relations between different Chinese characters, we notice that Fenollosa distinguishes two separate types. In the first place, and by far the most numerous, are sentences in which a number of ideograms are strung together. At the visual level there is no connection between them, they are linked entirely at the verbal level. Here the signifiers have no independent life of their own. This structure, which is that of phonetic languages, is also found in Apollinaire. Although the vast majority of his visual poems consist of several visual figures, and although these compositions are ordered scrupulously, the images usually bear little relation to each other. The most that can be said is that they are arranged metonymically to form the poetic equivalent of paintings. In this way they may be divided into still-lifes, portraits, and landscapes. We have already seen several examples. The fountain discussed above is juxtaposed with a fluttering dove, the tugboat with the bridge, but the addition of these signs does not suggest "some fundamental relation between them." What one finds instead is a second type of sentence structure identified by Fenollosa. Extrapolating from our discussion of dynamic ideograms, we encounter the same concept at a higher level. The common principle that governs the sentences in this group is that they all depict actions or processes. To illustrate his contention that Chinese notation is "based upon a vivid shorthand picture of the operations of nature," Fenollosa cites the sentence: "Man sees horse." The astonishing thing is that the Chinese characters appear to illustrate this pronouncement visually. The first sign depicts the man himself, the second shows the man carrying (moving) his eye, and the third portrays a recognizable horse. This system reproduces the verbal utterance perfectly. At both levels the sentence's subject is linked to its object by the transitive eye. The order of the three signs corresponds to their natural sequence in the act of perception. A similar principle would seem to be at work in the calligrams, which Apollinaire tells up depend on "juxtaposed figures." And we recall the poet's insistence on the expressive function of the "relations" between these figures. Indeed this process can be demonstrated in a poem that has already been examined: "Paysage." In the original version, as I have shown elsewhere, the top two figures were reversed.[10] While this

shunted the tree to one side where it simply sat, it brought the man, the cigar, and the house into meaningful alignment. Specifically it created the following visual sentence: "Man directs cigar smoke into house." Although this action is nonsensical, the order of the elements in the sentence is perfectly logical; i.e., grammatical. To understand the hidden meaning of this enigmatic action requires us to decipher the metaphoric code. While the demonstration is too complex to rehearse here, what we actually see is a picture of Apollinaire/Eros impregnating the heavens. At one level this is a predominately poetic gesture, at another it acquires cosmic overtones.

A related structure is to be observed in "Coeur couronne et miroir," which reads as follows:

> My heart like an overturned flame
> The kings who are dying one by one are reborn in the poets' hearts
> In the mirror I am enclosed alive and real as one imagines
> the angels and not like reflections
>
> Guillaume Apollinaire

Alain-Marie Bassy has suggested that the three figures are organized according to the alchemical formula *formatio, reformatio, transformatio.*[11] Following the order specified in the title, and in the formula, we witness Apollinaire's double metamorphosis. Bassy's identification of the "mirror" as a mandorla (a halo surrounding the body) provides the key to the ideogrammatic code. On the basis of the figures alone, taken as pictographic symbols, the reader-viewer is able to discern the double progression (1) man ⟶ king ⟶ saint as well as (2) love ⟶ power ⟶ spirituality. We do not need the text to follow the progressive elevation of the poet-Apollinaire. Although the written message recapitulates and develops the visual message, specifying that it is a matter of apotheosis via poetic creation, the basic drama of transcendence is enacted visually. By establishing a visual hierarchy corresponding to an abstract system of values, Apollinaire suggests fundamental relations between the three categories. Using visual language, he makes a number of complex statements: (1) Mere brute existence is not enough; (2) transcendence of this state is possible; (3) transcendence of this state is desirable; (4) acquisition of power and prestige is an improvement but is not sufficient; (5) a saint is more valuable than a king; (6) the ultimate goal involves refinement and purification; and so on. Interestingly,

the structure of this poem is similar to a second Chinese sentence discussed by Fenollosa: "The sun rises in the east." Both sign sequences consist of a linear series of pictograms. Take the notion of elevation, moreover, which is the major structural principle of the visual poem before us. In the Chinese sentence the meaning is rendered by three characters, each of which contains the sign for the sun. The astonishing thing is that as it passes from one ideogram to the next, the sign rises in position, paralleling the process in nature. In Apollinaire's poem the increase in the value of each figure parallels the physical rise of the poet: from village to mountaintop chateau and eventually to heaven. Since no two of them share the same sign, since the poet is nowhere to be seen, his progress is entirely emblematic. At the purely visual level, rather than climbing the page physically he is metamorphosed into three successive images.

Apollinaire eventually tired of the rather limited effects that the printer could achieve and abandoned typography for more fluid forms like "Le Pont." Whereas the typographers ruined, ignored, or compromised some of his early attempts at visual poetry, which mocked traditional printing conventions, photographic reproduction allowed him to retain every nuance. Since the later calligrams simply tend to reproduce written manuscripts, the communication between the poet and the reader becomes more direct. In retracing Apollinaire's own handwriting one becomes aware of numerous variables that affect the nature of the visual message. Not the least of these is the thickness of the line used to form the letters, which influences the total design. Whether the letters are graerful or solid, whether they are close together or far apart, whether the poet proceeds confidently or with some hesitation – these and other factors make the calligram a marvelously sensitive instrument. Visually at least the handwritten version is a considerable improvement over the original. Its existence also permits us to point out one more connection with the Chinese written character that might otherwise have gone unnoticed. From this perspective the role of handwriting in Apollinaire's visual poetry exactly parallels the role of calligraphy in the elaboration of the Chinese ideogram. In both cases, it is precisely the personal touch that is important. As Confucius remarks, "A man's character is apparent in every brushstroke."[12]

## Notes

1. Jacques Derrida, *Marges de la philosophie* (Paris: Minuit, 1972), pp. 3-29.
2. Wolfgang Iser, *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response* (Baltimore:

Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978), pp. 10-19.

3. Stéphane Mallarmé, letter to Henri Cazalis written in October or November 1864, *Correspondance,* ed. Henri Mondor and Jean-Pierre Richard (Paris: Gallimard, 1959), Vol. 1, p. 137.
4. Stéphane Mallarmé, "Préface," *Oeuvres complètes,* ed. Henri Mondor and G. Jean-Aubry (Paris: Gallimard/Pléiade, 1956), p. 455.
5. Paul Claudel, "Les Muses," *Cinq Grandes Odes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1948), p. 16.
6. Ferdinand de Saussure, *Cours de linguistique générale* (1916 Paris: Payot, 1964), p. 57.
7. See, for example, Laszlo Géfin, *Ideogram: History of a Poetic Method* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1982).
8. Ernest Fenollosa, *The Chinese Written Character as a Medium for Poetry,* ed. Ezra Pound (San Francisco: City Lights, 1969). Hereafter references to this volume will be cited in the text.
9. Guillaume Apollinaire, *Oeuvres poétiques,* ed. Marcel Adéma and Michel Décaudin (Paris: Gallimard/Pléiade, 1956), p. 378. Hereafter cited in the text as *Po.*
10. Willard Bohn, "Landscaping the Visual Sign: Apollinaire's 'Paysage,' " *Philological Quarterly,* LXV, 3 (Summer 1986), pp. 345-69.
11. Alain-Marie Bassy, "Forme littéraire et forme graphique: les schématogrammes d'Apollinaire," *Scolies,* Nos. 3-4 (1974-5), pp. 161-207.
12. Cited by Fenollosa, p. 37.