

Time-play-space: playing up the visual in writing

“Perhaps thinking must in future first open the time-play-space for poetising, so that through the poetising word there may again be a wording world.”

Martin Heidegger, “For Eugen Fink on his Sixtieth Birthday.”¹

lightly
falling
time

I want to approach question of the *time* of this might differ when *look* of writing. This am uncertain about the status of some of the modal distinctions implied – as, for example between a ‘visual’ writing and any writing not so called but working through the eye even so – and have a strong intuition that social genres of interaction within which different modes of writing occur, or into which they are placed, may have as much to do with modalities of time as the formal temporality of any specific medium.

very slowly this writing, and how attention is on the might take time. I

I came to the making of ‘visual poems’ as a reader and writer of poetry on and for pages where a page is thought of as one in a folded sequence of leaves in a book or magazine. Poetry for the page has an unbroken line of descent from oral forms, adapting to scriptive and then print literacy and to changes in writing and print technologies. Handwritten and printed poetry draw patterns on pages which a reader encounters before any sounding – actual or imagined – of words begins. Experienced poetry readers take in at a glance a number of spatial features that will translate later

¹ Martin Heidegger *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics: World, Finitude, Solitude* translated by William McNeill and Nicholas Walker (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1995) p.369

into temporal ones: on any occasion of reading off the page the first reading is, in other words, a visual one of a different order from the systematic decoding of the visual signs of alphabetic script². Even at this stage, though, individual words or word clusters, such as those in titles, might catch attention and insist on their immediate legibility – on transporting a reader through or past their material visuality.

The most obvious features of this immediately visual – pre-lexical – legibility are: line lengths, division into blocks, ratio of type to white space, length of poem. Some preliminary sense of letter form might already be in play too. What is also immediately apparent is whether the page is a formal feature of a poem or is simply a given of book media. Many lyric poems are contained within a page or a double-spread. In these cases their *end* is contained before it is encountered: a spatial syllabic journey can be paced within a frame³.

Some readers will also at this stage of (pre-)reading pick out the visual patterning of punctuation marks: will *see* something about syntax, especially perhaps sentence length and clausal complexity, and will anticipate how this plays off against line and stanza breaks. Any such anticipation sets the conditions for reading.

With these introductory remarks I am trying to deflect a misleading distinction between working with visual material, where that material is predominantly linguistic – even perhaps literary – and working with the familiar literary conventions of a page. The history of writing systems, as seen from the point of view of alphabetic writing, has been one of the making of shapes that can be seen (or felt), that recognisably belong to a specific system or set of rules for a writing game. It would be a very different discussion that considered also those forms of writing that are encountered only as sounded or performed – where there may be no visual signs of script or where a script might have been purposefully transcended or suppressed. It would also be a different one if I were discussing visual material that is not *predominantly* linguistic – the use of linguistic signs as elements of compositions within visual art traditions, for example⁴.

In relation to time there are a number of formal distinctions already in play here. All discourse makes, takes and shapes time. In each case it also differentiates itself from the modes of time that surround it, that immediately precede and follow it. Art works whose medium is temporal through and through are severed from other flows of time through markers of *beginning* and *ending*. Others, with no temporal beginning and

² I have discussed this aspect of pre-reading in ‘Eluded Readings: trying to tell stories about reading some recent poems’. This was given as a talk at Birkbeck College, London University on March 26th 2003 and will appear in *The Gig*, 15 (Willowdale, Ontario, 2003).

³ Compare, for example, a page in almost any of the original Tom Raworth books with their appearance in the recent *Collected Poems* (Manchester: Carcanet, 2003). Quite apart – if you can manage the ‘apart’ – from paper, typeface and other differences in the book object, the gaps and blanks – spaces and turnings that are temporal transitions – are unavoidably re-written. It isn’t that one book is ‘visual’ and the other isn’t; it is more that they are very different kinds of visual objects.

⁴ *The Dual Muse: The Writer as Artist · The Artist as Writer* (Exhibition catalogue: Essays by Johanna Drucker and William H. Gass; Introduction by Cornelia Homburg, (St. Louis: Washington University Gallery of Art, 1997) on the whole comes at its stated duality – at least through its images – from the point of view of ‘art’. The essays by Robert Vas Dias and Mark Leahy in the catalogue for the exhibition *Verbal Inter Visual: Linking Worlds of Art and Poetry* (London: Central St Martins, 2001) explore the same ‘confluence’, with more attention to poetry. In both cases the conventions of *exhibition* probably pull the work in the direction of ‘art’.

end of their own – though they may well be severed spatially from their surroundings through border, frame or architectural or topographical placement – invite a temporal negotiation that is their relationship with ‘reader’. These are fundamentally different modes of engagement. What happens when they are brought together?

Forms such as photographs, drawings, paintings can appear to offer everything up *all at once*, allowing for an instantaneous gestalt. The subsequent play of time in, through and across the space then might well feel as though it is the viewer’s⁵. The image allows a viewer to take her or his time, to make time to do so, or not. In contrast, a film and forms of ‘live’ performance whose temporal dimension is fixed in advance invite a viewer or listener to give themselves over to this already shaped time-within-time. The domestication of digital technology is increasingly allowing for some degree of a breaking or re-ordering of this division of temporal power. And then there is the temporality of linguistic texts: sequenced like film or music by virtue of the concatenated structure of language, but open to the varying competences and engagements of readers. Many literary texts are a time-game between text and potential readers: how can the to-be-absent writer shape the way that the time of the text is measured out? Perhaps this question underlies all prosody, if prosody can be taken to include prose in its reach.

Graphic presentations of poems – let us crudely say, in the first place as graphic *re*-presentation of metrical units and then, as a graphic *im*-presentation of breaks in the chain – offer up the poetic *line* as both a measured entity in the continuities (and hesitations) of a text and also as detachable, as having the capacity to float off and be separately legible, out of sequence. As soon as a poem can be read as an assemblage of lines, each line can come close to giving its legibility away to a glancing encounter – can, in its stretched out way, offer itself for something approaching an all-at-once reading.

As I have implied above, my own insights as a practitioner are drawn from a very constrained notion of the ‘visual’ in relation to text, that starts with the page and the line of poetry and not from art school, and that at least until now has relied wholly on domestic computers and a ready supply of high-street frames. The ‘visual’ genres I have worked with have been mainly domestic objects: framed texts, cards and clock faces. My first prompt was wanting to produce a poem as the cover for a book that, given the ratio of line length to average poem length, was to be in landscape format (22.8 x 13.8 5³/₈ cms).⁶ A cover invites a different kind of reading from body-text. In the hurried typology above, it is a visually – that means quasi-pictorially – composed space, usually containing quite separable lines of text. Covers do not insist on a reading whose labour must set out at top-left. Detail is plucked, scanned, browsed. At least two modes of temporality are in play, and each mode is a different kind of variable-time reading.

⁵ Photographs are perhaps the most poignant in the way original light-drawn images are captured at quite specific points in time and yet, once processed – and especially if framed and hung – are open and vulnerable in their exposure to quite different flows of time.

⁶ John Hall *Days* (Pensnett: Grosseteste Review Books, 1972); the cover is reproduced at http://www.shearsman.com/pages/gallery/john_hall/books2.html

There is a way of taking in an exhibition in a kind of *recce*, with the promise (that is often not kept) of a selective return. Exhibitions (unless they are ‘permanent’) take place in calendrical time. Their openings and closings are a matter of public availability in a fixed place for fixed durations. It is the characteristic posture of a book to be *closed*, and characteristically it is the visual presence of the spine that is the opening that marks this specific closedness. So there are image-collections that open and close in somebody else’s time and there are books that, if available, open in *my* time. Unless I am opening one idly ‘just to see’ or opening one to reacquaint myself with some part of it, the act of opening is the first move in a potentially significant – and often daunting – temporal undertaking.

So there are these different kinds of being-there of images and writings that include: being there and open at given times and being there always but closed and awaiting an opening. And there is another that has come to interest me more and more: those domestic images that, like the books in your shelves, are always there and, on the face of it, always open. They contribute in a number of ways to constituting the time of their environment: how it celebrates continuity-through-time (this is always also a loss, of youth if not of life) of its members; how it shows itself (or not) as stratified shards of a history beyond this space; how it appeases or appropriates the dead; how it calls in – as memories that may have no originals – absent places or times.

These images are perched on the surfaces of furniture and equipment or hung on walls. There are no set times in day, month or year for ritualising their presence with some special attention and thereby reactivating whatever force is in them. Some of them glaze over through sheer ever-presentness. Visitors might stoop towards such an image and in doing so re-open it to view for others, and when this happens the image participates in the social time that belongs to modes of hospitality, that has its own shapes and conventions.

This kind of presence of framed images is necessarily visual and spatial – a closed-off framed space that helps shape the space it is in and offers at the same time symbolic openings, through the doubleness of all signs, and through their resemblance to doors and windows, to other spaces that are figured within them. A house is a partitioned enclosure – a spatial environment before it is ‘visual’ – that as an environment can be modulated – every object, every sound, every smell. These framed images are part of this larger composition; sometimes it is enough to sense that they are there.

Their doubleness is temporal as well as spatial. As ‘writings’, in the broader sense on which Derrida insisted, they temporalise through the oscillating delay that is of the essence of writing. They ambiguate time so that it is a medium you are both within and without or stretched from a now and a then towards that always deferred settling of the score.

At some times of year these images are augmented or displaced with the temporary presence of cards marking anniversaries. Cards are (like) miniature books, in that they enclose – fold in – a text that must be opened, though lack of spine insists on frontal display. There is an established order: image on open display, words inside. Of course there can also be words outside, woven into images or sitting under or over as captions. And the words inside are of two orders, usually: those that come with the

card are part of commodity choice, and those personal additions, necessarily hand-written.

There is a tradition too of inscribing a space ('Bless this house', for example, or those joke signs in kitchens). This form of inscription is the opposite of hand-writing. The hand-written card says, as it were: 'This is again your / our time and I hereby acknowledge it; when this marked time is over you will throw these words away, and next year I will send again'. In contrast any formal inscription – carved or embroidered letters, say – places the obduracy of the labour of writing over against time: to throw such words away is an act of violence. They are 'for ever'.

This environment for and of words and images has increasingly attracted me: an infiltration of words marked with their labour into the space both of domestic photographs and of inscriptions which connect homes with other places of public inscription: places that ritualise religion, genealogy, death, state power and law, and that do so in large part within a formal and discursive theme that declares the necessity for social and transcendent continuities *despite* mortality. Whatever their formal means – and they are significant – their temporal situation is *in* this despite and that is where their work goes on.

At the same time, these formal means that are adopted in the visualising and temporalising of domestic space, are promoted and displayed in the standard games of marketing, in which time is mobilised equally as anxiety and promise. And there is now a developing technology for printing, which, in relationship of hand and eye, moves the emphasis from hand to eye, and in doing so casualises monumentalism and public inscription.

For Heidegger, the temporality of Being is a unity made up of the three '*ecstases*' of having-been, making-present, and not-yet., with primacy given to the future. The translators of the 1962 translation of *Being and Time* provide the following gloss on *ecstasis*:

The root-meaning of the word 'ecstasis' (Greek 'έκστασις'; German, 'Ekstase') is 'standing outside'. Used generally in Greek for the 'removal' or 'displacement' of something, it came to be applied to states of mind which we would now call 'ecstatic'. Heidegger usually keeps the root-meaning in mind, but he is also keenly aware of its close connection with the root-meaning of the word 'existence'.⁷

This is how Heidegger leads up to the use of the term:

The future, the character of having been, and the Present, show the phenomenal characteristics of the 'towards-oneself', the 'back-to', and the 'letting-oneself-be-encountered-by'. The phenomena of the "towards...", the "to...", and the "alongside...", make temporality manifest as the *ekstatikon*

⁷ Martin Heidegger *Being and Time* (Oxford et al: Blackwell, 1962), translated by John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson; Footnote 2, p.377

[Greek letters in the original] pure and simple. *Temporality is the primordial 'outside-of-itself' in and for itself.* [Italics in original]⁸

This comes 350 pages into a patient argument that relies on a deliberately repeated use of terms and cannot readily be lifted out of context. Even so I want rather simply-mindedly to follow a few of the indications from the passage from which this excerpt is taken. Heidegger has just argued that 'temporality' is a verb masquerading as a noun; even though it is used as the subject of predication it shouldn't be, because 'temporality temporalizes', it never just 'is'. Taking this together with the notion of the 'ecstatic' which brings together "'outside-of-itself'" with "in and for itself", I want to suggest an interaction between the way any given text *performs* time, in a performance that is 'ecstatic' in relation both to its environment and 'itself', and that engages thereby with temporalities beyond its own. This engagement can be with its 'context of utterance' – its situation, where and between whom it is placed; in association with what other behaviours and texts – and it can be expressed thematically. There is obviously a difference between the performance of time and statements about time.

I used a plural for 'temporalities' just then where I suspect Heidegger would have used an essentialising singular. This is partly because I have no way of feeling certain in the face of a phenomenally transcendent Time and partly because of an awareness that 'our time' is multiply temporalised, however vaguely these temporalities may be sensed.

There can perhaps be some simplifying distinctions: between a time which could loosely be called cosmological (theological, geological, astro-physical, Darwinian – even biological); one that is historical (historiological, perhaps); an order of temporality which is in some sense a time of being and becoming (and therefore too of having-been), and of death; an order which is to do with a quite specific *now* or a quite specific *then* (in which because of the nature of writing – indeed of language – any *now* is already a *then* and any *then* is being recuperated into an already past *now*); and an order which is to do with *taking-time* and shaping it as a medium (how much, how fast, how long, how pulsed (divided into repetition)?

Of course these can be thematised – the earlier ones almost necessarily so - within writing - but themes are relatively promiscuous in relation to forms and formal procedures and I shall try – and fail – in what is to come in this essay to leave aside any predominantly thematic engagements with time.

In relation to everything above, how does a text 'perform time' and what do 'visual materials' have to do with this? To save time I shall be schematic. I shall use, in the spirit of the invitation to participate in this discussion, a piece of my own.. It is a version, adapted for the context of this article, of a visual poem that I made first a few years ago. I should say that I am still working on this because it has only really 'worked' in one frame (Varnished beech; external dimensions: 20 x 25 cms; opening: 8.5 x 13.6 cms). Since I often start with the frame, its shape, size, colour(s) and materials are part of the poem from the outset, not just as an afterthought.

⁸ *ibid*



The characteristics of time that I shall consider include: duration, tempo, fluctuation, variability.

Duration: how long does it last? How long does it *seem* to last? How does the experience of duration it offers provide a point of correspondence with other kinds of experience or sense of duration? How long will it endure (hold off decay, as a printed object)?

Tempo derives from the Latin word for time; in itself it is as an attitude to time and a way of pacing it; it is the experience of time as movement rather than as duration (a stretch between two *thens*, organised as anticipation and memory in relation a moving *now*). ‘Pace’⁹ is a good metaphoric term because it breaks movement into paces, steps. How is the text paced? The word has narrowed its meaning to ‘speed’ but that is only one aspect of pacing and excludes the extended sense of ‘gait’.

Fluctuation: perhaps this word can catch some of the changeable *dynamics* of tempo, its disruptions or flowings in different directions: the irregularities that imply a regularity. Fluctuation is characteristic of a text and is encountered through ‘reading’.

Variability allows for different time relations between text and ‘reader’.

So how can these terms help understand the time-being of the visual poem above? I shall run them across a different set of headings: grammatical time, prosodic time, lexical time and discursive time. I hope to subsume under these headings two others: structural (or architectonic) time, and, of course, themed time.

Grammatical time: grammar has little to do with duration except in so far – and that is quite far – as a sentence has duration, as a sentence insists on the significance of its duration. ‘Loss in blossom’ is a noun phrase making use of a familiar ‘x in y’ structure. It carries no grammatical setters or markers of time – no verbs (and therefore no marked tense), no adverbs or adjectives of time; its preposition ‘in’ can be temporal (though is more often spatial, perhaps). In its temporal mode ‘in’ can be a ‘now’ marker: ‘It *is* the time when loss is in blossom’.

Syntax performs time by performing through time in the linear operation of word order. Syntax has tempo, relating to complexity (and also always borrowing from its discursive context – for example the tempo of preceding sentences); and complexity also produces fluctuation. Although not a completed sentence, ‘Loss in blossom’ can count as complete in discourse on the analogy of a caption or title. Syntactically, I suggest, this does not lack, does not frustrate, does not suffer from the loss of a verb. If treated as an ellipse, there are two easy solutions, carrying different meanings: ‘Loss is in blossom’ or ‘There is loss in blossom’.

⁹ Meaning 6 in the OED gives: ‘any one of the various gaits or manners of the stepping of a horse’; and 7: ‘Rate of stepping; rate of progression...’. ‘Gait’ would do well as an alternative for pace; or that specific sense of a ‘going’, when applied to the gait rather than the state of the track.

Also, another form of syntax is invoked, one that is pictorial rather than linguistic: the compositional space of a defined rectangle announces wholeness every bit as resoundingly as any rounded-off sentence and brings with it centuries of expectations about two-dimensional spatial order.

So what does this all this mean for syntactical time? As the person who made it I have to be careful here. What I think it does is send it back to itself so that the reading can be done at a glance and yet never be over. The phrase has a beginning and end but is so short that it has ended before it has begun. The containment of pictorial space (at least partially) absolves the phrase from the drive to become sentence.

Prosodic time: This is a poem in four lines, having an uncertain number of syllables (four or five – how do you treat the ‘b’ in line 2? Do you sound it at all? Is it ‘Beh’? Do you slide or elide into loss? Or do you do all of these in another act that sends you back?), with 13 letters. It is the equivalent of the first two feet of a single pentameter line. Its prosody, in common with all page poetry, is both graphic and phonic but it leads with the graphic so that letter form (Century Gothic), letter size (44 point), line-breaking, character spacing, justification, are all part of its matrix of decisions. Character spacing and justification are intended to create an inner rectangle of letters to declare its fit (its rhyme) with the rectangle of the frame. Two of the four(?) syllables are identical, pointing up a strong rhyme. There is an assonantal relationship between the short ‘o’ of ‘loss’ and that in ‘o m’.

The 13 letters are made up as follows: four ‘s’s, three ‘o’s, two ‘l’s, one ‘b’, one ‘i’ one ‘m’ and one ‘n’. This means that actually only seven different letters are used, with considerable repetition. Below is the lower-case alphabet in Century Gothic, highlighting the used letters. It is a type-face of deliberate design simplicity.¹⁰

abcde fghijklmnopqrstu vwxyz

The letters chosen are either formed through uprights (l, i), rounds and part-rounds (o, s) or a combination of the two (b, m, n). Many others could have been used within these constraints. The following are outside the range in that they contain straight horizontals and diagonals: e, f, k, t, v, w, x, y, z.

Two colours are used, one for figure, one for ground. They are ‘simple’ colours.

This is as tight and as enclosed a double prosody as could be expected. It does not itself in any way stretch time so much as assert its own spatial repeatability. Perhaps there is not so much fluctuation as oscillation: colour vibration in association with an oscillation between text / between-text / text / between-text, and so on. The piece is always there. It is for a reader to enter it and then, having entered, to leave, if only temporarily: this is its variability.

¹⁰ I should say that I have made versions of the piece using other fonts, including one with light serifs and distorted rounds.

Lexical time (etymological and intertextual): Of course individual words, as syllables and combinations of syllables, have duration and tempo. This makes it possible for poems to consist of single words. But that is a consideration for prosody. As lexical items they only work – and only produce fluctuations – because they have done time, because they have accrued meaning and force through usage and association; they bring this with them by appealing to prior knowledge, by putting the dispersed having-beens of linguistic items up against the linguistic having-been of a ‘reader’.

In this case there is a vocabulary of three words, though the prosodic arrangement might trouble the certainty of that statement. Is ‘om’ supposed to be a word here? After all T.S.Eliot used it in one of the best known (modernist) poems of the early twentieth century. And what about ‘bloss’? Does it sound like a word? Or is that just because it is so like ‘bless’ and ‘bliss’ – ideas that may seem to have natural affinity with ‘blossom’. These neighbouring words are also neighbours in the room where one framed version of the poem hangs and another sits.

If any of this querying occurs in a reading (and I don’t mean one that sets out with exacting critical and analytic attention) then there is lexical fluctuation, never resolvable, present to every circuit of the reading.

But what of the words that are certainly there: ‘loss’, ‘in’ and ‘blossom’. In the terms of this discussion the word that oscillates most for me is ‘in’, a preposition of space and time. As a preposition of time it is as *present* as any preposition can be (too punctual a present to allow for the continuities of ‘during’). It suggests ‘now’, but also carries that intimate spatiality of ‘within’.

A term like ‘in’, though, is not usually experienced (leaving language mechanics like poets and linguists aside here) as having a history. I assume that it is treated as having a workaday function. The other two words are, I suspect, encountered as ‘steeped’ and as ‘poetic’; as word-objects they carry a sense of having been around and both semantically allude to time. ‘Loss’ is a melancholy or mournful relationship with the past¹¹. ‘Blossom’ is (*stands for*, in popular usage) an annual, transient occurrence of bliss. As words they carry etymological and intertextual time; as semantic items they thematise it.

Discursive time: what is the discursive context for this ‘thematization’ – a grand term indeed for three words? I try to write as a reader now! Perhaps there are two epigrams – in other words two condensed and elliptical arguments worked into each other and borrowing off each other. One is a little aperçu: that the linguistic sequence ‘l-o-s-s’ doubles – both graphically and phonetically - as the word ‘loss’ and as a sounded element of the word ‘blossom’. The same could be said of ‘colossal’, as another example. But here it is ‘blossom’ and not ‘colossal’. So the other epigram is about a most familiar seasonal cycle: the transitoriness or fragility of blossom, that is enjoyed always with the poignancy of love for the about-to-be-lost. There is, of course, a long and strong tradition of poems on this topic¹², with a choice of moral.

¹¹ I want to relegate to a footnote the obvious comment that *loss* is a concept central to at least one ‘world religion’ and also to psychoanalysis.

¹² About the same number of miles as centuries from where I write this, Robert Herrick in *To Daffadils*, for example.

I have already touched on the social discursive context for the framed versions of this poem that I have made. One hangs and one sits where family photographs might be found. I don't want to suggest that there is a single performative for family photographs and paintings, mantelpiece objects, paintings of scenes, but there is no doubt that one is to *bless*. Blissful images of a past act as charms towards the future: to bless individuals, to bless the collective *family*, to bless this *house*, this place that enacts the continuities of loved beings, even of genealogies.

The etymological note on 'bless' in the OED marks a convergence between a Teutonic term meaning "to mark (or affect in some way) with blood (or sacrifice); to consecrate" with the Latin term *benedicere*, (etymologically) "to speak well of". "At a very early date", the note goes on, "the popular etymological consciousness began to associate this verb with the n. BLISS 'benignity, blitheness, joy, happiness, which affected the use of both terms.'"



standing
a
part
in bliss

This poem – loss in blossom - has a companion piece, filed in its directory as 'ecstasy', and produced well before my reading of Heidegger.

There is an awkwardness in this lexical history, carried in the word 'bless' and transferred to 'bliss', that wishes, as it were, to cover a wound of sacrifice with a speaking well. And then there is an insertion into and invocation of the specific discursive context of *home*, where the fit might too be awkward, where the taken-for-grantedness of an established (though troubled) temporality might just be further troubled by a speaking well that confounds itself, by a speaking that repeats itself.

Have you seen? Have you read? Do you see? In the present tense of a seeing that all the same takes time?

John Hall
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