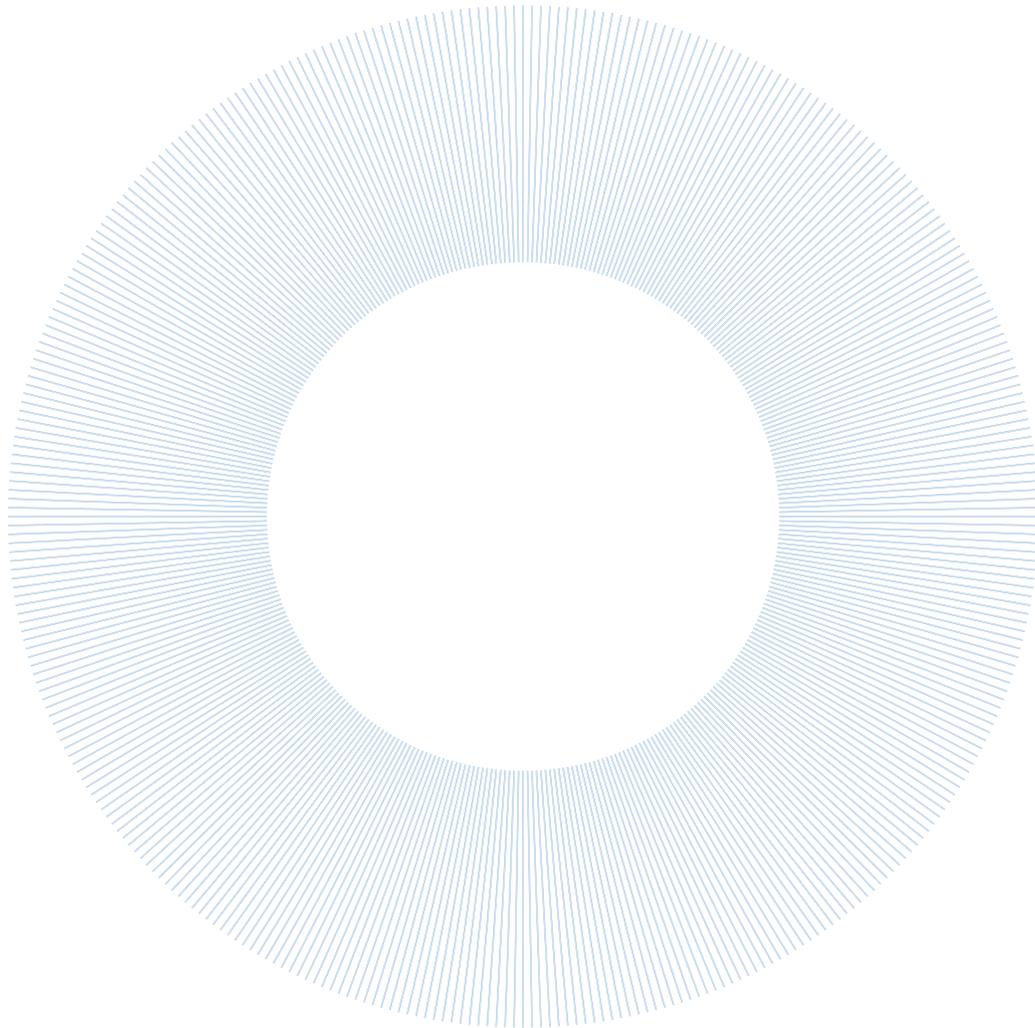


Visual Poetry in France after Apollinaire



Willard Bohn

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VISUAL POETRY IN FRANCE AFTER APOLLINAIRE

For all intents and purposes, visual poetry can be defined as poetry that is meant to be seen – poetry that presupposes a viewer as well as a reader. In contrast to traditional poetry, visual poems are conceived not only as literary works but also as works of art. Whether the visual elements form a rudimentary pattern or whether they constitute a highly sophisticated design, they transform the poem into a picture. Visual poetry itself has a long and fascinating history, going back to ancient Greece and perhaps even earlier. Around 1914 it experienced a dramatic rebirth and began to interest poets and painters, who were intrigued by its possibilities and who have experimented with it endlessly ever since. Between 1914 and 1918, when he died at the age of only 38, Guillaume Apollinaire created approximately 150 visual poems, which he called calligrammes. Following his impressive example, many poets experimented with visual poetry in France following and even during the First World War.

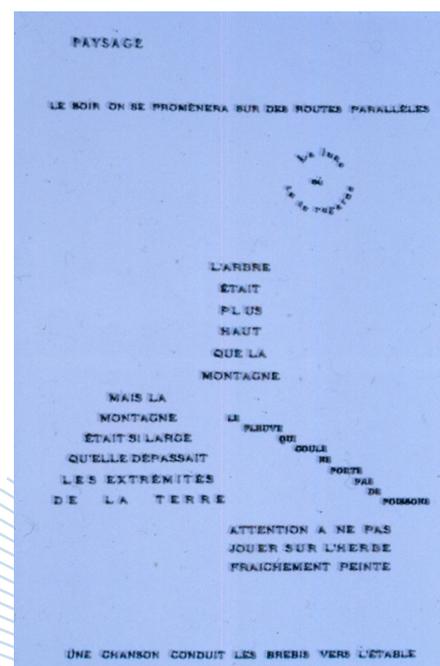


Vicente Huidobro

As many critics have observed, the Chilean author Vicente Huidobro decisively influenced the development of modern Spanish poetry. Arriving in the Iberian capital in July 1918, where he spent the next five months, he exhorted the young poets to abandon traditional forms and to embrace an exciting new aesthetic. ‘Su venida a Madrid,’ Rafael Cansinos-Asséns later recalled, ‘fue el único acontecimiento literario del año, porque con él pasaron por nuestro meridiano las últimas tendencias estéticas del extranjero’ (‘His arrival in Madrid was the sole literary event of the year, because he brought with him the latest aesthetic tendencies from abroad’) (Cansinos-Asséns, 1927, p. 195). In particular, Huidobro urged his fellow poets to emulate the French poets, who were experimenting with something called ‘literary cubism.’ Since he had spent the previous year in Paris, where he published a volume of cubist poetry himself, he spoke with considerable authority. In addition, Huidobro brought numerous examples of the new poetry with him.

Sandwiched in among the French books were copies of Huidobro’s latest volume of poetry, entitled *Horizon carré* (*Square Horizon*). Although most of the visual effects are unremarkable, one composition exploits pictorial conventions in a spectacular fashion.

Dedicated to Pablo Picasso, ‘Paysage’ (‘Landscape’) juxtaposes five separate pictograms to create a verbo-visual painting. The latter depicts a moonlit scene consisting of a grassy meadow, a huge mountain, a



cascading river, a tall tree and the moon itself. Compared to subsequent experiments by other poets, the typographical effects seem crude and relatively inexpressive. The poem is composed entirely of capital letters except for the image of the moon, whose graceful outline is rendered in lower case letters. Through ignorance or inadvertence, the (silent) 's' in 'regardes' was originally omitted. The six remaining phrases utilize two different fonts as building blocks. The larger capitals, which connote solidity and weight, make up the tree, the meadow, and the mountain. The smaller capitals are reserved for more fluid objects such as the song and the river. Except for the moon, which is immediately recognizable, the visual images are far from realistic. The tree reminds one of a massive chess piece, the mountain looks like an Aztec pyramid, and the river resembles a floating staircase. Like the visual analogies cultivated by the Italian Futurists, the images are essentially schematic. Eventually, after repeated scrutiny, one realizes that the visual effects are deliberate rather than accidental. Huidobro is not interested in creating realistic portraits of the objects but rather, like Picasso before him, in reducing them to their geometric equivalents. Looming over the entire collection, the book's title, *Horizon carré*, establishes the basic paradigm at the very beginning. Like the horizon, which is normally circular, the objects in the poem have been modified to conform to Cubist aesthetics.

Surprisingly, for a poem that doubles as a painting, 'Paysage' is structured according to verbal conventions. Despite its radical premises, which privilege visual images over linguistic constructions, it adheres to the traditional model. By shifting the poem's title to the left, where it marks the starting point, Huidobro explicitly recognizes this fact. As in traditional poetry, the reader begins at the upper left-hand corner and descends the page line by line. Like a professional typist (or a person eating an ear of corn), one continues from left to right, within the confines of the individual figures, until one reaches the bottom of the page. This strategy is so firmly established that it even governs the decipherment of the moon. Instead of proceeding smoothly in a clockwise direction, as visual conventions would dictate, the reader divides the phrase into three horizontal lines: 'La lune / où / tu te regarde[s].' The process described above yields the following poem:

LANDSCAPE
 IN THE EVENING WE WILL STROLL DOWN PARALLEL PATHS
 The moon in which you look at yourself
 THE TREE WAS HIGHER THAN THE MOUNTAIN
 BUT THE MOUNTAIN WAS SO WIDE IT PROJECTED
 BEYOND THE EARTH'S EDGES
 THE FLOWING RIVER CONTAINS NO FISH
 DO NOT PLAY ON THE FRESHLY PAINTED GRASS
 A SONG LEADS THE SHEEP TOWARD THE STABLE.

The first thing one notices is that the poem depends primarily on its visual dimension for its sense. It is not a description of a particular scene so much as a presentation of the scene itself. At the same time, since the latter is highly stylized, the reader remains continually aware of its verbal foundation. Indeed, several images cannot be identified without resorting to verbal clues. Only the moon and the river are readily apparent. Working his or her way through the text, the reader discovers what seems to be a typical pastoral scene. Bathed in moonlight, two lovers stroll side-by-side enjoying the natural setting around them. Paralleling their path, a shepherd sings to himself in the distance as he leads his flock home for the night. These details allow us to situate the poem fairly precisely. The scene takes place somewhere in the countryside either at dusk or in the early evening. The reason the tree is higher than the mountain seems to be because it is growing on top of it. This detail is more apparent in a later (authorized?) version of the poem, published in the *Dada Almanach* three years later, in which the tree is positioned directly above the mountain (Huelsenbeck, 1920,

p. 156). That the latter is so absurdly wide simply indicates that it blocks a large part of the speaker's view. Suspended high overhead, the moon contains a double (implicit) metaphor. On the one hand, Huidobro compares the bright disc to a circular mirror, on the other, to the face of the speaker's sweetheart reflected in the mirror. Like the heavenly orb, her beautiful countenance is positively radiant. However, the theme of the reciprocal gaze also operates on another level. For as the woman looks at the moon, the moon unexpectedly looks back at her. Huidobro saves a single word for the center of the circle, where it represents the pupil of an enormous eyeball looking down at us.

The two concluding images interrupt the previous reverie and introduce a discordant note. For some reason, the river cascading down the mountainside does not contain any fish – perhaps it is too polluted or perhaps they have all been caught. In addition, the meadow in the foreground turns out to be completely illusory. Close inspection reveals that what looks like grass is actually green paint. At this point, we perceive we are looking not at a natural scene but at an artistic rendering of a natural scene. The reason the river is devoid of fish, one realizes, is because it is not a real river. Like the elusive meadow, it is an artistic creation. 'Paysage' depicts a landscape all right, but it depicts a landscape *painting*. The horizontal lines at the top and bottom represent the edges of the picture, which in the *Dada Almanach* is signed at the bottom. Huidobro has chosen to exploit the title's ambiguity in order to explore and contrast different modes of representation. The composition consists essentially of a verbal pun that has been raised to the visual level. Instead of a picture poem, it proves to be a picture-of-a-picture poem. Instead of a poem that functions as a painting, it proves to be a poem that functions as a painting of a painting. Like Apollinaire's poem of the same name, on which it is partially modeled, 'Paysage' creates a deliberate confusion between illusion and reality. The alternation between three different tenses (another Cubist trait) adds to this confusion and emphasizes the work's virtual dimension. Suspended between the past, the present, and the future, 'Paysage' occupies an existential limbo.

André Breton

While André Breton is best known as the founder (or co-founder) of the Surrealist movement, his first attempts at writing poetry were far from revolutionary. Like most French poets at the beginning of the 20th century, he chose to write in the Symbolist mode. However, other poets were experimenting with a new kind of poetry, one that reflected recent advances in communication and transportation. Breton was attracted to both schools and developed close ties to their respective leaders. A tug of war ensued between Paul Valéry, the leader of the Symbolists, and Guillaume Apollinaire, the leader of the avant-garde, who convinced Breton to join him and his friends (Balakian, 1974, pp. 42-53). Although Apollinaire succumbed to the Spanish flu a few years later, he was one of the key formative influences in the younger poet's life (Bohn, 2002, pp. 121-39). Inspired by *Calligrammes*, for instance, Breton briefly experimented with visual effects in his own poetry. Published in *Dada* in March 1920, one of the more captivating experiments was entitled 'Pièce fausse' (Figure 1).

The first thing one notices is that the vase evoked in the first line is depicted visually. Unfortunately, since the text is rarely printed on a single page, many readers have failed to grasp this fact. For that matter, most editors have also been oblivious to the poem's visual appearance. In both the *Oeuvres complètes* and the current edition of *Clair de terre (Earthshine)*, the text occupies the opposite sides of the same leaf. The reader must turn the page to finish the poem, obscuring the visual image in the process. The latter does not portray just any vase, moreover, but one that is made of crystal. 'As a hyperbole of

verre [glass],’ Michael Riffaterre notes, ‘*cristal* amplifies senses such as *transparence* [and] *fragility*’ (Riffaterre, 1983, p. 50). Since Breton employs solid instead of outlined forms, the vase’s transparency can only be imagined. The fact that it is fragile, however, is confirmed by its physical appearance. In addition, the word ‘crystal’ conjures up visions of elegance. Since the vase is tall and graceful, it conforms to this prescription as well. It is not made of ordinary crystal, finally, but of the very best – crystal that comes from Bohemia. This last fact suggests that the vase is expensive.

Du vase en cristal de Bohême
 Du vase en cris
 Du vase en cris
 Du vase en
 En cristal
 Du vase en cristal de Bohême
 Bohême
 Bohême
 En cristal de Bohême
 Bohême
 Bohême
 Bohême
 Hême hême oui Bohême
 Du vase en cristal de Bo Bo
 Du vase en cristal de Bohême
 Aux bulles qu’enfant tu soufflais
 Tu soufflais
 Tu soufflais
 Flais
 Flais
 Tu soufflais
 Qu’enfant tu soufflais
 Du vase en cristal de Bohême
 Aux bulles qu’enfant tu soufflais
 Tu soufflais
 Tu soufflais
 Oui qu’enfant tu soufflais
 C’est là c’est là tout le poème
 Aube éphé
 Aube éphé
 Aube éphémère de reflets
 Aube éphé
 Aube éphé
 Aube éphémère de reflets.

Figure 1: Pièce fausse.

‘Pièce fausse’ is governed by two basic principles: repetition and redundancy. Fragments of each line are repeated over and over as the poem progresses. While Jean-Gérard Lapacherie compares this phenomenon to stuttering, in reality it resembles a series of echoes (Lapacherie, 1985, pp. 16-20). It stems not from Breton’s inability to express himself but from his decision to employ two complementary strategies, one visual, and the other verbal. The phrases and bits of phrases make splendid building blocks, for example, with which to construct the visual image. In addition, they enable Breton to parody another genre in a different medium. Since the poem was published in Dada, one wonders initially if it was not simply a hoax – something

designed to *épater la bourgeoisie*. Although this was undoubtedly one of its functions, sooner or later its main purpose dawns on the reader. 'Pièce fausse' is meant to be a parody – a parody of an operatic aria. The reason repetition plays such an important role is because it has an operatic structure. Breton may even have had a particular opera in mind. Internal evidence suggests that he sought to parody *La Bohème*, composed in 1896 by Giacomo Puccini.

At this point, it is useful to consider the poem's title: 'Pièce fausse' ('False Piece'). As Lapacherie declares, 'le titre est révélateur des intentions satiriques de Breton. Il constitue un 'programme' de lecture et met le lecteur sur la voie d'une interprétation dérisoire' ('The title is indicative of Breton's satiric intentions. It constitutes a reading 'program' and encourages the reader to adopt a derisory interpretation') (Lapacherie, 1985, p. 18). Although *pièce* can designate a number of different objects, coupled with *fausse* it refers most obviously to a coin (*pièce de monnaie*). The fact that the latter is 'false,' however, means that it represents a counterfeit coin. And since money is not mentioned anywhere in the poem, it is clearly a metaphor for something else, something Breton feels is illegitimate. Lapacherie argues that the poem's scorn is directed at its own physical appearance and, by implication, at Apollinaire's calligrams. Instead of attempting to imitate painters, he adds, Breton believed poets should explore the possibilities of poetic language. As proof, he points out that 'Pièce fausse' is composed of four octosyllabic verses rhyming ABAB:

From the crystal vase from Bohemia
To the bubbles as a child that you blew
There you have there you have the whole poem
Ephemeral dawn of reflections.

Breton reduces the calligrams to a childish game, Lapacherie asserts, to soap bubbles blown by a group of children. Visual poetry is depicted as an illusion, as an ephemeral dawn of reflections.

Despite its radical appearance, 'Pièce fausse' turns out to be surprisingly traditional at heart. As the editors of the Pléiade edition point out, the central quatrain was borrowed from an earlier poem entitled 'Camaïeu' ('Cameo') (Breton, 1988, p. 41). Written in 1914 during Breton's Symbolist period, it resembles a number of compositions by Mallarmé. By 1920, when he created 'Pièce fausse,' Breton had embraced Dada and was on the brink of inventing Surrealism. Poetry itself had evolved to the point that it was no longer recognizable. Viewed from this vantage point, Breton's previous efforts must have seemed hopelessly old-fashioned. Why, one wonders, did he decide to resurrect a poem from his earlier period? And why did he select this stanza instead of another one? Sooner or later the answer to the first question dawns on the reader. Breton chose 'Camaïeu' precisely because the poem was so old-fashioned. As it appears in 'Pièce fausse,' the stanza constitutes an object of derision. Breton deliberately mocks himself and his earliest poetry. The title reveals his satiric intentions, as Lapacherie says, but these are directed at the text instead of the visual image. The poem does not criticize Apollinaire's calligrams but rather takes them as its point of departure.

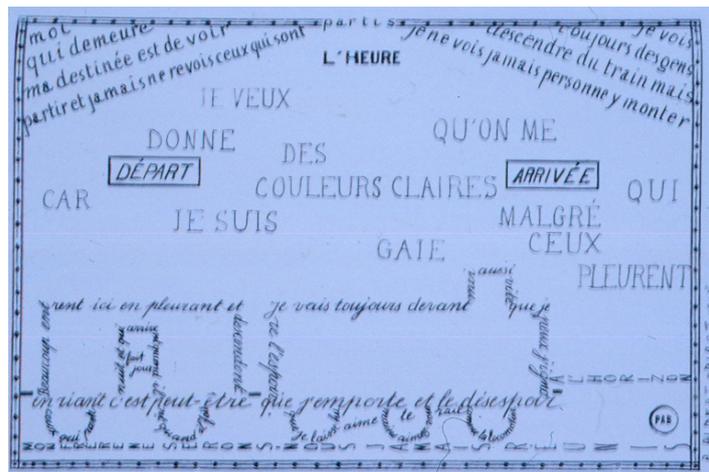
Nevertheless, 'Pièce fausse' is much more than an exercise in self-flagellation. Although Breton deplors his youthful folly, his derision is aimed primarily at another target. The reason he chose this particular stanza, to answer a previous question, is because it summarizes the Symbolist aesthetic. In contrast to the Parnassian poets, who equated poetry with sculpture, the Symbolists strove to capture fleeting impressions and delicate moods. Mallarmé advised his colleagues to 'peindre, non la chose, mais l'effet qu'elle produit' ('depict, not the thing, but the effect it produces') (Mallarmé, 1959, p. 137). Like the crystal vase in the first verse, the soap bubbles in the second symbolize delicate beauty. Unlike the vase, whose multiple facets sparkle with light, the bubbles only last for a moment. These two attributes – the

play of light and evanescence – reappear in the final verse: ‘Aube éphémère de reflets,’ which is auto-illustrative. The phrase simultaneously defines and represents Symbolist poetry. Ironically, as Louis Aragon observed, ‘Pièce fausse’ represents ‘[une] rupture d’avec la vieillesse poétique’ (‘[a] break with obsolete poetic conventions’) (Aragon, 1968, p. 9). Since Breton is denouncing the Symbolist enterprise, the verse is an example of how *not* to write poetry. Thus ‘Pièce fausse’ turns out to contain two counterfeit coins: his early poetry and Symbolist aesthetics.

Pierre Albert-Birot

The editor of a journal entitled SIC (*Sons, Idées, Couleurs*), which appeared from 1916 to 1919, Pierre Albert-Birot, was a man of many talents. An active playwright, painter and set designer, he also published a number of visual poems. One of the most interesting examples depicts a locomotive and a passenger car standing in a railroad station.

The fact that it is surrounded by an elaborate frame emphasizes its status as a pictorial artifact. Functioning as the composition’s title, ‘L’HEURE’ (‘THE HOUR’) represents the large clock that was the central fixture of every railroad station. Among other things, the scene



recalls Claude Monet’s paintings of the Gare Saint-Lazare in Paris. At the top of the page, four diagonal lines of text on either side represent the station’s peaked roof.

I / who remain / my destiny
is to see / those who have left
and to never see them / again

I always / see people / getting
off the train but / I never see
anyone getting on

THE HOUR

I WOULD LIKE TO HAVE SOME PALE COLORS

DEPARTURE

ARRIVAL

I AM GAY DESPITE THOSE WHO ARE CRYING

Since the roof-beams are situated on opposite sides of the station, their perspective is severely limited. Those on the left only see passengers who are leaving, and those on the right, passengers who are arriving. Inevitably, each experience is destined to be incomplete. The words in large capitals in the middle of the page seem to be spoken by the station. Perhaps

because it is gay at heart, the building yearns to be redecorated in pastel shades. That people are crying comes as a bit of a surprise until one examines the composition more closely. Since the passenger car is stationed in front of the departure sign, the train must be preparing to leave. As the time to depart approaches, the air is filled with sudden tears and emotional goodbyes. Deciphering the train itself, which is outlined in cursive script, poses a series of new problems. The complicated visual demands placed on the poet by the composition (and vice versa) ensured that little attention would be paid to its verbal requirements. Although a correct reading strategy does exist, it violates the reader's expectations at every turn. The only way to proceed is through trial and error.

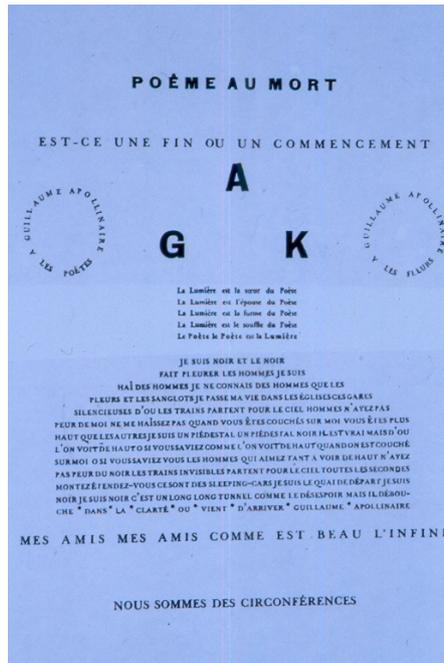
The first problem that confronts the reader is deciding where to begin. Although it is tempting to tackle the passenger car first, since it is on the left, the fact that the locomotive's message begins with a larger capital signals this as the place to start. Since the locomotive pulls the rest of the train, this strategy makes perfectly good sense. The reader basically proceeds in a clockwise direction, rotating the page to the left or the right as necessary. While the transition between the top of the drawing and its right side is relatively smooth, the message suddenly breaks off. Casting around for the missing fragment, one discovers that it constitutes the figure's left side. Thereafter, the reader performs the same operation on the passenger car, which differs from the locomotive in one important respect. Its lower edge extends all the way across the page, forming the locomotive's lower edge as well. The poet adopts a smaller font for the remainder of the train, which makes it harder to read. Proceeding from left to right, one deciphers the passenger car's left wheel, the door, the right wheel, and each of the wheels belonging to the locomotive. The last three words form a primitive connecting-rod joining the latter's wheels together. Despite a few grammatical irregularities, the text reads as follows:

*I go straight ahead as fast as I / can I igno / re hope
 Many people en / ter crying and / exit / laughing
 perhaps I take it and despair away
 those who depart at night and arrive when it is day
 I leave you to your destiny
 love each other as the locomotive loves the rails.*

The first message is uttered by the locomotive, which is proud of its tremendous power and speed. Oblivious to human distractions such as love and hope, it eagerly plunges ahead, determined to reach its destination. The second message is uttered by the passenger car, which is proud of the security and comfort it offers. By the end of the journey, the tearful goodbyes have been forgotten and the passengers are thoroughly enjoying themselves. Travel by train is not only pleasurable, the speaker observes, but positively therapeutic. The last three lines are addressed to passengers traveling at night, whom, for some reason, Albert-Birot enjoins to love each other. On the one hand, he may be thinking of lovers running off together to start a new life. On the other, he may be referring to people traveling over night to visit loved ones. Stretching 'TO THE HORIZON,' the rails at the bottom of the page echo the poet's own thoughts: 'MY BROTHER WILL WE NEVER SEE EACH OTHER AGAIN [?]'.

Apollinaire's tragic death in 1918 profoundly affected the members of the French avant-garde, who suddenly found themselves without a leader. Since Albert-Birot had worked so closely with him, his personal sense of loss was especially great. Entitled '**POÈME AU MORT**' ('**POEM TO THE DECEASED**') in heavy boldface letters, the first composition depicts the poet's funeral at the Église Saint-Thomas-d'Aquin on November 13, 1918.

Resting on a massive bier, Apollinaire's coffin is crowned by three photographs draped in black crêpe and flanked by two large funerary wreaths.



IS IT AN END OR A BEGINNING
 FOR **A** FOR
 GUILLAUME APOLLINAIRE THE POETS **G K** GUILLAUME APOLLINAIRE THE FLOWERS

Light is the Poet's sister
 Light is the Poet's wife
 Light is the Poet's form
 Light is the Poet's breath
 The Poet the Poet is Light

I AM BLACK AND BLACK
 CAUSES PEOPLE TO CRY I AM
 HATED BY MANKIND ALL I KNOW OF MANKIND IS
 TEARS AND SOBS I SPEND MY LIFE IN CHURCHES THOSE SILENT
 RAILROAD STATIONS FROM WHICH TRAINS LEAVE FOR HEAVEN MEN DO
 NOT BE AFRAID OF ME DO NOT HATE ME WHEN YOU REST ON ME YOU ARE
 HIGHER THAN EVERYONE I AM A PEDESTAL A BLACK PEDESTAL TRUE BUT
 FROM WHICH ONE SEES FAR Ô IF YOU KNEW HOW FAR WHEN ONE RESTS
 ON ME Ô IF YOU KNEW MANKIND WHO LOVE TO GAZE FAR OFF DO NOT
 FEAR BLACK THE INVISIBLE TRAINS LEAVE FOR HEAVEN EVERY SECOND
 GET ON STRETCH OUT THEY ARE SLEEPING CARS I AM THE PLATFORM
 I AM BLACK I AM BLACK THERE IS A LONG LONG TUNNEL LIKE DESPAIR BUT IT
 OPENS INTO BRIGHT LIGHT WHERE GUILLAUME APOLLINAIRE JUST ARRIVED
 FRIENDS MY FRIENDS HOW BEAUTIFUL INFINITY IS

WE ARE CIRCUMFERENCES

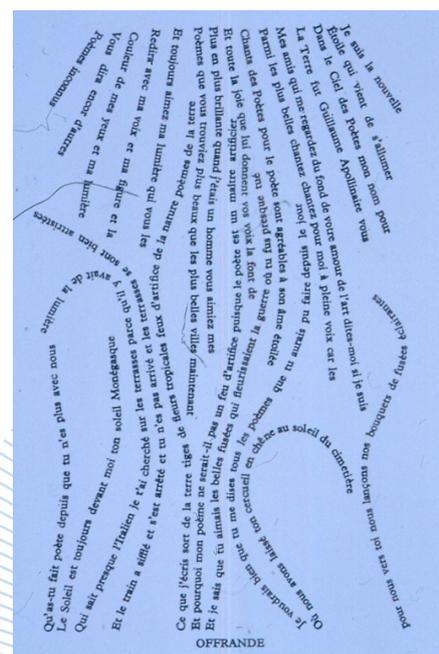
The poem begins with the question that traditionally arises at funerals – is there life after death? Does death represent the end of all our dreams, or is it a threshold to a glorious new experience? The fact that Albert-Birot asks this question at all reveals he is reluctant to accept Catholic dogma. For the moment, in any event, the question evokes no response. At first glance, the wreath on the left seems to have been sent by Apollinaire's fellow poets,

whose collective name appears at the bottom. By the same logic, however, one would expect the right-hand wreath to have been sent by the flowers, whose name also appears at the bottom. In retrospect, one perceives that the wreaths function primarily as (implicit) visual metaphors. They signify, firstly, that numerous poets have come to pay tribute to Apollinaire and, secondly, that the church is filled with flowers. Representing pictures of the deceased poet, the letters **G A K** stand for Guillaume Apollinaire de Kostrowitzky. Beneath the pictures, a rectangular block composed of five lines of poetry constitutes the poet's coffin. These are arranged to form a litany, during the course of which Apollinaire is progressively transformed into Light. By the end of the poem, when his apotheosis is complete, he has become a divine principle. Whether this symbol was chosen consciously or unconsciously, it dovetails nicely with Apollinaire's own symbolism. 'J'aime l'art d'aujourd'hui,' he explained in *Méditation esthétiques*, 'parce que j'aime avant tout la lumière' ('I love today's art because I love light above all else') (Apollinaire, 1991, p. 18).

As we have had the opportunity to observe, objects in Albert-Birot's poetry often possess a voice. As soon as the litany is finished, for example, the bier pronounces a long, impassioned speech, much of which is basically irrelevant. Whereas the poem is supposedly concerned with Apollinaire, the bier complains about its own lot in life. Confined to the dark recesses of the church, it emerges periodically to encounter people who are crying and sobbing. Universally feared and detested, the bier protests that it deserves to be viewed more favorably. Those who lie atop its platform, for example, are treated to an incredible view – presumably encompassing all of existence. If the bier bears a certain resemblance to Mt. Everest, the church in which it stands resembles a railroad station. According to the speaker, invisible trains depart every second carrying newly liberated souls to heaven. Just when it seems the journey will never end, they emerge from a long tunnel into the dazzling light, where Apollinaire is waiting to welcome them. The poem concludes with two observations. Once death is conceived as an encounter with the infinite, the poet announces, it becomes a beautiful experience. Unlike Pascal, who was terrified by the thought of infinity, he finds it exhilarating. Returning to the question posed at the beginning, Albert-Birot refuses to consider death as either an end or a beginning. Since existence is circular, it simply represents a transition.

Entitled 'Offrande' ('Offering'), another visual poem was composed a few years later while Albert-Birot was vacationing in Monaco.

Recalling that Apollinaire spent much of his childhood there, he decided to create a visual dialogue between himself and the poet in heaven. This explains why the composition is structured vertically and why it is divided into two halves. The lower portion is reserved for Albert-Birot, whose words ascend toward the top of the page, and the upper portion for Apollinaire, whose response descends in the opposite direction. The first message requires a quarter turn to the right to decipher, the second message, a half turn to the left. For various reasons, Albert-Birot insisted on publishing most of his works himself. Besides the obvious financial advantages, this arrangement allowed him to retain complete control over his artistic production. And since he did all his own printing, he soon became an accomplished typographer. Some of the visual compositions adhere to the traditional rectilinear grid. Other compositions defy any attempt to



contain them. This describes 'Offrande' in particular, whose sinuous design and intertwined lines represent an extraordinary achievement.

In addition to being a typographical *tour de force*, the visual design communicates on several levels simultaneously. The recognition that it constitutes a visual dialogue serves as the starting point. Since spoken words are not really visible, however, the picture at this level is entirely imaginary. The verbal exchange between Albert-Birot and Apollinaire is rendered schematically. At the realistic level, by contrast, several other possibilities exist. As the poet notes during the course of the poem, the composition resembles a pyrotechnical display. Viewed from this angle, the design represents a verbal metaphor projected onto the visual plane. And since an *offrande* is a religious offering, the design could conceivably depict a cloud of incense – in which case, it would also be a visual metonym. Whereas these figures play a relatively minor role, two additional images exist that dominate the entire poem. Like the pyrotechnics, both of them are verbal metaphors that have been raised to the visual level. Albert-Birot's words are depicted as tropical vegetation and Apollinaire's words as rays of sunlight. Each metaphor complements the other and comments on the relationship between the two poets. Just as plants derive energy from sunlight, Albert-Birot's poetry derives its inspiration from Apollinaire's example. Like tropical flowers basking in the sun, it absorbs his radiant message.

Looming over the rest of the poem, where they serve as vivid emblems, these two images illuminate the poem's broader concerns. The relationship between Apollinaire and Albert-Birot is clearly that of mentor to disciple. The ultimate offrande is the poem itself, which the latter presents to his beloved master. Filled with poignant memories, it is by turns affectionate, witty, and sad.

What have you been doing poet since you left us
Your sun is still here in Monaco
It almost knows Italian I looked for you on the terraces because
they were full of light
And the train whistled and stopped and you didn't get off and the
terraces grew very sad
What I am writing comes from the earth stems of tropical flowers
fireworks from nature poems from the earth
Why couldn't my poem be a firework since poets are fired with
enthusiasm
And I know you loved the beautiful flares that bloomed during the
war in which you were nearly killed
I would like you to tell me all the poems you have made since the day
We left your oak coffin in the cemetery's sun
for us toward you we throw our bouquets of signal flares.

As elsewhere in his poetry, Albert-Birot portrays Apollinaire as the poet of light. Whereas light is related to divine revelation in '**POÈME AU MORT**,' it is associated here, as we have seen, with the emblematic sun. Since Monaco is near Italy, the poet jokes that the sun speaks broken Italian. The association between Apollinaire and light was so fixed in his mind, he adds, that he found himself looking for the poet on the sunny terraces. Similarly, since Apollinaire grew up in Monaco, he half expected to see him get off the train. Comparing the poem to tropical flowers and fireworks ('feux d'artifice'), Albert-Birot engages in a bit of wordplay. The second comparison is justified, he insists, because every poet is a master of artifice. In any case, he adds, Apollinaire himself admired the signal flares when he was fighting at the front. 'Que c'est beau ces fusées qui illuminent la nuit,' he exclaimed in one poem, 'Ce sont des dames qui dansent avec leurs regards pour yeux bras et coeurs' ('How beautiful these flares

are illuminating the night They are ladies who dance with their gaze instead of their eyes arms and hearts') (Apollinaire 1965, p. 271). Now that the war is over, Albert-Birot confides, he would love to know what the poet has been writing about in heaven. Transforming the preceding message into a bouquet of flares, he launches them in Apollinaire's direction.

Observing the scene from his celestial abode, Apollinaire responds with a message of his own. Since he is the poet of light, his words are concerned with the principle that animates him.

I am the new
 Star that has just begun to shine
 In the Poets' Sky my name on
 Earth was Guillaume Apollinaire you
 My friends who gaze at me from the depth of your love of art tell me
 if I am
 one of the lovelier ones sing sing loudly for me for the
 Songs of the Poets please the poet's starry soul
 And all the joy your voices give him makes it
 Brighter and brighter when I was a man you loved my
 Poems which you found more beautiful than the most beautiful cities
 Continue to love my light which will
 Tell them to you again with my voice and my face and the
 Color of my eyes and my light
 Will tell you more

While Apollinaire's speech is not devoid of interest, it catches the reader totally by surprise. Not only is there no trace of the *visual* dialogue between him and Albert-Birot, but it appears to contradict that dialogue. Although the visual image occupying the top half of the page clearly represents sunlight, Apollinaire declares that he is a star – a brand new star in the poetic firmament. At the purely verbal level, this statement makes perfectly good sense. Apollinaire is portrayed as a stellar poet – as a beacon shining in the wilderness. The reader imagines a night sky populated by former poets who have been transformed into celestial bodies. Where the problem arises is when one attempts to translate it onto the visual plane. The idea of tropical plants deriving energy from starlight is frankly ludicrous. A serious conflict exists as well between the two speeches, which supposedly constitute a dialogue. What looks like a response on Apollinaire's part is not a response at all. Instead of replying to Albert-Birot's affectionate greetings, he addresses his friends in general. However, the message he sends them is far from inspiring. Apollinaire first asks if his star is beautiful. Then he commands his friends to sing his praises, so his star will shine more brightly. Instead of offering words of wisdom, all he seems to care about is his posthumous reputation. Ironically, although the poem was originally conceived as a homage to Apollinaire, it portrays him in a somewhat unflattering light. To be sure, this is no reflection on Apollinaire but rather on Albert-Birot, who still had much to learn about composing visual poetry.

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Insights

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