

‘A Certain Noise’: Approaching the ‘Music of Poetry’

Jed Rasula

University of Georgia
E-mail: rasulaj@uga.edu

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Abstract

This article considers T. S. Eliot’s preoccupation with ‘the music of poetry’, a subject he addressed throughout his career. It was a certain ‘music’ to which the first readers of *The Waste Land* responded in the poem. This music, I argue, is not a matter of melodious sounds or acoustic mimicry. Rather, it is to be discerned in ‘a certain noise’ (Joseph Brodsky’s phrase), an underlying pulse. In order to examine this rhythmic prompt, I look at the graphic manifestations of another poet, Henri Michaux, who wrote lines of poetry and, in equal abundance, drew and painted maelstroms of lines that often share the page with the poems. These graffiti-like emanations provide us with a visual rendering of the ‘music of poetry’.

Keywords: *T. S. Eliot, Henri Michaux, music, collage, graphism*

The Waste Land was published a hundred years ago. T. S. Eliot’s poem was not so much written as assembled with the welcome input of Ezra Pound. The drafts reveal that Eliot had many free-floating pages of material, much of which seemed to belong to utterly different projects. Before Eliot sought his input, Pound had been writing his *Cantos* for several years, in which he had worked out a way of establishing resonances between motifs and episodes across time, a kind of historical shorthand, but without explanatory transitions. Collage, in other words, and this is what he helped Eliot organize in *The Waste Land*. Collage allows discrepant parts to coexist without having to fit together or conspicuously cooperate. The principle behind collage might be put in the words of a Stephen Stills song from the Sixties: ‘If you can’t be with the one you love, love the one you’re with.’ Given the flow of non sequiturs stitched together by Pound and Eliot, you can go through *The Waste Land* and mock up a storyboard just like assembling shots for a movie: first we find ourselves sledding in the mountains, then crossing London Bridge, someone worries over a game of chess, then you find yourself in a pub at last call, and so it goes. ‘These fragments I have shored against my ruins’, Eliot writes near the end of the poem, amidst a freefall of such fragments.¹

That Eliot’s poem can prompt storyboarding is demonstrated by Martin Rowson’s graphic format adaptation *The Waste Land* (1990), seasoned by Raymond Chandler’s detective novels. In cinema, a storyboard is a narrative plan, something depicted in one visual medium in order to be executed more fully on screen. Rowson’s *Waste Land* is a gumshoe narrative. He does not attempt to render Eliot’s text in the consecutive assembly of Eliot’s exposition. Rather, he follows something like the figure Eliot evokes in ‘What the Thunder Said’:

¹ T. S. Eliot, *The Waste Land: Authoritative Text, Contexts, Criticism*, ed. Michael North (New York: Norton, 2001), 20.

Who is the third who walks always beside you?
 When I count, there are only you and I together
 But when I look ahead up the white road
 There is always another one walking beside you²

This passage is in the form of an interpersonal address, an appeal, a question. It is one of the voices in *The Waste Land*, one of as many as sixty-six by my reckoning. Imagine all these voices in Eliot's poem engaged in an unfolding cacophony, as each bounces off a wall, asking *Who's there?* *The Waste Land* is a bubbling cauldron of voices and images huddling together: bats with baby faces, finding the measure by echolocation. It is a bewitching scenario, reminiscent of Homer's Sirens, the encounter with whose music Odysseus recognizes as a danger, nothing less than a portal to madness.

Something like madness played a part in the production of *The Waste Land*, which Eliot completed while he was in psychiatric treatment after a nervous breakdown. A reference to Margate (the resort at which he commenced a medically mandated rest cure: 'I can connect / Nothing with nothing'³) is in "The Fire Sermon." The poem cannot be regarded as the product of mental infirmity, but it was written by a man who regarded himself as a neurasthenic and suffered years of marital trauma and despondency. More than a decade earlier he had ventured the image of a madman shaking a dead geranium in 'Rhapsody on a Windy Night', a fitting evocation of a mind at the end of its tether.⁴ Insofar as Eliot's maladies impinged on the production of *The Waste Land*, the poem's recourse to collage was an accurate reflection of its halting progress stalled in the end by those fragments shored against ruins.

At the time of its publication, nobody used the term collage about *The Waste Land*. After the Great War, the pictorial collages pioneered by Raoul Hausmann, Hannah Höch, Kurt Schwitters and others were little known outside the circles of German Dada. Instead of collage, for the first readers of Eliot's poem the reference point was to music. The humanist scholar Ernst Robert Curtius, who translated *The Waste Land* into German soon after its publication, was moved by its 'dazzling flashes of mystery and music'. Curtius found that 'its music carried me over its obscurities.'⁵ Another humanist scholar who translated the poem, Mario Praz, recognized in it 'not an absence of music, but a new sense of it, which does not reject cacophony and dissonance'.⁶ Italian poet Eugenio Montale detected 'the sense of an interior and personal fount of music vibrating all possible harmonics lying below common words'.⁷ English critic I. A. Richards ascribed to it a 'music of ideas' conveying 'a coherent whole of feeling and attitude'.⁸ For the younger generation of Auden and friends, who attended university in the years following the publication of *The Waste Land*, 'the poetry got into your head like a song-hit', one of them recalled.⁹

² Eliot, *The Waste Land*, 17.

³ Eliot, *The Waste Land*, 15.

⁴ Eliot, 'Rhapsody of a Windy Night', *Blast* 2 (July 1915): 50.

⁵ E. R. Curtius, *Essays on European Literature*, trans. Michael Kowal (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1973), 357.

⁶ Mario Praz, in *T. S. Eliot, A Symposium*, ed. Richard March and Tambimuttu (New York: Henry Regnery, 1949), 247-8.

⁷ Eugenio Montale, in March and Tambimuttu, 192.

⁸ I. A. Richards, *Principles of Literary Criticism*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1926), 293.

⁹ March and Tambimuttu, 45.

Less than a year after Eliot's poem appeared, his friend Conrad Aiken published a book-length poem, *The Pilgrimage of Festus*, in which the publisher printed a statement on the cover of the dust jacket declaring 'Festus is an Odyssey of the soul of modern man; it is *The Waste Land* set to a magical music, but sharing none of its bitterness.'¹⁰ Aiken was a belated enthusiast of that nineteenth-century craze known as melomania, in which all the arts aspired to the condition of music.¹¹ *Festus* was part of a cycle of long poems Aiken called symphonies, designed to assemble evocative sensations and play upon them like a keyboard. It was, he thought, 'in quest of a sort of absolute poetry' executed 'with the same cool detachment with which a composer employs notes or chords' meant to produce 'a music of which the chief characteristic is its elusiveness, its fleetingness, and its richness in the shimmering overtones of hint and suggestion'.¹²

Eliot was sceptical, regarding Aiken's outlook as a stale perpetuation of *fin-de-siècle* fixations like the fad for synaesthesia – as registered in the titles of paintings like *Opus 217: Against the Enamel of a Background Rhythmic with Beats and Angles, Tones and Tints* by Paul Signac (1890), and spelled out by Czech painter František Kupka's conviction, 'I believe I can find something between sight and hearing and I can produce a fugue in colors.'¹³ While *The Waste Land* was thematically indebted to music, particularly the operas of Richard Wagner, Eliot took the view expressed pungently by Pound, who characterized the Wagnerian aesthetic of the Gesamtkunstwerk as one in which 'you confuse the spectator by smacking as many of his senses as possible at every possible moment.'¹⁴ And yet, as time went on, Eliot did not hesitate to refer to 'the music of poetry'. Before considering what that meant to him, let us turn to some other testimonials that avoid reference to music altogether.

In the late 1970s, English poet Stephen Spender gave a talk at the New York Institute for the Humanities on 'The "I" as an Other in Poetry'.¹⁵ In the discussion that followed, the poet Joseph Brodsky dismissed the familiar exegetical recourse to expressive categories like self, persona, character, speaking voice and so on. Yes, he allowed, personal elements may arise in the compositional process, but 'the main thing' that gets the poet going is 'a certain noise'. It is not the personality of the poet, Brodsky suggests, that is of interest; 'the main thing is that a poem has its own dynamic [...] what makes [the reader] finish the poem is the more visceral pleasure of seeing those words assembled in this or that fashion.'¹⁶

To get closer to this visceral pleasure, in which the poem 'spins itself off', as Brodsky put it, I want to turn to a letter written by German writer Carl Einstein to

¹⁰ Conrad Aiken, *The Pilgrimage of Festus* (New York: Knopf, 1923) dustjacket cover.

¹¹ On melomania, see Jed Rasula, *History of a Shiver: The Sublime Impudence of Modernism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 22-53.

¹² Conrad Aiken, *The Divine Pilgrim* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1949), 287.

¹³ Judith Zilczer, 'Music for the Eyes: Abstract Painting and Light Art', in *Visual Music: Synaesthesia in Art and Music Since 1900*, organized by Kerry Brougher, Jeremy Strick, Ari Wiseman and Judith Zilczer (Washington, DC: Hirshorn Museum, 2005), 38. The milieu in which synaesthetic aspirations flourished in the arts is the subject of *History of a Shiver*, cited in footnote 11.

¹⁴ Ezra Pound, *Antheil and the Treatise on Harmony* (Chicago: Pascal Covici, 1927), 44.

¹⁵ It is by way of Spender that we have the most explicit acknowledgement from Eliot of Wagner's impact: 'Once, after having followed a radio performance of *Das Rheingold* with the score, I asked him whether, when he wrote *The Waste Land*, he had been studying the libretto. He looked at me slyly and said: "Not just *Rheingold* – the whole of the Ring.'" Stephen Spender, *T. S. Eliot* (New York: Viking, 1976), 206.

¹⁶ Joseph Brodsky, in Stephen Spender, 'The "I" as an Other in Poetry', *Humanities in Review* 1, ed. David Rieff (New York: New York Institute for the Humanities, 1982), 180-1.

Picasso's art dealer, Daniel-Henry Kahnweiler, in 1923. Trying to work out the implications of his astonishment, Einstein realized Cubism had a bearing on far more than painting. Most compellingly, it suggested a mental space, disclosing 'the *I*, the person, not as a metaphysical substance but as a functional one, which grows, disappears, and can become just as complex as a cubist space'.¹⁷ Cubist space is a formulation that resisted the optical constraint of painting. Einstein observes that 'this *cubic experience is not a matter of theory* but the gradual modification of sensations.'¹⁸ As the person 'waxes and wanes in volume', experiencing these modifications, words 'slip away from someone as one feels or one's sense of space grows'.¹⁹ He's noticing the point at which a speaker starts losing track of what the words are doing, even as what is exposed is not confusion but an underlying, autonomous expressivity. Instead of words, wordlessness becomes the vehicle of communication.

The potential of Cubism for literature, as Einstein saw it, meant prying words loose from fidelity to a model or source; it meant disassembling the speech act within an artistically bounded space, yet preserving all its parts in a persuasive yet confounding multiplicity – much like the visual impact of Cubist canvases by Picasso. The Cubist painting was no longer a flat surface supporting mimetic values, no longer a window on the world, but an immersive environment in which one needed to recalculate perceptual opportunities, instant by instant. The point was rendered in the definitive opening of Paul Klee's 'Creative Credo' in 1920: 'Art does not reproduce the visible but makes visible.'²⁰

The experience of witnessing something *made visible* has particular resonance for me. Before embarking on an academic career, I earned my living doing typesetting and graphic design, working with the first generation of computer-based typography. A console would store the text as a photographic image, and every ten or twelve pages I would print them out a continuous photographic sheet, run it through the various chemical baths, then pin it up to dry. On five-foot strips of printout – where the words were too small to read from a distance – I saw poems become pictures. Abstract shapes hustled the words into a visual vocabulary. Lines made up of words dissolved into lines without words, as the aggregate of lines took on intriguing shapes of their own.

Cubism was the leading edge of what would soon be identified as *defamiliarization* by Russian writer Viktor Shklovsky, by which he meant the interruption of perceptual habit. Such was the experience I had when I saw strips of poems hung up to dry, words become images. That experience led me to some formal investigations, turning lines of poems into linear artifacts, visible but alphabetic. I named the project 'Lecture sans paroles', or reading without words. But I also meant the title to suggest reading *out on parole*, released from semantic shackles. This composition deploys many different *looks* of poetry punctuated by material from Wassily Kandinsky's teaching manual, *Point and Line to Plane*, theatrical diagrams by his Bauhaus colleague Oskar Schlemmer, and Rudolf Laban's movement notation diagrams, known as Labanotation, first introduced in his 1928 book *Schrifttanz* or

¹⁷ Carl Einstein, *A Mythology of Forms: Selected Writings on Art*, ed. and trans. Charles W. Haxthausen (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2019), 138.

¹⁸ Einstein, 139.

¹⁹ Einstein, 138-9.

²⁰ Paul Klee, *Notebooks, Volume 1: The Thinking Eye*, ed. Jürg Spiller, trans. Ralph Manheim (London: Lund Humphries, 1961), 76.

Written Dance,²¹ contemporaneous with the material by Kandinsky and Schlemmer. Kandinsky pursues a sense of ‘line’ as something more than a term coincidentally used with reference to poetry and to drawing. Defining the visual point as ‘the briefest, constant, innermost assertion’, Kandinsky regards the line as a ‘concentric tension’ erupting out of the point and taking on a life of its own.²² German philosopher Ernst Bloch has a similar observation on the note in a musical composition: ‘The note begins as something that was pulling and stretching, but does it want to go on like this?’ he wonders.²³

The poems I used (effaced) for ‘Lectures sans paroles’ were from a considerable range of sources, though a majority are from the twentieth century. In the first panel (Fig. 1)²⁴ the cosmic flux of nineteenth-century illustrations is echoed by alphabetic material from one of John Cage’s acrostic books, and a twirling placard assembly of short poems by the Dada artist Francis Picabia. In Fig. 2 in the upper left a stanza from Dante represents the most traditional of verse forms, a kind of visual stacking. The geometric shapes at the bottom are pattern poems by George Herbert. And the equally balanced centred lines (in the center of the page) are from Ronald Johnson’s long poem *Ark*. The rocking waves upper left of Fig. 3 are from Catalan poet Joaquim Folguera’s ‘Blind Street Musicians’. The poem is dedicated to Guillaume Apollinaire and was published the year he died, 1919. Apollinaire’s famous poem ‘Il Pleut’ (It’s Raining) snakes down the page in Fig. 4, and at the bottom is ‘Metro’ by Apollinaire’s friend Pierre Albert-Birot, a pioneer in visual poetry and editor of the journal *SIC* (for sounds, ideas, colours) where this appeared in 1917.

In the upper left of Fig. 5, the use of prose footnotes below the text of the poem is from David Jones’s book-length *The Anathemata*. Next to it the Chinese ideograms indicate a passage from Ezra Pound’s *Cantos*. To the right of that is the winsome ‘data cluster’ from Ed Sanders’s manifesto ‘Investigative Poetry’. In the upper middle of Fig. 6 is an example of what Alfred Stieglitz called a ‘psychotype’. This is a composition by Katherine Rhoades, published in Stieglitz’s journal *291* in 1915, with some visual organization provided by Albert de Zayas. The portfolio concludes with three circles, or periods full stop (Fig. 7). Taken together, they suggest an ellipsis. The shaggy one is a microscopic enlargement of a printed period, published in *Micrographia* in 1665, with author Robert Hooke’s remark that it resembled ‘a great splatch of London dirt’.²⁵

Precedents for this project included Man Ray’s effaced poem published in Francis Picabia’s journal *391* in June 1924 (#17, third page), Ernest Fraenkel’s 1960 dossier of effacements of Stéphane Mallarmé’s *Un coup de dés*, and a more elegant approach to Mallarmé’s poem realized by Belgian artist Marcel Broodthaers in 1969.²⁶ His cover and title page are identical to the 1914 Gallimard edition of the poem, but with a crucial difference. Where Mallarmé follows the title with the word *Poème*, Broodthaers substitutes Image. And, having diligently effaced the text of the poem with black bars,

²¹ Rudolf Laban, *Schrifttanz: Methodik, Orthographie, Erläuterungen* (Vienna: Universal Edition, 1928).

²² Wassily Kandinsky, *Point and Line to Plane*, trans. Howard Dearstyne and Hilla Rebay (New York: Solomon Guggenheim Foundation, 1947), 32, 54.

²³ Ernst Bloch, *Essays on the Philosophy of Music*, trans. Peter Palmer (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 228.

²⁴ This and subsequent figures are grouped together in a separate Appendix at the end of the essay.

²⁵ Adrian Johns, *The Nature of the Book: Print and Knowledge in the Making* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 431.

²⁶ See Craig Dworkin’s related discussion of ‘cenography’, or (etymologically) empty writing, in *No Medium* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2013), 33-52.

he replaced Mallarmé's (reluctantly composed) preface with the words of the poem in prose format, transforming *Un coup de dés* into a preface to its own obliteration. One of the three versions Broodthaers produced was printed on transparent paper, so you can gaze *through* the whole text like looking into a tidepool.

Subsequent treatments of *Un coup de dés* have been undertaken by Guido Molinari (2003), Michalis Pichler (2008), and Eric Zboya (2011), among others.²⁷ But have any poets availed themselves of such non-alphabet lines where we might expect poetry? A preeminent example is Franco-Belgian poet Henri Michaux, for whom the line of poetry and the drawn line were in cahoots. Michaux's impetus, biographically speaking, goes back to his discovery of the painting of Paul Klee in the 1920s – after which, he recalled nearly fifty years later, he wanted 'to participate in the world via lines'²⁸ – lines as an alternative to signs. 'Signs say things to me', he admitted. 'I would gladly make signs, but a sign is also a stop sign.' The drawn or painted line, by contrast, had that liquidity, that flow of the ongoing, 'A continuum. A murmur without end', he imagined.²⁹ Despite his incessant production as a graphic artist, Michaux was no slouch as a writer. The three-volume Pléiade edition of his complete work includes nearly three thousand pages of poetry (which in his case could be characterized as compositions in Roman alphabet), an output matched in volume by art media, executed in gouache, watercolour, India ink, pastel, acrylic and oil painting.³⁰

In 1954 Michaux contributed a preface to Will Grohman's book on Paul Klee, giving it the title 'Adventures of Lines'. He took delight in Klee's 'Lines living with the little people of dust and dots'.³¹ Michaux's observations repeatedly find affirmation in Klee's Bauhaus teaching notes (which Michaux had not seen, as they were not published until 1956). He found in Klee's work what he calls 'sign-lines, poetry-

²⁷ See Annette Gilbert, *Literature's Elsewheres: On the Necessity of Radical Literary Practices*, trans. Cadenza Academic Translations team and Antonia Hirsch (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2022), 111-7, and, for a more specific discussion of Pichler, Laurent Milesi, 'Countertexting One Another: Conceptual Poetics, Flarf, and Derridean Countersignature', *CounterText* 1.2 (2015): especially 214-5.

²⁸ Henri Michaux, *Emergences-Resurgences*, trans. Richard Sieburth (New York: The Drawing Center/Skira, 2000), 10.

²⁹ Michaux, 11. Anthropologist Tim Ingold, who like Michaux has learned much from Klee, stresses that the natural environment consists of lines not signs, his point being that symbolism has no part in an environment, or Umwelt in Uexküll's sense. Instead of signs, then, the inhabitant of a given milieu responds to *affordances*. See Tim Ingold, *Imagining for Real: Essays on Creation, Attention and Correspondences* (London: Routledge, 2022), 340-1.

³⁰ For visual images of material discussed in what follows, most can be found in *Untitled Passages* edited by Catherine de Zegher (New York: The Drawing Center / Merrell, 2000), with excellent colour reproductions. Michaux's 1927 'Alphabet' and 'Narration' can be found on pages 13-16; for the 1944 alphabets see pp. 37, 42-43; figures from *Mouvements* are on pp. 45-60 (I'd emphasize 45, 49, 56-57); for the linear proto-alphabetic work from the early Sixties, see pp. 112, 115-9; drawings from *Par la voie des rythmes* appear pp. 145-55. Many of Michaux's drawings on mescaline and other drugs are represented here, as they are (with less visual clarity) in the exhibition catalogue *Henri Michaux* (Guggenheim Museum, 1978), in which the 1927 'Narration' is not well reproduced, but there is a useful note by René Bertelé on p. 15. An account (including one by Michaux) of *Mouvements* with illustrations is on pp. 68-71, and the early Sixties foray into Indian ink paintings settled into a persistent horizontality that suggested a script or text (132-5), continued later in some gouaches (146-7). Michaux wrote a stimulating account of his lifelong graphism in *Émergences-Résurgences* (Geneva: Skira, 1972), which doubles as a comprehensive visual portfolio.

³¹ Henri Michaux, *Darkness Moves: An Henri Michaux Anthology 1927-1984*, ed. and trans. David Ball (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 316. The Catalan artist Joan Miró also expressed his indebtedness to Klee, and produced a considerable number of paintings involving graphism and deployment of alphabetic materials.

tracing'.³² Among Klee's numerous pedagogical illustrations are some that illustrate his fetching notion that a line 'goes out for a walk, so to speak, aimlessly, for the sake of the walk'.³³ Klee construed lines in terms of melody, linearity, detours, congregations, in various stages of rhythmic articulation. Short lines are depicted floating horizontally, vertically, and nudged into alphabetic potentiality by slight augmentations. Klee repeatedly worked with a field of parallel lines, ghosts of writing, into which perturbations give rise to shapes. He also used letter forms as pre-fabricated compositional templates.³⁴ In *Mr. Zed* a face is conjured out of the last letter of the alphabet. Placed inside an oval, the zigzag of a Z handily delivers eyes, nose and mouth. In this environment, even paintings with identifiable pictorial content could suggest letters lurking in the mix. Klee's drawn lines began to petition alphabetic consequences.

For a few years around the end of World War I, Klee was rendering poems in grids. In *Einst dem Grau* (1918), the poem is written out in cursive at the top, then carefully worked into cells housed in the grid. He began to float letters into paintings as a kind of iconological regalia, as in *The Vocal Fabric of the Singer Rosa Silber* (1922) and several 'Letterpictures' (1924, 1926). *Sign Collection* (1924) is a stately convocation in watercolour in which the signifying components resist alphabetic resolution – so successfully in fact that although 'x' and 't' are recognizable, they do not come across as letter forms. Later, in the Thirties, he returned to proto-poetic renderings. In a 1938 watercolour, *Beginning of a Poem*, the alphabet swarms on the page like a cloud as it begins to disperse, yet there is a latent gravitational summons suggesting that these floating letters may serendipitously precipitate words. *Novel in Secret Writing* (1935) addresses its prospect by minimizing alphabetic shapes, highlighting glyphic elements instead. In *Secret Letters* (1937), proto-alphabetic forms congregate in agitated hush against a milky gray background; but the very title suggests a subterranean reciprocity between the contours of the Roman alphabet and nature's proliferation of signifying forms, a point emphasized by another title, *Signs Signifying Themselves*. The semiotic rumble that undergirds Klee's pictorial vocabulary retains alphabetic insinuations even when letters are withheld, as in the gouache *Gesetz* (or *Law*) (1938). In *Park Near Lu* (1938), tree branches helplessly mimic the letter Y. Of all Klee's evocations of textual material, however, the one that most closely approximates the route taken by Michaux is *Abstract Script* (1931), which at first glance looks like four lines of writing in a florid hand, yet none of it approximates any known form of writing.³⁵

Klee was engaged in what he called 'find[ing] one's way in a whole that is composed of parts which belong to different dimensions'.³⁶ This outlook is precisely what Michaux learned from Klee. His excited response to the German artist – in which he envisions lines waking up, hoping, rising, waiting – takes its deepest dive with this psychotropic supposition: 'A line is dreaming. Before then, no one had ever let a line dream.'³⁷ After encountering Klee, Michaux promptly set to work in 1927, with two

³² Michaux, *Darkness Moves*, 317.

³³ Klee, *Notebooks, Volume 1*, 105.

³⁴ Klee, *Notebooks, Volume 1*, 215.

³⁵ Many of these works are reproduced in the informative study *Paul Klee's Pictorial Writing* by K. Porter Aichele (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), followed up by Aichele's *Paul Klee, Poet/Painter* (Rochester, NY: Camden House, 2006).

³⁶ Dennis J. Schmidt, *Between Word and Image: Heidegger, Klee, and Gadamer on Gesture and Genesis* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2012), 84.

³⁷ Michaux, *Darkness Moves*, 317.

pages of script-like scribbles, one called 'Narration' and the other 'Alphabet'. Each resembles a written or printed page, though there is no alphabetic material. Yet the surge and chatter of linear strokes of various kinds hint at some imminent script. This marked the onset of Michaux's compulsive proliferation of lines and doodles that went on for more than fifty years.

Some harmonically arranged ensembles from 1938 inaugurated a series Michaux thought of as alphabetic. He was fabricating alphabets from figures edging over into glyphs. These were often hatched from humanoid apparitions. In 1951 he published *Mouvements*, with sixty-four pages of drawings selected from twelve hundred he had churned out over the previous year. These anthropomorphic derivatives 'were gestures, interior gestures', he said, 'the ones with which we don't have limbs but desires for limbs, stretching, impulsive movements and all this with living ligaments that are never thick, never big with flesh nor enclosed in skin'.³⁸ Apart from his short Postface, the only text in the volume is a nine-page poem placed in the centre of the book, a rumination on his compulsive graphism:

Movements of dislocation and inner exasperation more than moving
 movements of explosion, of refusal, of stretching out all around
 of unhealthy attractions, of impossible cravings
 gratifications of the flesh striking the neck
 Headless movements
 What good is a head when you're overflowing?³⁹

A line by T. S. Eliot teases Michaux's title *Mouvements* with exquisite poise: 'To be still and still moving.'⁴⁰

Drugs fuelled and informed this activity as well, particularly in medically supervised sessions over five years beginning in the late 1950s involving mescaline, peyote, LSD, and other substances. Initially attempting to write while under the influence, Michaux found that the hallucinatory experience melted words into linear drooling. Under the influence, he was a manic scribbler, but he recognized the futility of reproducing – as he put it – 'the entire manuscript, which directly and simultaneously translated the subject, the rhythms, the forms, the chaos, as well as the inner defences and their devastation.' To write *about* the drug experience, while not in it, he had to confront what he called 'a typographical wall. Everything had to be rewritten. The original text, more tangible than legible, drawn rather than written, would not, in any case, suffice.'⁴¹

One solution while rewriting was to interpose block lines that visually register the stammer of hallucination. In addition to being mental placeholders, these lines are gestural traces, the examples here being reflex responses to hashish. Michaux calls them 'endo-polyformations' caught up in a turbulent 'tennis of synonyms'.⁴² Under the influence of the drug, each thought or perception hatched a clone, the clones proliferating into a litter, yielding a constant succession, each line overcome by the next.

³⁸ Henri Michaux (New York: Solomon Guggenheim Foundation, 1978), 69.

³⁹ Henri Michaux, *Mouvements: Soixante-quatre dessins, Un poème, Une postface* (Paris: Gallimard, 1951), unpaginated. My translation.

⁴⁰ T. S. Eliot, *Four Quartets* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1943), 17.

⁴¹ Henri Michaux, *Miserable Miracle (Mescaline)*, trans. Louise Varèse (San Francisco: City Lights, 1963), 5.

⁴² Henri Michaux, *Light Through Darkness*, trans. Hakon Chevalier (New York: Orion Press, 1963), 78.

‘I have often followed a thought’, Michaux reflects, then wonders, ‘Was it always a thought?’⁴³ In this self-cancelling pulsation, every effort to speak results in ‘*Very . . . It is very . . . Everything is very . . .*’⁴⁴ In the end, he found it ‘*intolerable to be in the midst of the superlative of everything*’.⁴⁵ It was, in his summary, a case of ‘[t]he metaphysical taken over by the mechanical’ in some ‘incessant morpho-creation’ as he found himself ‘held prisoner in some workshop of the brain’.⁴⁶ In it, however, he was absorbed by microperceptions and microsignals like Klee’s lines comporting with the little people of dust and dots.

In 1965 Michaux published *Parcours* (Journey), a limited edition folio of twelve etchings, with an introduction by René Bertelé, in which the pages more clearly evoke the proximity of a text, as if at any moment words might come into focus from the slurry of graphism. These etchings were a slightly more organized version of the ‘Narration’ and ‘Alphabet’ from nearly forty years earlier. While Michaux’s graphic work was reproduced in numerous volumes, interspersed with poems and prose commentary, in one book of his – *On the Path of Rhythms* (1974) – no alphabetic material appears at all except the publisher’s information. But there is a table of contents of sorts, with horizontal strokes indicating the book’s five sections, each given ostensible titles consisting of semantically aspirational glyphs. The rear cover includes a similar graphic splatch, perhaps suggesting a blurb, but certainly leaving a gestural trace. The editors of the Pléiade edition of Michaux’s complete works call the book ‘une lecture-évocation’, a solicitation or evocation of reading.⁴⁷ The figural elements in play solicit the scrutiny of a reader who cannot, or need not, read – but for whom the posture of *reading* provides an underlying support, and potential edification.

‘Who has not wished at some point to create an abecedarium, a bestiary, or even an entire vocabulary, from which the verbal would be entirely excluded?’ Michaux wondered in the preface to *Saisir* [Grasp] in 1979.⁴⁸ The development of language, he felt, had corrupted human life with a command-control administrative environment. ‘The handcuffs of words are on for good’, he lamented.⁴⁹ The book pointedly ends with the phrase ‘vers accomplissement’ [towards accomplishment] facing what looks like an effaced poem, strikingly similar to the famous precedent by Man Ray mentioned earlier. The lines get the last word, as it were, at the end of *Par des Traits* (translated by Richard Sieburth as *Stroke by Stroke*) – the last book Michaux published before his death in 1985 – as the final lines of the text are followed by two imperfectly rendered horizontal lines. A long poem in the middle of the book reiterates the title in a context of looming nuclear extinction. But on a more reflective note, the book concludes with an essay, ‘Of Languages and Writing, Why the Urge to Turn Away from Them’, which reads now like a prescient indictment of Twitter and Facebook.

⁴³ Michaux, *Light Through Darkness*, 102.

⁴⁴ Michaux, *Miserable Miracle*, 38.

⁴⁵ Michaux, *Miserable Miracle*, 70. Elsewhere he reiterates the point. Under mescaline, ‘[y]ou are invaded by superlatives. You are stifled by superlatives. If you howled, you would howl superlatives.’ *Infinite Turbulence*, trans. Michael Fineberg (London: Calder and Boyars, 1975), 14.

⁴⁶ Michaux, *Miserable Miracle*, 64; *Untitled Passages*, 8; *Miserable Miracle*, 7.

⁴⁷ Henri Michaux, *Oeuvres complètes III*, ed. Raymond Bellour and Ysé Tran (Paris: Gallimard, 2004), 1650.

⁴⁸ Henri Michaux, *Stroke by Stroke*, trans. Richard Sieburth (Brooklyn, NY: Archipelago Books, 2006), unpaginated.

⁴⁹ Michaux, *Stroke by Stroke*, unpaginated.

Michaux's identification of a zone that feels like a cascade of superlatives usefully approximates the state of mind discerned by Joseph Brodsky as 'a certain noise'. Noise, like the swamp of superlatives, is a spur to poetic articulation – and an impediment. Michaux's drawn lines present a visual stutter, articulation stalled in repetition. Expression balled up in the inexpressible. Yet all these lines drawn by a poet cannot but seem skeletal morphologies of poems wrangled from an embryonic alphabet. Michaux exuded so prodigious an output of graphic work that its scale hangs like an immense penumbra over his equally prodigious poetry. The question hanging over both modes of production is whether one or the other was primary. Are drawn lines on the way to becoming poems, flickers of potentiality coming up just short of words? Or are poems the ongoing struggle with handcuffs, the only relief coming when words drop away and only the lines remain, ghosts of a text?

Like Michaux, Carl Einstein was compelled by the painting of Paul Klee, drawing on terms like *psychograms* and *écriture spontanée* to address Klee's mediumistic transcription (*das mediale Niederschreiben*), his plunge into hallucinatory currents.⁵⁰ These terms outline what he identified as a technique of the trance. A useful illustration of mediumistic transcription is a passage by Virginia Woolf. In *Mrs Dalloway*, Peter Walsh, returning to England after years of foreign service in India, comes across a decrepit figure slumped in a public place emitting vowels in a sheer material exudation.

A sound interrupted him; a frail quivering sound, a voice bubbling up without direction, vigor, beginning or end, running weakly and shrilly and with an absence of all human meaning into

ee um fah um so
foo swee too eem oo—

the voice of no age or sex, the voice of an ancient spring spouting from the earth; which issued, just opposite Regent's Park Tube Station, from a tall quivering shape, like a funnel, like a rusty pump, like a wind-beaten tree for ever barren of leaves which lets the wind run up and down its branches singing⁵¹

Woolf has clearly absorbed the lessons of the Aeolian harp, while transposing this legendary musical instrument into a debased oracle. In a way, this passage looks forward to Woolf's own polyphonic outing in *The Waves*, when she submerges six human identities into mingled vocalization. She was shadowboxing with James Joyce all the way, and in *The Waves* tried to preserve a kind of civil dignity for voices going under, just as she saw the mad Irish hatter doing in the cacophonous blarney of *Finnegans Wake*.

Woolf's 'voice bubbling up without direction' finds its theoretical provenance in her friend T. S. Eliot's suggestion that 'a poem, or a passage of a poem, may tend to realize itself first as a particular rhythm before it reaches expression in words, and [...] this rhythm may bring to birth the idea and the image.'⁵² This is from 'The Music of Poetry', a talk Eliot delivered at Glasgow University in the midst of World War II. Apart from his insistence that such music must be rooted in the vernacular, he ventured

⁵⁰ Einstein, *A Mythology of Forms*, 271.

⁵¹ Virginia Woolf, *Mrs Dalloway*, ed. Claire Tomalin (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 105.

⁵² T. S. Eliot, *The Complete Prose. The Critical Edition. Volume 6: The War Years, 1940-1946*, ed. David E. Chinitz and Ronald Schuchard (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2021), 321. Eliot made the same point in "Poetry, Speech and Music" (p. 283 of the same volume), which suggests the importance of the concept to him at the time.

two attributes. First, it was not a matter of ‘line by line [...] but a question of the whole poem’. And then, in a revealing turn, he suggested there is ‘a music of imagery as well as sound’.⁵³ A ‘certain *noise*’ then may be a certain urge in search of a certain way of sounding – and sounding can take the form of images in the mind. This sound or noise can also summon the aura left in the memory of a reader, contributing to the palpable difference between, say, a poem by Robert Frost and one by Mina Loy.

It is commonly assumed that music is a vocal sonority that strikes the ear as ‘poetic’. But is it the voice that is sonorous, or the poem – and how do you tell the difference? The distinction is hampered by our internalization of theatrical voices, like Jeremy Irons’s recording of *The Waste Land*, or the bowling ball rumble of Wallace Stevens’s recorded recitations. By contrast, the off-putting nasal tone of William Carlos Williams, or Pablo Neruda in his recording of *Las Alturas de Macchu Picchu*, can seem incongruous with the gravitas of poetry as such. Music, then, applied to poetry, is a variable term like the X in an algebraic equation. If certain conditions are met, the music of poetry seems evident, but the conditions are maddeningly variable – and potentially inscrutable. The music of poetry turns out to conform to the condition of Cubism in Picasso’s characterization of it as a perfume hanging in the air from an indeterminate source.

An intriguing but little-known determination to investigate poetry scientifically is documented by Tobias Wilke in *Sound Writing*. These largely nineteenth-century endeavours involved such devices as the phonoautograph, glossograph, kymograph, labiograph and other devices for investigating the ‘psychophysics of poetry’, its ‘tonal calculus’ in Robert Givler’s terms.⁵⁴ Ezra Pound experienced one of these devices in Paris, ‘a machine for measuring the duration of verbal components’ with ‘[a] quill or tube held in the nostril, a less shaved quill or other tube in the mouth, and your consonants signed as you spoke them.’⁵⁵ American phonologist E. W. Scripture approached poems as ‘living vocal gestures’ following and performing a ‘verse curve’ unrecognized (he maintained) by the clumsy vocabulary of feet, stresses and so on. He hit upon the notion that the empathetic ardour of certain poems could be scientifically traced not by recitations of the poems themselves but in the ‘rhythmic recitation of meaningless syllables’ identified by statistical analysis of a given body of work.⁵⁶ These exercises sound much like attempts to capture the elusive perfume of Cubism. Givler went so far as to reduce lines of poems like ‘The inviolate island of the sage and free’ by Byron to phonetic chatter that could register sound properties without semantic bias: ‘Thū vī lānd sā nīl jī tā frō the vēē.’⁵⁷ Scripture also measured speech forms in graphic renderings that send sympathetic vibrations out to Klee and Michaux: Fig. 8.⁵⁸ Wilke observes that such mechanistic protocols ‘served the far-reaching purpose of establishing the medium of a “natural writing” in which the bodily process of

⁵³ Eliot, *The Complete Prose. Volume 6*, 319.

⁵⁴ Tobias Wilke, *Sound Writing: Experimental Modernism and the Poetics of Articulation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2022), 107, 108.

⁵⁵ Ezra Pound, *Polite Essays* (Norfolk, CT: New Directions, 1940), 129-30. Michael Golston provides numerous illustrations of such ‘devices ticking beneath the surface of Modernist poetry’ in *Rhythm and Race in Modernist Poetry and Science* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), 71.

⁵⁶ Wilke, *Sound Writing*, 92, 76.

⁵⁷ Robert Chenault Givler, *The Psycho-physiological Effect of the Elements of Speech in Relation to Poetry* (Princeton, NJ: Psychological Review Co., 1915 [Psychological Review Publications XIX: 2]), 61.

⁵⁸ E. W. Scripture, *The Study of Speech Curves* (Washington, DC: Carnegie Institution, 1906), between pp. 50-51.

articulation would "inscribe itself" via graphic traces that were indexical rather than symbolic.⁵⁹ Such a prospect roused Cuban poet José Martí in 1883 to excitedly acclaim 'the prancings, dashes, sudden pauses, unexpected outbursts, wavelike swellings, and galloping revelations of ignited thought' made possible, he imagined, by the glossograph.⁶⁰

It is unlikely that Eliot knew of these scientific investigations of the music of poetry, but he too was interested in detecting some primal dimension, some nascent music, in poetry. In his Glasgow talk, Eliot ventured a precarious supposition in the following passage:

If we are moved by a poem, it has meant something, perhaps something important, to us; if we are not moved, then it is, as poetry, meaningless. We can be deeply stirred by hearing the recitation of a poem in a language of which we understand no word; but if we are then told that the poem is gibberish and has no meaning, we shall consider that we have been deluded – this was no poem, it was merely an imitation of instrumental music.⁶¹

Why is it illegitimate to be deeply stirred by gibberish? After all, Wallace Stevens – that aesthete of buffoonery – acknowledged that '[t]he poem goes from the poet's gibberish to / The gibberish of the vulgate and back again.'⁶²

In Eliot's thought experiment, it is only the disclosure that a putative foreign language is not a language that provokes awareness of gibberish. But what if we are never told that this is gibberish? Eliot is tripped up here by a misplaced criterion of meaning. If we are moved, he says, the poem 'has meant something'. But this is *his* characterization of an emotional experience, not the delivery of *a meaning*. After declaring that 'the music of poetry is not something which exists apart from the meaning', he goes on to infer that '[o]therwise, we could have a poetry of great musical beauty which made no sense, and I have never come across such poetry.'⁶³ However, it seems a bit far-fetched that Eliot would have been unaware of the domain of sound poetry.

In 1919 Eliot had reviewed a publication by the Dadaist Tristan Tzara which, he observed, had 'the odd distinction of being neither verse nor prose nor prose-poem'. But whatever it was, he found it 'agreeably competent'.⁶⁴ After quoting a few lines ('Bonjour sans cigarette tzantzanza / ganga / bouzdouc zdouc nfounfa mbaah') he decided that '[t]he only way to take this sort of thing is very seriously.' Acknowledging that 'at least it is a symptom of "experiment"', he advised tongue in cheek that it 'ought not to be put in the hands of the young'.⁶⁵

It might be imagined that Eliot did not take Gertrude Stein seriously either, and he did remark in a review that her work 'is not improving, it is not interesting, it is not

⁵⁹ Wilke, *Sound Writing*, 68-9.

⁶⁰ José Martí, *Selected Writing*, ed. and trans. Esther Allen (New York: Penguin, 2002), 145.

⁶¹ Eliot, *The Complete Prose. Volume 6*, 314.

⁶² Wallace Stevens, *The Palm at the End of the Mind: Selected Poems and a Play*, ed. Holly Stevens (New York: Vintage, 1990), 222.

⁶³ Eliot, *The Complete Prose. Volume 6*, 313.

⁶⁴ T. S. Eliot, *The Complete Prose. The Critical Edition: Volume 2: The Perfect Critic, 1919-1927*, ed. Anthony Cuda and Ronald Schuchard (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2021), 68.

⁶⁵ Eliot, *The Complete Prose. Volume 2*, 69.

good for one's mind.'⁶⁶ This sounds dismissive, but in fact he was referring to Stein's lecture 'Composition as Explanation', which he had hoped to publish in his journal *The Criterion* until he discovered it had been issued as a Hogarth Press pamphlet by Virginia Woolf. So his apparent dismissal is actually a qualification: Stein's work does not fall into the category of self-improvement, general interest, or moral uplift. A few years later in a public lecture Eliot made a revealing comparison of English metaphysical poetry to Stein, whose work, he observed, provided 'an extremely valuable exercise for unused parts of the mind'.⁶⁷

By the time he addressed 'The Music of Poetry' in 1942, though, he apparently no longer had any use for unused parts of the mind. Would Eliot have caught the reference if someone in his Glasgow audience had suggested that 'a poetry of great musical beauty which made no sense' did in fact exist, citing the panoramic *Ur-Sonate* by Kurt Schwitters? In fact, Schwitters at that point was living in London. As a refugee from the Nazis, he had arrived in the United Kingdom in 1940, and been interned in Edinburgh and then the Isle of Man for a year and a half. Schwitters had composed his sonata during the 1920s, expanding a seed element from a short sound poem (based on a type sample) by his friend Raoul Hausmann. The exquisitely produced 29-page text of Schwitters's Sonata was designed by Jan Tschichold, leader of the international New Typography movement between the wars.

The Waste Land and Schwitters's *Ur-Sonate* are a salient pair, recto and verso of modern poetry. But as both verbal and typographical events, the *Ur-Sonate* has greater claim to the criteria suggested by Eliot for the music of poetry, which 'realize[s] itself first as a particular rhythm before it reaches expression in words'.⁶⁸ Although the poem is primarily abstract, Schwitters embeds word in his alphabetic toolkit, like *Rakete* meaning rocket. True to its meaning, Schwitters uses the word as a launching pad, albeit for vocal permutations: 'rakete bee bee? rakete bee zee' counting off letters before achieving flight in exuberant repetition of the phrase 'rakete rinnzekete'.⁶⁹ But with the *Ur-Sonate* you do not need to read for semantic cues or lexical prompts. The poem is abstract, yet also concrete. These were prevailing elements in the Constructivist circles to which Schwitters contributed, in which (as another Dada poet-painter, Jean Arp, put it) 'avant-garde painters no longer stood before an apple, a guitar, a man, or a landscape to convert or dissolve them into coloured circles, triangles, and rectangles; on the contrary, they created autonomous compositions directly out of their most intimate joy, their most personal suffering, out of lines, planes, forms, colors.'⁷⁰ Or, for the poet, sounds, lines, and possibly signs.

Schwitters's poem – and sound poetry in general – has a surprising foreground in the Southern poet Sidney Lanier's *Science of English Verse*, published in 1880, in which he audaciously suggested that poetry could be recognized 'purely as sounds, without reference to their associated ideas'. As a practical demonstration, he proposed 'the simple experiment of substituting for the words of a formal poem any other words which preserve the accentuation, alliteration, and rhyme, but which convey no ideas to

⁶⁶ T. S. Eliot, *The Complete Prose. The Critical Edition: Volume 3: Literature, Politics, Belief, 1927-1929*, ed. Frances Dickey, Jennifer Formichelli and Ronald Schuchard (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2021), 27.

⁶⁷ Eliot, *The Complete Prose. Volume 2*, 682.

⁶⁸ Eliot, *The Complete Prose. Volume 6*, 321.

⁶⁹ Kurt Schwitters, *Das literarische Werk: Lyrik* (Munich: Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag, 2005), 215.

⁷⁰ Jean Arp, *Arp on Arp: Poems, Essays, Memories*, ed. Marcel Jean, trans. Joachim Neugroschel (New York: Viking, 1972), 139-40.

the mind, – words of some foreign language not understood by the experimenter being the most effective for this purpose.⁷¹

Lanier's proposal is illustrated in a poem by the late gay poet David Melnick, which burbles along on a carapace of Greek sounds provided by the *Iliad*, albeit adding an umlaut to make the Greek *menin aida* into:

Men in Aïda, they appeal, eh? A day, O Achilles!
 Allow men in, emery Achaïans. All gay ethic, eh?
 Paul asked if tea mousse suck, as Aïda, pro, yaps in.⁷²

Melnick is tacitly following Ezra Pound's advice from 1913: the poet should 'fill his mind with the finest cadences he can discover, preferably in a foreign language, so that the meaning of the words may be less likely to divert his attention from the movement.'⁷³ Undisturbed by meaning, this movement – which the Imagists at that moment called cadence – resembles the organic rhythm of cardiac promptings extolled as the basis of *vers libre* by Camille Mauclair, which he regarded as 'entirely physiological: the beat of the arterial blood, the amplitude or the constriction of respiration, according to the emotion, are the natural impulsions'. On this somatic basis, 'there are as many kinds of vers libre as there are poets.'⁷⁴ The free verse movement was part of a much broader emancipatory initiative around the turn of the century, propagated by François Delsarte's theories of expressive gesture, Emile Jaques-Dalcroze's eurhythmics, modern dance and much more, extending even to pre-school kinaesthetic training and the propagation of schoolyard playgrounds. A proponent of childhood education put it in terms that might equally apply to art: 'Movement is "the cry of the being to be," the I AM of the human organism.'⁷⁵ Comparable emancipatory pledges attended the advent of Dada. As one insider explained in 1920, '[o]ur writers emerge from Mallarmé and Guillaume Apollinaire and seek to create a new language, purely aesthetic, which no longer has to be understood. You can reproach them for subjectivism, but, conversely, there's nothing more objective than their language that has no goal but to inspire thought.'⁷⁶ The thought of such thought is tellingly registered by Alain Badiou's suggestion that 'the poem is an unthinkable thought'.⁷⁷

The very expression 'unthinkable thought' suggests corollaries, like *unseeable image* or *inaudible music*. Badiou's phrase is not meant to suggest such imponderables, however. In the essay 'What Does the Poem Think?' he begins by acknowledging the singularity of poetic speech as intransigent, bearing no message but nevertheless deploying communicative means. 'The poem is the guardian of the decency of saying', he affirms, 'exposing itself in solitary exception to the ruckus that takes the place of understanding' in the shared idiom of consensus. The poem, then, lies somewhere

⁷¹ Sidney Lanier, *Science of English Verse* (New York: Scribner, 1880), 21.

⁷² David Melnick, in *Imagining Language*, ed. Jed Rasula and Steve McCaffery (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1998), 284.

⁷³ Ezra Pound, 'A Few Don'ts', *Poetry: A Magazine of Verse* (March 1913), 202.

⁷⁴ Robert Michael Brain, *The Pulse of Modernism: Physiological Aesthetics in Fin-de-Siècle Europe* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2015), 159.

⁷⁵ Hillel Schwartz, 'Torque: The New Kinaesthetic of the Twentieth Century', in *Incorporations*, ed. Jonathan Crary and Sanford Kwinter (New York: Zone, 1992), 87.

⁷⁶ Germaine Everling, in Trevor Stark, *Total Expansion of the Letter: Avant-Garde Art and Language After Mallarmé* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2020), 211.

⁷⁷ Alain Badiou, *The Age of the Poets and Other Writings on Twentieth Century Poetry and Prose*, trans. Bruno Bosteels (New York: Verso, 2014), 48.

beyond or outside the consensual. Rather than seeking unanimity, ‘the poem’s wish is the incessant migration into heterogeneous phenomena.’⁷⁸ The poem’s *unthinkable thought* is a mode of thinking that provides no traction for reason, method, delegation. Yet, for Badiou and for us, the unthinkable thought is a touchstone of sapience, a reminder that thought has limits, that life exceeds thought.

I want to offer, as an encounter with the poem as unthinkable thought, a visual enactment. In *Space Writing (Self-Portrait)* in 1935, Man Ray made a timed photographic exposure of himself behind a chess board, on which was mounted a pane of glass in a frame, suggesting the parameters of both a photograph and a page of writing. Inside this rectangle, using a flashlight, he left a gestural flurry of light lines on the emulsion of the photographic negative. Here we see the registration of ‘a certain noise’, habitation of a space at the cusp of both appearance and disappearance, writing and drawing. *Space Writing* imagines that pulsation Eliot recognized prompting a poem, a poem that tends ‘to realize itself first as a particular rhythm before it reaches expression in words’. *Space Writing* also confirms the observation Marianne Moore makes in her poem ‘To Be Liked by You Would Be a Calamity’: ‘Gesticulation – it is half the language.’⁷⁹

Gesticulation is a good word for Michaux’s graphism: gesticulations manifest in linear pulsations, suggesting that what gives rise to the poem is not a semantic destination but an unthinkable thought. Such thoughts are not subject to thinking; they do not aspire to the act of taking thought. Instead, they submit to the pulsations, the bio-rhythms that retain the sapience of an organism out for a walk. The line goes out for a walk. This, the cultural anthropologist Tim Ingold usefully suggests, is a form of wayfaring.⁸⁰ And wayfaring is a way of knowing as you go. Following a trail rather than studying a plan. A journey made rather than an object found. It is a form of mobile habitation. Call it a poem.

A poem is not a work of legislation, however much it may don the rhetorical garments of legislative address. As wayfaring, the poem resists the communicative mission of news bulletins, legal arguments, and even personal disclosures – the kind of documents of which the question can be put: What does it mean? What I have been describing is a different point of engagement, for the poet possessed by a certain noise is not trying to *say* something, but to *make* something, where making is on the move, and moving means accompanying a line going out for a walk. Making, not asserting or ascertaining. And yet saying prevails.

A certain noise precipitates an unthinkable thought. But the noise, like the thought, is thoroughly embedded and recessed in the corporeal entity we call identity. The mystery of it is nicely captured by Paul Valéry in his dialogue on architecture, in which Socrates asks his interlocutor ‘what is your thought?’ The answer makes for a fitting conclusion:

⁷⁸ Badiou, *The Age of the Poets...*, 25, 26, 30.

⁷⁹ Marianne Moore, *Observations*, ed. Linda Leavell (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2016), 34.

⁸⁰ See Tim Ingold, *Lines: A Brief History* (London: Routledge, 2016). In *Being Alive: Essays on Movement, Knowledge and Description* (London: Routledge, 2011), Ingold contrasts lines of type from handwritten lines, suggesting that the former ‘does not go out for a walk’ (231) – that is, it does not participate in ‘wayfaring’. The present essay attempts to restore Ingold’s sense of wayfaring to lines of poetry, which even in type are demonstrably different than prose.

I no longer know how to grasp it. Nothing contains, everything implies it. It is within me, like my own self; it acts infallibly; it judges, it desires. . . . But as for expressing it, I find it as difficult as saying what makes me to be myself, a thing that I know so precisely and yet so little.⁸¹

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⁸¹ Paul Valéry, *Eupalinos, or The Architect*, trans. William McCausland Stewart (Oxford: Oxford University Press / London: Humphrey Milford, 1932), 16.

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Appendix

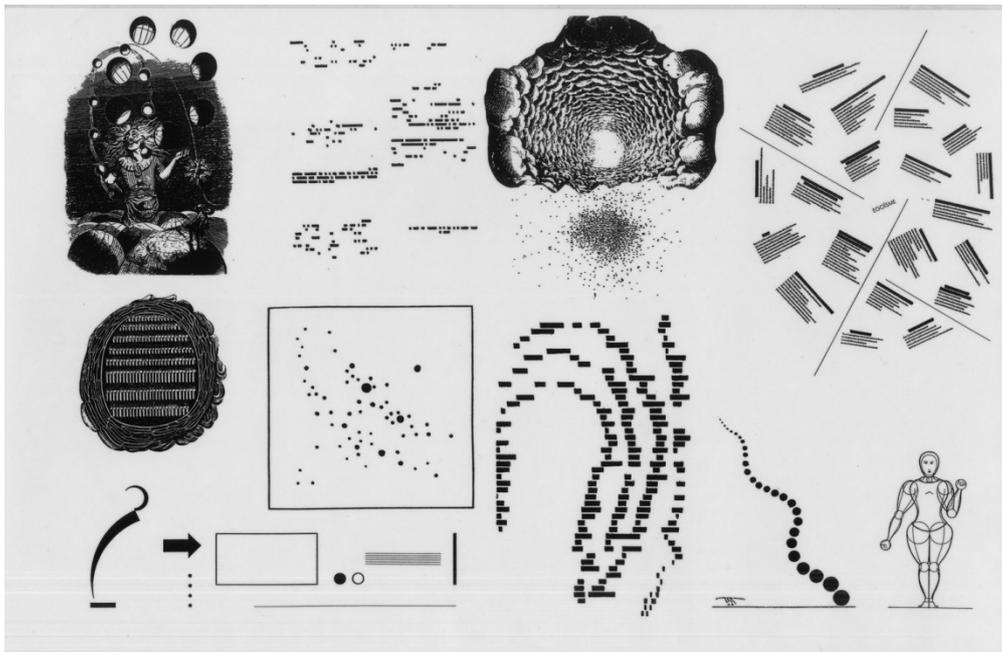


Fig. 1

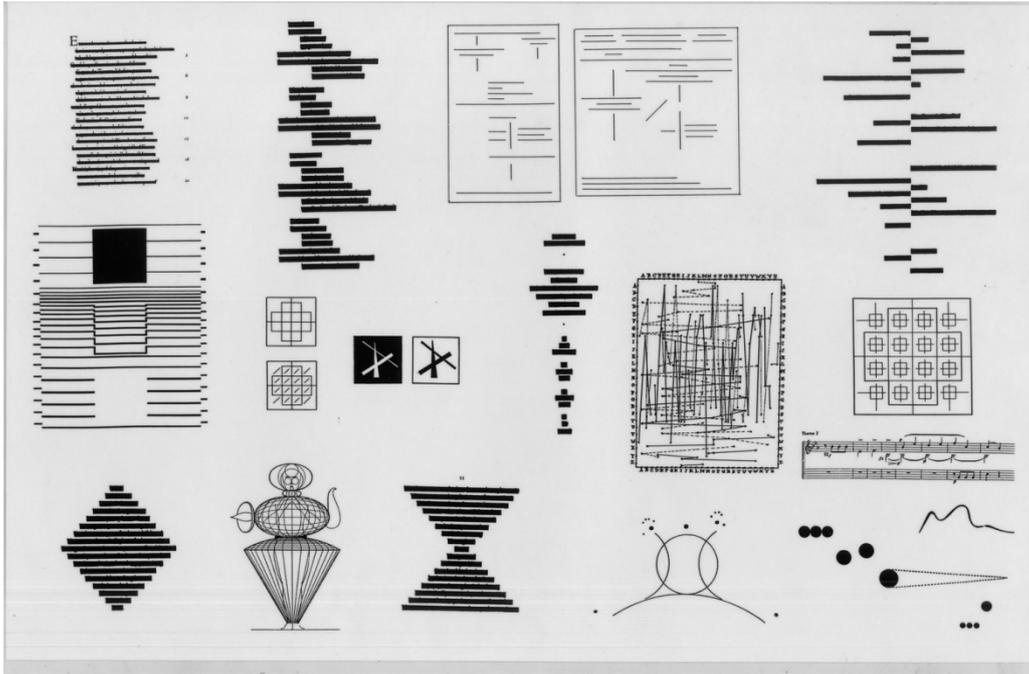


Fig. 2

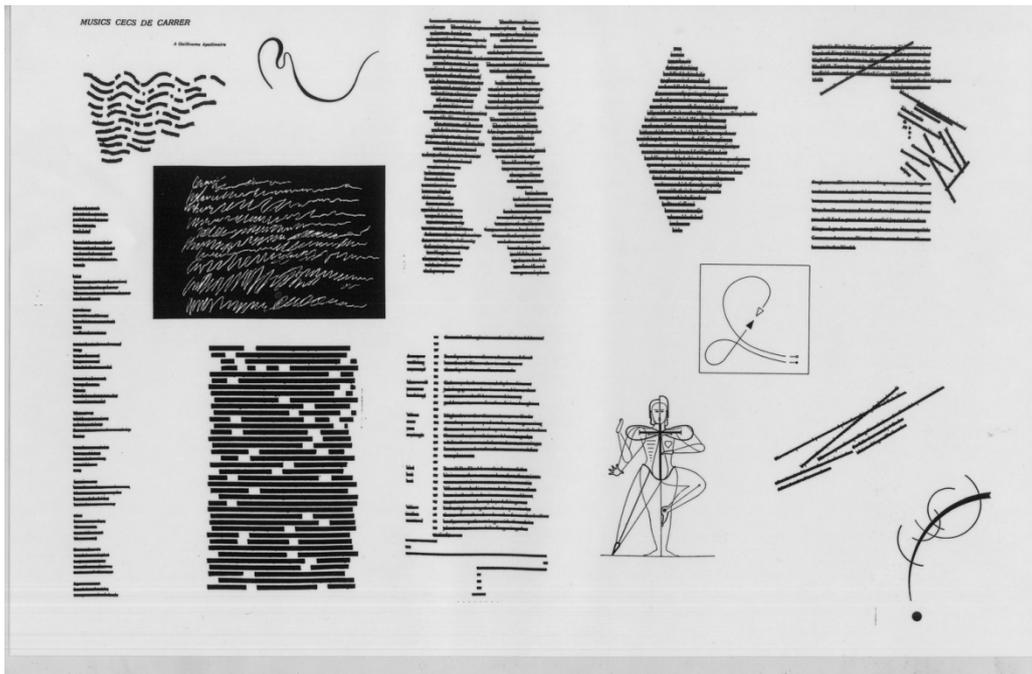


Fig. 3

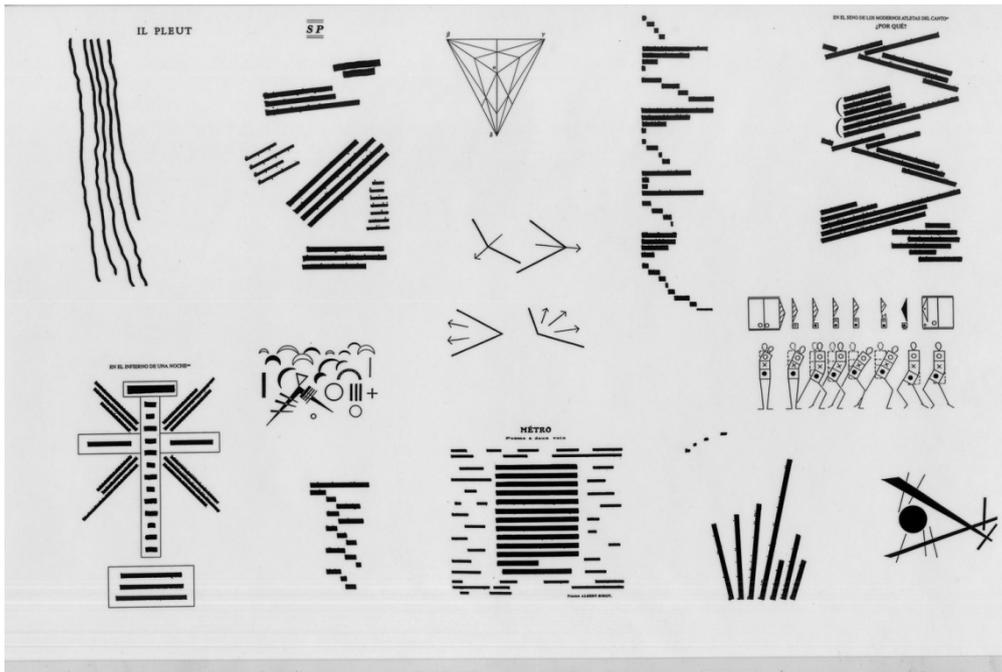


Fig. 4

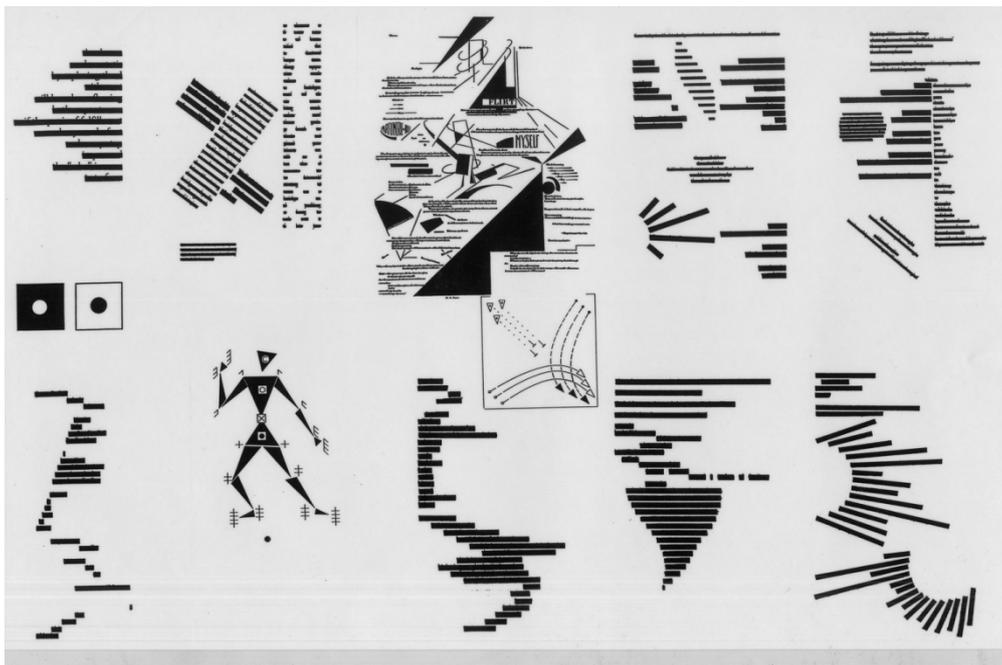


Fig. 5

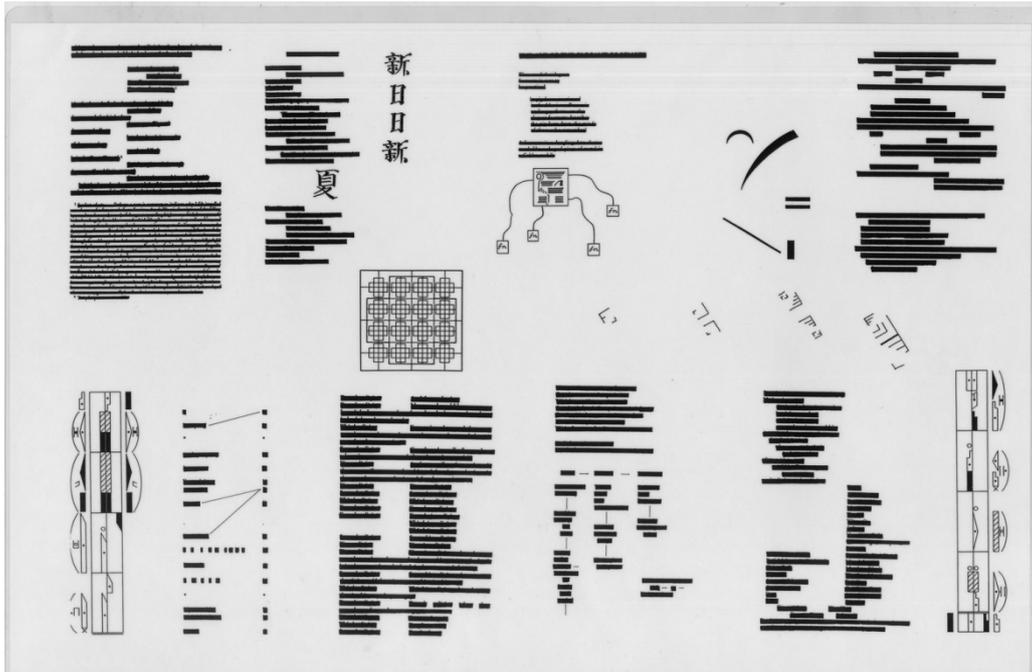


Fig. 6

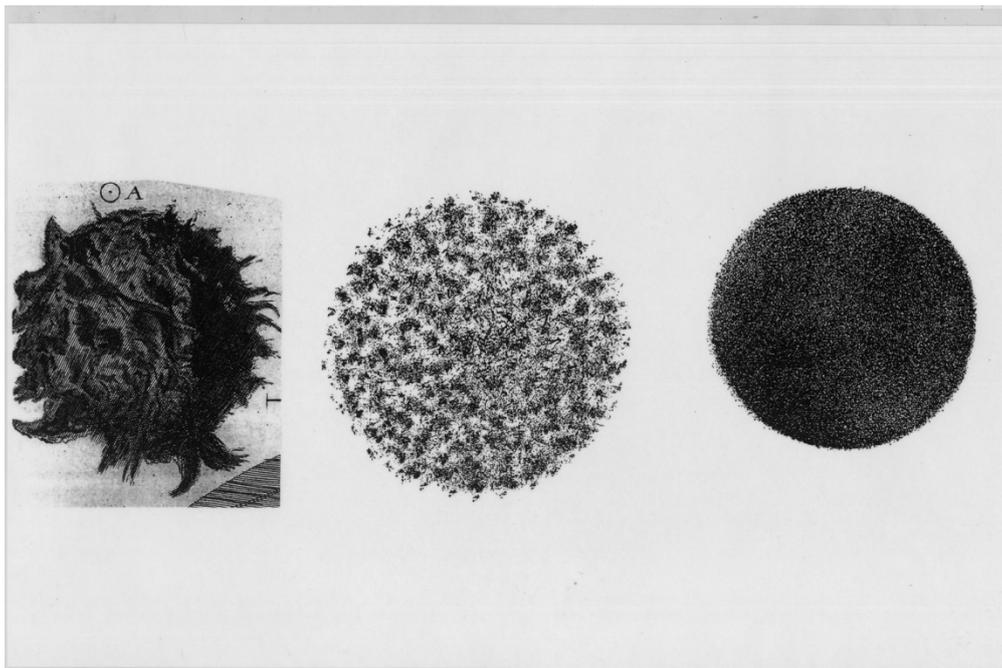


Fig. 7

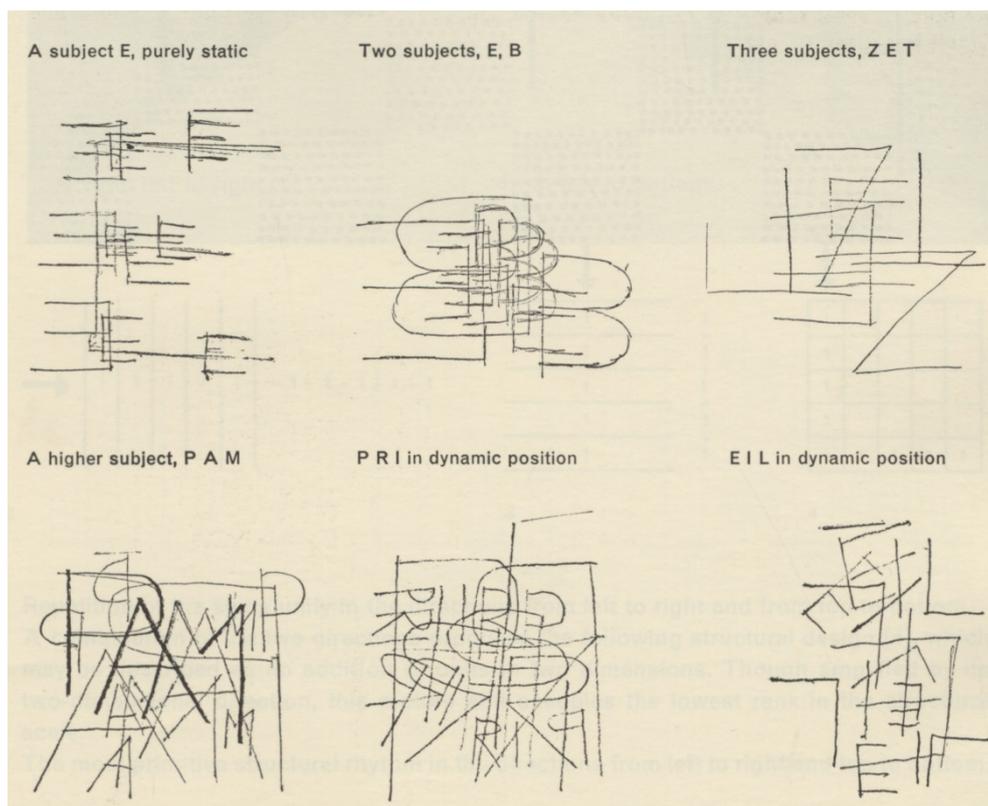


Fig. 8

„Un anumit zgomot”. Spre o „muzică a poeziei”

Acest articol ia în considerare preocuparea lui T. S. Eliot pentru „muzica poeziei”, un subiect la care s-a raportat de-a lungul carierei sale. Primii cititori ai poemului *The Waste Land* au reacționat la un anumit tip de „muzică”. Această muzică, după cum susțin, nu este un simplu indicator al folosirii unor sunete melodioase și al unui mimetism acustic, ci se discerne mai degrabă ca „un anumit zgomot” (după o expresie a lui Joseph Brodsky), un puls de fundal. Pentru a examina acest semnal ritmic, investighez manifestările grafice ale altui poet, Henri Michaux, care a scris versuri și, în egală măsură, a desenat și a pictat un vârtej de linii care adesea împart aceeași pagină cu poemele. Aceste emanații de tip graffiti ne furnizează o redare vizuală a „muzicii poeziei.”