Zeitschrift: SPELL : Swiss papers in English language and literature
Herausgeber: Swiss Association of University Teachers of English
Band: 2 (1985)

Artikel: Iconic dimensions in poetry
Autor: Nänny, Max
DOI: https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-99839

Iconic Dimensions in Poetry

Max Nänny

Introduction

In semiotic terms an *icon* is a sign that is characterized by a relationship of similarity between the signifier and the signified, between form and meaning. Thus a photograph of Hemingway is an icon of the man; or the verb "to meow" iconically renders the sound the cat makes.

A *symbol*, on the other hand, is a sign whose signifier is linked to the signified by arbitrary contiguity of a conventional kind. In semiotic parlance, the name "Ernest Hemingway" is a symbol for the man; or the word "cat" is a symbol for the domestic animal which according to other linguistic conventions is called "Katze," "chat,", "gatto," and so on.

As we have been told since Saussure, spoken language is a code of arbitrary signs or symbols. For language as spoken, as an acoustic event in time is also subjected to the general law that among purely temporal, auditory signs there is a predominance of symbolism.[1] Being primarily symbolic, language, then, is poor in iconicity.

However, Roman Jakobson, the founder of literary semiotics, has insisted time and again that also in language there is an occurrence of iconic signs quite apart from the obvious case of onomatopoeia, especially if we take account of syntax. "Any attempt to treat verbal signs as solely conventional, 'arbitrary symbols'," he writes, "proves to be a misleading oversimplification. Iconicity plays a vast and necessary

[1] Roman Jakobson, "Language in Relation to Other Communication Systems," *Selected Writings*, vol. II (The Hague: Mouton, 1971), p. 701.

though evidently subordinate part in the different levels of linguistic structure."[2]

In his "Quest for the Essence of Language" Jakobson demonstrates that it is less the iconic sign that substantially replicates its object (C. S. Peirce's "image") than the sign whose *relations* reflect those of the object (C. S. Peirce's "diagram") that is of some importance to language and – by extension – to poetry.

Thus he shows that gradation may be iconically (or rather, diagrammatically) expressed by a graduated addition of linguistic elements, as for instance, in "high – high*er* – high*est*." Similarly, the plural may be iconically distinguished from the singular by adding a morpheme which renders "a numeral increment by an increased length of the form."[3]

Furthermore, the temporal order of speech events may mirror the order of narrated events in time, as, for example, in Caesar's *Veni, vidi, vici*. Or the order may be a reflection of rank as in "the President and the secretary of state attended the meeting."

If this is true of spoken language, we must, however, consider that in literature we are primarily confronted with a written form of communication though it is often a printed record of the spoken language. Literary texts, hence, are what Jakobson calls "syncretic messages" based on a combination of different sign patterns.[4]

It is noteworthy in this context to realize that unlike non-alphabetic scripts, such as hieroglyphs, which usually have a tenuous relation with the spoken language and tend to use icons of visible reality instead, alphabetic writing is unique in being primarily an icon (or rather, diagram) of *speech*. For its sequential combination of arbitrary symbols or letters into syllables, words and sentences diagrammatically mirrors the unidirectional, granular nature of the temporal sequence of phonemes that constitutes spoken discourse.

Now the typographic transposition of this verbal sequence in time, of auditory signs into the spatial and visual signs of print not only attenuates the one-way character of speech flow[5] (hence the possibility of anagrams and palindromes), but it makes language more amenable to the use of icons, that is, of the sign-class which is dominant in visual communication.[6]

[2] Ibid., p. 700.
[3] "Quest for the Essence of Language," *Selected Writings*, vol. II, p. 352.
[4] "Language in Relation to Other Communication Systems," p. 705.
[5] Ibid., p. 706. [6] Ibid., p. 701.

"Written language," Jakobson states, "is prone to develop its peculiar structural properties so that the history of the two linguistic varieties, speech and letters, is rich in dialectical tensions . . ."[7] It is exactly these tensions that poets in their use of various kinds of iconicity in the primarily symbolic context of language have exploited and sometimes pushed to extremes.

Considering that the entire tendency of western civilization and art has been towards visualization and spatialization, and hence towards an increased iconicity, as Wyndham Lewis diagnosed in *Time and Western Man* over fifty years ago, it is no wonder that especially since Imagism and Vorticism there have been demands that poetry ought to be remodeled in order to become iconic of visible reality. After what has been said about the symbolic nature of alphabetic script and print it is, therefore, not surprising that in the attempt to overcome the symbolic properties of language the Chinese written character with its originally iconic and diagrammatic features was suggested as a model for poetry by Fenollosa and Pound.

But the trend towards greater iconicity in poetry may also be seen as yet another endeavour at increasing the poeticalness of the text by a promotion of what Jakobson calls "the palpability of signs"[8] through a foregrounding of their "concrete" materiality and presence as print on paper.

Before I now try to analyse some poetic uses of iconicity, let me remind you that the difference between an icon and a symbol is not an absolutely radical one but rather "a difference of relative hierarchy."[9] So what we have to do with, then, are mostly transitional or hybrid varieties such as "iconic symbols" or "symbolic icons."

In the following I shall not touch on the well-known tradition of the pattern poem *(carmen figuratum)* that goes back to the ancient Greeks and has its best known English representative in George Herbert. Nor shall I deal with modern "concrete poetry" that makes primarily a painterly use of the typewriter.

Instead of offering yet another exploration of this "peaceful province of acrostic land" (John Dryden) and instead of developing one more theory of the literary icon, I shall concentrate on a number of texts that,

[7] Ibid., p. 706.

[8] "Closing Statement: Linguistics and Poetics," *Style in Language,* ed. Thomas Sebeok (Cambridge, Mass.: M.I.T. Press, 1960), p. 356.

[9] "Quest for the Essence of Language," p. 349.

in my view, contain some elements of iconicity. My aim is not a watertight classification of iconic dimensions in poetry but the presentation of a wide variety of ways poets have availed themselves of iconic expression.

My subdivision of the randomly chosen poetic examples characterized by an element of iconicity is a rough and ready one and based on the fact that typography essentially allows two basic kinds of iconic signification.

First, its signs can be arranged into *spatial configurations* in two dimensions. These typographical configurations may mirror a concrete object (also picture and symbol), form, pattern or relative position. By analogical extension they may also reflect notions of size, distance, balance, proportion, detachment, dissociation, fragmentation, presence and absence, disguise or latency.

Second, the linear *sequence* of typographic signs can iconically render a succession in time and/or in space. By analogy this sequence may express continuity, change, decay and growth, motion (be it circular, horizontal, vertical or back and forth), length of time and rank.

I. Spatial Configurations

1. Shape

When critics think of iconicity in poetry they usually think of pattern poems or concrete poems that typographically present an icon, that is an outline or shape of an object (e. g. an altar). It is this almost exclusive focus on typographical shapes that has blinded critics to other and, as I believe, far more important as well as more frequent iconic devices in poetry.

Having said this, I shall, for completeness' sake, but very briefly, deal with modern ways of shaping poetry that depend on the use of the typewriter.

Due to the inadequacy of idiosyncratic handwriting as an accurate model for a sophisticated typographic layout there had been few shaped poems and relatively little iconicity in poetry before the invention of the typewriter. Thus the few poets who created pattern poems restricted themselves to a relatively tame juggling with line-lengths and with the spatial disposition of single words.

The typewriter, however, changed all this. For the first time it allowed the poet to compose an exact typographical version of the text on the page. It also made the single letter as a unit of design more freely available to him and gave him a new awareness of, as well as interest in, the spatial ordering of written language on paper.

Two modern poets who had this iconic awareness and who composed shaped poetry on their typewriters were e. e. cummings and T. S. Eliot.

The shape of e. e. cummings' very first "poempicture" in his collection *95 poems*[10] simultaneously presents an icon of the number "1" and of the pronoun for the first person singular "I" (in informal language also "number one") as well as a diagram of a leaf's twirling ("af/fa") fall to the ground:

I

l(a

le
af
fa

ll·

s)
one
l

iness

The poem is not only an iconic enlargement of, and visual rhyme on, the five "l's" of its text (on older typewriters number 1 and the letter l were identical) and on the lower case Roman numeral "i" of the last line,[11] but its gaunt shape surrounded by a waste of white space is also an iconic representation of its theme of the individual's loneliness.

[10] *95 poems by e. e. cummings* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1958).

[11] The notions "first" and "one" are further reinforced by three "a's", "a" being not only the first letter of the alphabet but also used for number one in Greek.

An iconic symbolism of a different kind is found in T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*.[12] In "What the Thunder Said" the contrast between the blocklike solidity of waterless rock (ll. 331–45) and the protean liquidity of water ("spring," "pool," "water over rock," "Drip drop," ll. 346–58) is iconically reflected by a contrasting patterning of lines:

Here is no water but only rock
Rock and no water and the sandy road
The road winding above among the mountains
Which are mountains of rock without water
If there were water we should stop and drink
Amongst the rock one cannot stop or think
Sweat is dry and feet are in the sand
If there were only water amongst the rock
Dead mountain mouth of carious teeth that cannot spit
Here one can neither stand nor lie nor sit
There is not even silence in the mountains
But dry sterile thunder without rain
There is not even solitude in the mountains
But red sullen faces sneer and snarl
From doors of mudcracked houses
If there were water
And no rock
If there were rock
And also water
And water
A spring
A pool among the rock
If there were the sound of water only
Not the cicada
And dry grass singing
But sound of water over a rock
Where the hermit-thrush sings in the pine tress
Drip drop drip drop drop drop drop
But there is no water

One may even say that line 346 ("If there were water") is an icon of a jet of water springing from the "rock" of the previous lines. The iconizing effect of the typewriter may be gauged from the fact that in the handwritten manuscript the phrase "If there were water" begins the line on the left whereas in the later typewritten version it has moved to the present position on the right.[13]

[12] *The Complete Poems and Plays of T.S. Eliot* (London: Faber, 1969), pp. 59-80.

[13] See Valerie Eliot, ed., *T. S. Eliot. The Waste Land. A Facsimile and*

2. Relative Positions

The iconic rendering of relative positions is probably more common in poetry than one thinks. Thus Tennyson in "The Eagle"[14] assigns his descriptions of the eagle's upper position on "the crag," "Close to the sun," "Ringed with the azure world" to the upper stanza, whereas his depictions of "The wrinkled sea beneath him," his downward look and thunderbolt-like fall are allocated to the stanza beneath, "falls" being the word in the lowermost and ultimate position:

The Eagle
Fragment

He clasps the crag with crooked hands;
Close to the sun in lonely lands,
Ringed with the azure world, he stands.

The wrinkled sea beneath him crawls;
He watches from his mountain walls,
And like a thunderbolt he falls.

A similar iconic representation of top and bottom is used by Elisabeth Jennings:[15]

Out of the Heights

Out of the preening and impetuous heights
Where we look down and do not fear and risk
The snow escaping, the ice-melting flights,

And where we spin the sun a golden disc
And do not care and watch the clouds attend
The tall sky's dazzling and arched arabesque,

Out of those places where we think we end
Unhappiness, catch love within a final hand,
God, from such places keep us and defend

The innocence we do not understand,
The darkness to which we must descend.

Transcript of the Original Drafts Including the Annotations of Ezra Pound (London: Faber, 1971), pp. 72, 82.

[14] *The Poems of Tennyson*, ed. Christopher Ricks (London: Longmans, 1969), pp. 495-6.

[15] *Growing Points* (Cheadle, Cheshire: Carcanet New Press, 1975), p. 33.

Here, too, the first or top line of the poem iconically deals with height ("Out of the preening and impetuous heights") whereas the bottom line names "The darknesses to which we must descend."

Also Williams' "Poem"[16] translates the relative positions of described objects into iconic terms:

Poem

As the cat
climbed over
the top of

the jamcloset
first the right
forefoot

carefully
then the hind
stepped down

into the pit of
the empty
flowerpot

The cat's climbing "over / the top of / the jamcloset" is given in the top part of the poem. Notice that "over" is in the line above "the top", which in turn is above "the jamcloset." The cat's stepping "down/into the pit of / the empty / flowerpot," however, is in the bottom part of the poem.

Furthermore, the spatial inversion from top to bottom is also iconically mirrored by the inversion of the consonantal sequence t-p of "top" in the first stanza to p-t of "pit," "empty," "pot" in the last stanza. At the risk of overinterpretation one may also point out that in the line "first the right," "first" is the first word and "right" is on the right (Williams could have chosen "left" instead), whereas in the line "then the hind" the word "hind" is at the end.

In addition, the cat's whole hesitant movement over the pots on the jamcloset is given iconic expression by means of line breaks and stanza divisions. Especially the hiatuses between the second and the third

[16] *The Collected Earlier Poems of William Carlos Williams* (Norfolk, Conn.: New Directions, 1951), p. 340.

("forefoot/carefully") as well as the third and fourth stanzas ("down/into") iconically dramatize the cat's halting, slow-motion carefulness.

Williams has even attempted to represent the relative position of spaces in a painting by the verbal icon of a poem, as Wendy Steiner has cogently demonstrated.[17] In her detailed analysis of the structural (or diagrammatic) correspondences between W. C. Williams' "The Hunters in the Snow"[18] and Brueghel's "The Return of the Hunters" she shows how by a sophisticated interplay between the poem's syntax and its versification Williams is capable of iconically imitating Brueghel's message in verbal form. Thus she establishes that Williams' specific ordering of details in the poem, his inevitably sequential disposition of spatial relations plays on the up-down, left-right, and background-foreground bandings of Brueghel's painting.[19]

3. Size

An iconic reflection of size can be found in a poem of Philip Larkin's:[20]

Essential Beauty

In frames as large as rooms that face all ways
And block the ends of streets with giant loaves,
Screen graves with custard, cover slums with praise
Of motor-oil and cuts of salmon, shine
Perpetually these sharply-pictured groves
Of how life should be. High above the gutter
A silver knife sinks into golden butter,
A glass of milk stands in a meadow, and
Well-balanced families, in fine
Midsummer weather, owe their smiles, their cars,
Even their youth, to that small cube each hand
Stretches towards. These, and the deep armchairs
Aligned to cups at bedtime, radiant bars

[17] *The Colors of Rhetoric: Problems in the Relationship between Modern Literature and Painting* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), pp. 73–90.

[18] *Pictures from Brueghel and Other Poems* (Norfolk, Conn.: New Directions, 1962), p. 5.

[19] *The Colors of Rhetoric*, p. 82.

[20] *The Whitsun Weddings* (London: Faber, 1971), p. 42.

(Gas or electric), quarter-profile cats
By slippers on warm mats,
Reflect none of the rained-on streets and squares

They dominate outdoors. Rather, they rise
Serenly to proclaim pure crust, pure foam,
Pure coldness to our live imperfect eyes
That stare beyond this world, where nothing's made
As new or washed quite clean, seeking the home
All such inhabit. There, dark raftered pubs
Are filled with white-clothed ones from tennis-clubs,
And the boy puking his heart out in the Gents
Just missed them, as the pensioner paid
A halfpenny more for Granny Graveclothes's Tea
To taste old age, and dying smokers sense
Walking towards them through some dappled park
As if on water that unfocused she
No match lit up, nor drag ever brought near,
Who now stands newly clear,
Smiling, and recognising, and going dark.

In this poem about modern street hoardings Larkin tries to mirror their immense bulk ("frames as large as rooms", l.1) by the enormous (relative to the format of the page) typographic size of the two stanzas (each has sixteen lines) that make up the text. In addition, both the length of the lines and the ample sentences (three range through six lines, one through seven, and one is even eleven lines long) reinforce the iconic quality of Larkin's poem as a kind of verbal hoarding.

4. Absence

In poetry icons of material or notional absence are possible, too. Thus Ezra Pound's "Papyrus" (1916)[21] is an iconic attempt at rendering the fragmentary state of an ancient manuscript:

PAPYRUS

SPRING . . . . . .
Too long . . . . . .
Gongula . . . . . .

[21] *Personae. The Collected Shorter Poems of Ezra Pound* (New York: New Directions, 1971), p. 112.

The three lines are a free paraphrase of the first three lines of an extant Sapphic fragment. Now the syntactial incompleteness of the poem is an icon of the incomplete original text. The fact, however, that the poem is such an icon and not just a series of aposiopeses uttered under great emotion can be indicated by symbolic means only: by the title "Papyrus" and by the dotted lines.

A similar use of an icon of absence can be found in Pound's first Malatesta Canto, Canto VIII:[22]

THESE fragments you have shelved (shored).
"Slut!" "Bitch!" Truth and Calliope
Slanging each other sous les lauriers:
That Alessandro was negroid. And Malatesta
Sigismund:

Frater tamquam
Et compater carissime: *tergo*
...hanni de
..dicis
...entia

Equivalent to:

Giohanni of the Medici,
Florence.

The dotted lines are part of a transcription from a manuscript letter in which some words were partly obliterated by the wax wafer of Malatesta's seal. Although the fragmentary state of the text is more obvious here than in the previous example, Pound again had recourse to symbolic means: to dots and a translation of the full original text into English.

But whereas the *Cantos* text documents mere textual fidelity and authenticity without even wishing to puzzle the reader, the "Papyrus"-icon of absence has the additional poetic function of suggestiveness, leaving it to the reader to fill in the missing words and context.

Also Philip Larkin has given iconic expression to the idea of absence twice.

In the poem "Absences"[23] the imagined absence of the speaker from both earth and sky after his death is iconically reflected by the reduction of the last stanza – where the idea of absence is made explicit – to one line, "Such attics cleared of me! Such absences!":

[22] *The Cantos of Ezra Pound* (London: Faber, 1975), p. 28.
[23] *The Less Deceived* (London: The Marvell Press, 1973), p. 40.

Absences

Rain patters on a sea that tilts and sighs,
Fast-running floors, collapsing into hollows,
Tower suddenly, spray-haired. Contrariwise,
A wave drops like a wall: another follows,
Wilting and scrambling, tirelessly at play
Where there are no ships and no shallows.

Above the sea, the yet more shoreless day,
Riddled by wind, trails lit-up galleries:
They shift to giant ribbing, sift away.

Such attics cleared of me! Such absences!

And in "Ignorance"[24] the gradual reduction of line length in each stanza may be said to represent iconically the speaker's lack of words, explanations or information culminating in such minimal phrases as "Someone must know," "Yes, it is strange," "Have no idea why":

Ignorance

Strange to know nothing, never to be sure
Of what is true or right or real,
But forced to qualify *or so I feel,*
Or *Well, it does seem so:*
Someone must know.

Strange to be ignorant of the way things work:
Their skill at finding what they need,
Their sense of shape, and punctual spread of seed,
And willingness to change;
Yes, it is strange,

Even to wear such knowledge – for our flesh
Surrounds us with its own decisions –
And yet spend all our life on imprecisions,
That when we start to die
Have no idea why.

[24] *Whitsun Weddings,* p. 39.

5. Notional Structures

The spatial configurations in printed texts dealt with so far have had an iconic reference to primarily physical realities. But spatial arrangements in poetry may also refer to relative positions and relationships of a more notional sort for which the typographic icon is some kind of spatial analogue.

In the Second Epistle of his *Essay on Man* (1733)[25] Alexander Pope iconically represents the medial position of man in the chain of being, his being "Placed on this isthmus of a middle state" (l.3), his suspension between activity and rest, certainty and doubt, humility and pride, body and mind:

> Know then thyself, presume not God to scan;
> The proper study of Mankind is Man.
> Plac'd on this isthmus of a middle state,
> A being darkly wise, and rudely great:
> With too much knowledge for the Sceptic side,
> With too much weakness for the Stoic's pride,
> He hangs between; in doubt to act, or rest,
> In doubt to deem himself a God, or Beast;
> In doubt his Mind or Body to prefer,
> Born but to die, and reas'ning but to err;
> Alike in ignorance, his reason such,
> Whether he thinks too little, or too much:
> Chaos of Thought and Passion, all confus'd;
> Still by himself abus'd, or disabus'd;
> Created half to rise, and half to fall;
> Great lord of all things, yet a prey to all;
> Sole judge of Truth, in endless Error hurl'd:
> The glory, jest, and riddle of the world!

It can be seen that the half-line "He hangs between ..." (l.7) is actually placed isthmus-like between two pairs of lines on each side that form anaphoric couplets: the lines beginning "With too much ..." expressing positive excess and the lines beginning "In doubt ..." formulating negative excess. Hence, both the precarious balance of man's position as well as his narrow middle-state (buttressed by the fact that "He hangs between" is a mere half-line) are given iconic force by Pope's arrangement of lines.

[25] *The Poems of Alexander Pope*, ed. John Butt (London: Methuen, 1968), p. 516.

Both Eliot's *The Waste Land* and Pound's *The Cantos* can be and have been seen in iconic terms as representations of the nature of their subjects by means of imitative form. Thus the discontinuous, seemingly random fragments of *The Waste Land* have been said to represent the chaotic state of the modern world whose detritus and cultural fragments can no longer be unified into a whole, a coherent over-all meaning. According to such an iconic view of the poem, as Conrad Aiken once remarked, its "incoherence is a virtue because its *donnée* is incoherence."[26]

And Pound's *Cantos*, an open-ended poem that includes history, can be seen as a poetic rag-bag of documentary fragments, snatches of conversation, quotations, literary allusions and personal reminiscences which conveys the iconic message: this is how the past exists.

The *Cantos* themselves provide a rich mine of poetic attempts at iconic signification. Let me just point to one of Pound's iconic devices that has eluded critics so far. In his "Hell Cantos" (Cantos XIV/XV)[27] he indicates in an iconic way the utter damnability, thorough anality and cloacal character of the contemporary servants of Usury by reducing their names to "their rumps" (l.6) consisting of a few dots and the *tail* letter:

XIV

Io venni in luogo d'ogni luce muto;
The stench of wet coal, politicians
. . . . . .e and . . . . .n, their wrists bound to
their ankles,
Standing bare bum,
Faces smeared on their rumps,
wide eye on flat buttock,
Bush hanging for beard,
Addressing crowds through their arse-holes,
Addressing the multitudes in the ooze,
newts, water-slugs, water-maggots,
And with them . . . . . .r,
a scrupulously clean table-napkin
Tucked under his penis,
and . . . . . .m

[26] "An Anatomy of Melancholy," *T. S. Eliot: 'The Waste Land'. A Casebook*, ed. C. B. Cox and A. P. Hinchliffe (London: Macmillan, 1968), pp. 91–99.

[27] *The Cantos of Ezra Pound*, pp. 61 ff.

In her poem "Easter Duties"[28] Elizabeth Jennings uses the space between the stanzas as an iconic symbol for separation, disengagement or detachment:

EASTER DUTIES

They are called duties, People must confess,
Through garlic-smelling grilles or in quiet rooms,
All the year's mis-events–unhelped distress,
Griefs lingered over, *accidie* in dreams,
And hear the words which bless

And unbind, eat the bread and feel the cross
Hurting only a little, hinting more.
Why do I feel, in all these acts, a loss,
As if a marvel I had waited for
Were a cheap toy to toss

Away, the giver gone? Why do I care
In this uncaring? I need gods on earth,
The wonder felt, sleep which I somehow share
Because it is a going back to birth.
And, yes, I want to bear

Anticipated laughter, jokes which once
Meant calibre and bite but did not make
Anyone sad. Prayer yet could be a dance
But still a cross. I offer small heartbreak,
Catch grace almost by chance.

Between stanza one and two the disengagement has a spiritual sense ("which bless/And unbind"), between stanza two and three it acquires a spatial, physical ("to toss/Away") and between stanza three and four a temporal meaning ("to bear/Anticipated laughter").

6. Disguise, Latency or Suppression

Poets have also tried to express hidden, latent or suppressed realities or feelings in an iconic way. In the miscellany "The Church" (*The Temple*, 1633)[29] George Herbert iconically mirrors one poem's biblical motto

[28] *Growing Points*, p. 31.

[29] *The English Poems of George Herbert*, ed. C. A. Patrides (London: Dent, 1974), p. 100.

("our life is hid with Christ in God") by hiding the sentence "*My Life Is Hid In Him That Is My Treasure*" as a diagonal line that must be read from the top left to the bottom right of the stanza:

Coloss. 3.3

Our life is hid with Christ in God

My words & thoughts do both expresse this notion,
That *Life* hath with the sun a double motion.
The first *Is* straight, and our diurnall friend,
The other *Hid* and doth obliquely bend.
One life is wrapt *In* flesh, and tends to earth.
The other winds towards *Him*, whose happie birth
Taught me to live here so, *That* still one eye
Should aim and shoot at that which *Is* on high:
Quitting with daily labour all *My* pleasure
To gain at harvest an eternall *Treasure.*

Furthermore, the deep mystery of this hiding in Christ is rendered iconically by the position of "In Him" in the two middle lines in the very heart of the poem.

Also T. S. Eliot gave iconic expression to the idea of concealment, latency or suppression twice. Thus I think it can be demonstrated that in "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" Eliot conceals some poetic, that is, stanzaic patterns of the Renaissance love-song tradition (madrigals, sonnets, quatrains, *capitoli*) – stanzas used e. g. by Michelangelo in his *Rime* (1530–50)[30] – behind the conversational veil of his free verse. I suggest that this disguise iconically reflects the suppressed latency of Prufrock's amatory aspirations in the inhibitory world of salons dominated by bluestockings.

In the fifth section of *Ash Wednesday* (1930),[31] as Balz Engler has shown in his *Reading and Listening*, Eliot's free verse camouflages "a number of lines of similar length that show striking syntactical parallelism, and even form rhymed couplets and triplets."[32] The relevant passage of the poem looks like this:

[30] In my view, the famous lines "In the room the women come and go/ Talking of Michelangelo" (ll. 13–14, 35–36) refer to the poet of love-songs rather than to the sculptor.

[31] *The Complete Poems and Plays of T. S. Eliot*, p. 62.

[32] *Reading and Listening. The Modes of Communicating Poetry and Their Influence on the Texts* (Berne: Francke, 1982), p. 33.

Where shall the word be found, where will the word
Resound? Not here, there is not enough silence
Not on the sea or on the islands, not
On the mainland, in the desert or the rain land,
For those who walk in darkness
Both in the day time and in the night time
The right time and the right place are not here
No place of grace for those who avoid the face
No time to rejoice for those who walk among noise and deny the voice

Engler redistributes this passage in the following way:

		rhymes	number of syllables
	Where shall the word be found,	a	6
	Where will the word resound	a	6
	Not here, there is not enough silence	b	9
	Not on the sea or on the islands,	b	9
	Not on the mainland,	c	5
5	In the desert or the rain land,	c	8
	For those who walk in darkness	d	7
	Both in the day time	e	5
	And in the night time	e	5
	The right time and the right place	f	7
	Are not here, no place of grace	f	7
	For those who avoid the face	f	7
9	No time to rejoice	g	5
	For those who walk among noise	(g)	7
	And deny the voice	g	5

The visual, typographic free-verse structure of the text thus disguises a primarily, though not exclusively, aural poetic order or harmony. This iconically imitates perhaps less "the difficulty for the Word of God to resound, because of the obstacles placed in its way," as Engler maintains[33] than "the lost word" (l.1), "the Word unheard" (l.4), "the Word within/The world" (ll.5–6), that is, the hiddenness of the divine order which is the subject of the preceding passage.

II. Sequence

Apart from creating icons by means of spatial configurations there is the further possibility of iconic (more accurately, diagrammatic) representation by means of a sequence of textual units.

[33] Ibid., p. 34.

The famous Madame Sosostris passage in Eliot's *The Waste Land* (ll. 43–59)[34] offers an example of a case where the reader's decision whether to consider a textual sequence as iconic or not may be of considerable interpretative consequence:

> Madame Sosostris, famous clairvoyante,
> Had a bad cold, nevertheless
> Is known to be the wisest woman in Europe,
> With a wicked pack of cards. Here, said she,
> Is your card, the drowned Phoenician Sailor,
> (Those are pearls that were his eyes. Look!)
> Here is Belladonna, the Lady of the Rocks,
> The lady of situations.
> Here is the man with three staves, and here the Wheel,
> And here is the one-eyed merchant, and this card,
> Which is blank, is something he carries on his back,
> Which I am forbidden to see. I do not find
> The Hanged Man. Fear death by water.

For if we accept the succession of Tarot cards mentioned by the clairvoyante Sosostris not just as a random enumeration of cards but as an iconic reflection of the sequence of cards she picks up and lays out according to the Celtic method advocated by A. E. Waite, the passage may acquire an additional meaning.[35]

1. Motion

An early example for a sequential iconization of motion in a poetic text is offered by Shelley's "Ode to the West Wind" (1819).[36] Of the twenty-five stanzas that make up the poem only one (the final couplet of the fourth sonnet, (ll.55–56) is syntactically a separate unit and out of seventy lines thirty-five are run-on lines and only twelve lines are endstopped. From this, I think, we can confidently conclude that the syntactical continuity, the absence of stops and breaks in the text present an icon of the wild west wind's "uncontrollable" (l.47), sweeping movement.

[34] *The Complete Poems and Plays of T. S. Eliot*, p. 62.

[35] See my "'Cards Are Queer': A New Reading of the Tarot in *The Waste Land*," *English Studies*, 62: 4 (August 1981), p. 335–47, and Betsey B. Creekmore, "The Tarot Fortune in *The Waste Land*", *ELH*, 49:4 (Winter 1982), p. 908–28.

[36] *Shelley. Poetical Works*, ed. Thomas Hutchinson (London: Oxford University Press, 1968), pp. 577–79.

Similarly, in W. C. Williams's poem "The Dance,"[37] which describes Brueghel's painting "The Kermess," the continuous movement of the dance is iconically rendered by the total enjambement of the lines, the length as well as syntax of the two sentences that make up the text:

The Dance

In Brueghel's great picture, The Kermess,
the dancers go round, they go round and
around, the squeal and the blare and the
tweedle of bagpipes, a bugle and fiddles
tipping their bellies (round as the thick-
sided glasses whose wash they impound)
their hips and their bellies off balance
to turn them. Kicking and rolling about
the Fair Grounds, swinging their butts, those
shanks must be sound to bear up under such
rollicking measures, prance as they dance
in Brueghel's great picture, The Kermess.

The continuous circularity of the dance movement ("go round ... go round and/around") is iconically expressed by repetitions and variations of an interlocking kind such as the internal rhymes and assonance on the key word "round" ("impound," "Grounds" and "sound"), alliterations ("bagpipes, a bugle," "bellies off balance"). And the repetition of the first line at the end of the poem, "In Brueghel's great picture, The Kermess," is an iconic hint that the continuous movement has come full circle.

In the poem "Wires"[38] Larkin iconically enacts the to and fro movement of young steers that blunder up against electric wires and are repulsed by the electric shock which turns them into experienced, or resigned old cattle:

WIRES

The widest prairies have electric fences,
For though old cattle know they must not stray,
Young steers are always scenting purer water
Not here but anywhere. Beyond the wires

Leads them to blunder up against the wires
Whose muscle-shredding violence gives no quarter.
Young steers become old cattle from that day,
Electric limits to their widest senses.

[37] *The Collected Later Poems of William Carlos Williams* (Norfolk, Conn.: New Directions, 1944), p. 11.

[38] *The Less Deceived*, p. 27.

For the to and fro movement (and imprisonment) of the steers is mirrored by two superimposed chiastic patterns: first, by a chiastic sequence of words ("widest"-"electric"-"old cattle"-"young steers"-"wires" = "wires"-"young steers"-"old cattle"-"electric"-"widest") and, second, by a chiastic rhyme-scheme (abcd=dcba).

Furthermore, apart from the fact that each stanza is semantically fenced in by the occurrence of "wires" and "electric fences/limits" in the first and last lines, the space between the first and the second stanza, whose dividing function is reinforced by the parallel wording of "Beyond the wires" (l.4) and "against the wires" (l.5), iconically marks the pivotal position of the wire fence that turns young steers into old cattle.

2. Duration

In poetry a verbal sequence also can be used as a iconic indicator of the length of time or prolonged duration of an event.

In her "Thunder and a Boy"[39] Elizabeth Jennings uses lineation as a durational icon. After the first peal of thunder represented by the initial and end-stopped line the prolonged and overlapping rolling of thunder ("the huge chords") is given iconic expression by means of fourteen extremely long, enjambed and cadenced lines that literally form a "thundering" free verse sonnet:

> That great bubble of silence, almost tangible quiet was shattered.
> There was no prelude, the huge chords
> Broke and sounded timpani over the town, and then lightning, first
> darting, then strong bars
> Taking hold of the sky, taking hold of us we sank into primitive
> people,
> Wondering at and frightened of the elements, forgetting so swiftly
> how naming had once seemed
> To give them into our hands. Not any longer. We were powerless
> now completely.
> But today we have risen with the rain and, though it is torrential,
> we believe at moments that we
> Still have power over that. We are wrong. Those birds escaping
> through showers show us
> They are more imperial than we are. We shift, talk, doze, look at
> papers,

[39] *Growing Points*, p. 20.

Though one child is remembering how last night he stood with defiance
And joy at his window and shouted, "Do it again, God, do it again!"
Can we say he was less wise than us? We cannot. He acknowledged
Zeus,
Thor, God the Father, and was prepared to cheer or dispute with any
of them.
This afternoon he watches the sky, praying the night will show God's
strength again
And he, without fear, feel those drums beating and bursting through
his defended, invisible mind.

3. Change

Sequence can, of course, be accompanied by some qualitative change. Various poets have made poetic use of the iconic possibilities offered by a changing verbal sequence.

But let me first point to an example which shows an iconic insistence on permanence in change. In his "My Heart Leaps Up" (1802)[40] William Wordsworth links the three central lines by means of an anaphoric "So":

My heart leaps up when I behold
A rainbow in the sky:
So was it when my life began;
So is it now I am a man;
So be it when I shall grow old,
Or let me die!
The Child is father of the Man;
And I could wish my days to be
Bound each to each by natural piety.

The initial repetiton of "So" in the three lines, which in rainbow fashion display the temporal spectrum of a personal past, present and future, is, I would argue, an iconic expression of the poet's wish that the three ages of man may be "Bound each to each by natural piety."

One may also ask why this perceptual and emotional continuity is not expressed by means of a rhyme-triplet but by anaphora. I think it could be asserted that an anaphoric emphasis on the *beginning* of the line is a more adquate iconic reflection of the poet's hope that man's *first* or

[40] *William Wordsworth, Poems, Vol. I,* ed. John O. Hayden (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1977), p. 522.

pristine sensitivity to natural phenomena may persist throughout his life.

In *The Hollow Men*[41] Eliot uses an icon of a qualitative change for the worse by putting a verbally entropic, "whimpering" end to the poem in the form of three aposiopeses:

> For Thine is
> Life is
> For Thine is the
>
> *This is the way the world ends*
> *This is the way the world ends*
> *This is the way the world ends*
> *Not with a bang but a whimper.*

The commentary "This is the way the world ends" that immediately follows these lines makes their iconic nature quite explicit. In *The Waste Land*, as is well known, Eliot uses a similar device when he iconically renders the cultural entropy of "Falling towers" by gradually diminishing line lengths (ll.373–77):[42]

> Falling towers
> Jerusalem Athens Alexandria
> Vienna London
> Unreal

A different and more subtle way of iconically suggesting a change by means of a verbal sequence can be detected in the poetry of Philip Larkin.

Thus in his "No Road"[43] we get a gradual decrease in the formal tightness of the final couplet rhyme from stanza to stanza: there is a change from the perfect masculine rhyme "neglect/effect" in the first stanza to the perfect but feminine rhyme with weaker endings "longer/stronger" in the middle stanza to the imperfect feminine rhyme pair with weak endings "fulfilment/my ailment" in the last stanza:

[41] *The Complete Poems and Plays of T. S. Eliot*, p. 86.
[42] Ibid., p. 73.
[43] *The Less Deceived*, p. 26.

NO ROAD

Since we agreed to let the road between us
Fall to disuse,
And bricked our gates up, planted trees to screen us,
And turned all time's eroding agents loose,
Silence, and space, and strangers – our neglect
Has not had much effect.

Leaves drift unswept, perhaps; grass creeps unmown;
No other change.
So clear it stands, so little overgrown,
Walking that way tonight would not seem strange,
And still would be allowed. A little longer,
And time will be the stronger,

Drafting a world where no such road will run
From you to me;
To watch that world come up like a cold sun,
Rewarding others, is my liberty.
Not to prevent it is my will's fulfilment.
Willing it, my ailment.

This sequence of progressively deteriorating and loosening couplet rhymes may be seen as an icon of the gradual dissolution of the couple's interrelation and harmony. That is, the step-by-step disintergration of the couplet rhyme provides an iconic parallel to the gradual cessation of interpersonal communication which progresses from a road fallen "to disuse" (stanza 1) to "a world where no such road will run/From you to me" (stanza 3).

Conclusion

By way of conclusion let me briefly deal with e. e. cummings' poem "r-p-o-p-h-e-s-s-a-g-r"[44] which brilliantly combines the three chief poetic ways of iconic signification I have discussed so far, namely spatial configuration, sequential motion and successive change:

[44] *e. e. cummings. Poems 1923–1954* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1954), p. 286.

r-p-o-p-h-e-s-s-a-g-r
who
a)s w(e loo)k
upnowgath
PPEGORHRASS
eringint(o-
aThe):l
eA
!p:
S a
(r
rIvInG .gRrEaPsPhOs)
to
rea(be)rran(com)gi(e)ngly
,grasshopper;

If we follow the sequence of letters that makes most sense – thus we have to read the first word from right to left rather than from left to right –, our reading process follows lines of *motion* that provide a diagrammatic icon of the elusive, haphazard jumps and flights of a grasshopper. Thus we move to the left, to the right, to the left, etc. and follow words, syllables or letters that hop down one or two lines, vault typographic voids, skip up to capitals and down to small letters; we are interrupted by stops and reversals as well as puzzled by a saltatory punctuation (ll.9, 12, 15).

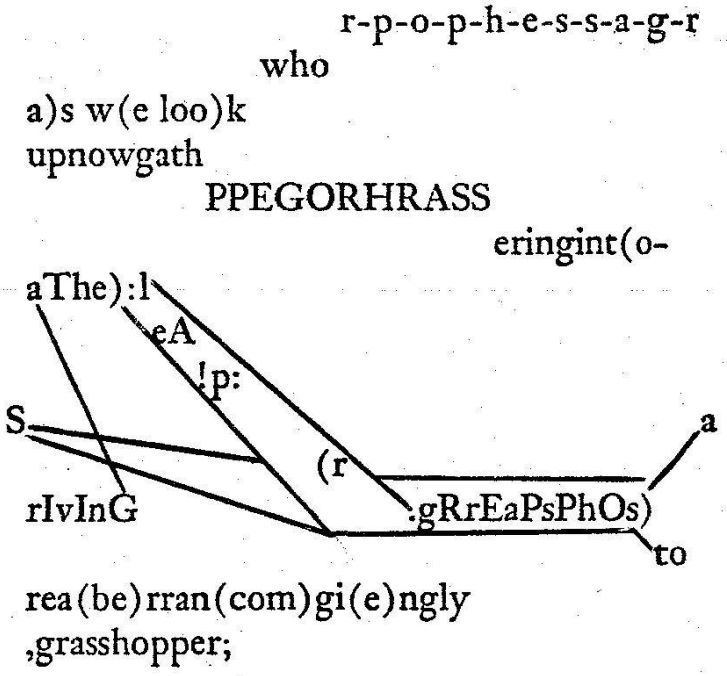
Furthermore, the word "grasshopper" itself, whose eleven letters behave like grasshoppers in a bait box, wildly hops around in the poem, leaping lines, landing in the middle of a word (l.5) or a sentence (l.12). Even the title of the poem, I suggest, has hopped from its proper place to line 7 ("The") and line 15 ("grasshopper") thus disguising the fact that the poem has the fourteen lines of a sonnet.

But the reading process also involves the progressive unscrambling or unravelling of the differently and successively less scrambled words for "grasshopper." Quite apart from offering various onomatopoeic icons of the grasshopper's whirring and stridulation, the sequential unscrambling on the part of the reader is an iconic imitation of a gradual *change* in the perceiving subject, of a gradually firmer perceptual grasp of the nature and identity ("The," l.7) of the evasive object called grasshopper. Hence, the initially slow and laborious act of rearranging the letters can be seen as an iconic re-enactment of the subjective process of

perception that bundles disparate sensory impressions into the whole of a meaningful "gestalt." The progressive recognition of the poem's genre as a titled sonnet matches this process in terms of poetic form.

This cognitive process that results in the eventual detachment of the "figure" of the grasshopper from the perplexing, seemingly chaotic sensory "ground" of cummings' typography is paralleled and reinforced on the iconic level of *spatial configuration,* too.

For if we look at his "poempicture" as if it were a picture puzzle, we discover to our surprise the rough outline of a grasshopper facing right. Thus "aThe):l/eA/!p:" forms the joint and femur of the hind or saltatorial leg; the "S" on the very left of line 10, which pricks the invisble vertical line of the left margin justification, stands for the sting; "a" on the very right of the same line represents the antenna; "r" is the place where the rubbing of the leg against the wing, the stridulation occurs; "rIvIng" indicates the hind claw on which the grasshopper lands or arrives after a jump; ".gRrEaPsPhOs)" represents the segmented thorax and the head with its compound eye ("O"), leaving "to" for the front claw or toe:[45]



In short, the puzzling difficulties of the cognitive process of clearly grasping a jumping insect's position in the grass, its species or name as well as its outward form are given simultaneous iconic expression in this virtuoso poem.

[45] The curve described by "S/aThe):l/A/!p:/(r" may, of course, also be seen as a diagram of the grasshopper's jump.