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The concrete historical

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The Concrete Historical

Roland Greene

“Material” poetry, “visual” and “sound” poetry, “concrete” poetry: with a few important qualifications, these terms denote one trans-historical phenomenon in Western poetic writing. Definitions of this phenomenon tend to find different ways of sounding right:

It so falleth out most times your ocular proportion doeth declare the nature of the audible: for if it please the eare well, the same represented by delineation to the view pleaseth the eye well and *è conuerso*: and this by a naturall *simpathie*, betweene the eare and the eye, and betweene tunes & colours, euen as there is the like betweene the other sences and their objects.

[In these poems,] the series of words, the series of sentences remind the reader of the constant flow, the perpetual development of things.

The poem—is it not that vibrant space on which a few signs are projected like an ideogram that might be a purveyor of meanings? Space, projection, ideogram: these three words allude to an operation that consists in unfolding a place, a here, that will receive and support a writing: fragments that regroup and seek to form a figure, a nucleus of meanings.

Everything concrete is nothing but itself. To be understood concretely a word must be taken at its word. All art is concrete which uses its material functionally and not symbolically.

The poet is a designer of language . . . [like] the industrial drafter occupied with finding better configurations for a planned object.

Poems about the poem itself or about the office of poet.¹

If meanings can be distributed, “material poetry” effectively names the entire historical and cultural continuum, and claims much writing—for instance, large swatches of an ostensibly conventional text such as Shakespeare’s *Sonnets*—that goes under no other experimental rubric. “Concrete poetry,” a term with a certain chronological and multi-national import, is virtually a brand or trademark for the program it represents in post-modern literature, which Augusto de Campos relates elsewhere in this *Bulletin*. “Pattern poetry” is a deliberately vague, appreciative term

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¹ The first observation here is by George Pattenham. *The Art of English Poesie*, ed. Gladys Doidge Willcock and Alice Walker (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1936), p. 85; the second by Jean Arp, “Kandinsky the Poet” (1955), *Arp on Arp: Poems, Essays, Memories*, ed. Marcel Jean, trans. Joachim Neugroschel (New York: The Viking Press, 1972), p. 283; the third by Octavio Paz, “Signs in Rotation” (1967), *The Bow and the Lyre*, trans. Ruth L.C. Simms (Austin: University of Texas Press,

1973), p. 249; the fourth by Max Bense (1965), cited in English in *Concerning Concrete Poetry*, ed. Bob Cobbing and Peter Mayer (London: Writers Forum, 1978), p. 13; the fifth and sixth by Haroldo de Campos (in the first instance paraphrasing Décio Pignatari) in his *A Arte no Horizonte do Provável*, 4th ed. (Rio de Janeiro: Editora Perspectiva, 1977), pp. 142, 153. Unattributed translations are mine.

for several practices that go by a number of more technical titles, such as *technopaegnon* and calligram.² The general phenomenon of material poetry is one of the least investigated currents in European and American literatures, while these relatively restricted terms have been the property of critical subcultures that hardly communicate with the study of poetry at large.

The prevalence and reach of material poetry would seem to pose a challenge to the phenomenon's usually marginal character, its susceptibility to being seen or heard as fatally eccentric. In fact, the attachment of that characterization to material poetry, especially since the nineteenth century, is almost as persistent as the phenomenon itself, and throughout the entire modern period of literary studies has often kept its theory and interpretation at bay. A typical judgment is rendered in something called the *Handy-Book of Literary Curiosities*: "Heading the list of English word-torturers stands so good and great a man as George Herbert. We quote two specimens, and then pass on with our eyes veiled, to avoid gazing too intently on a good man's shame."³ This ahistorical, anti-material bias is tacitly shared by many poets, theorists, and readers, and has substantially affected the reception of material poetry. Because such a poetry programmatically questions the ideas of a conventional lyric poetics, it is largely at the mercy of that poetics when it comes to be read for itself; material poetry either explains itself—which it almost always does, whoever may be listening—or depends on its small circle of aficionados, but does not often participate in the critical dialogue around poetry itself. As a consequence, that discussion has lost something.

The European Renaissance of about 1500 to 1650 sees material poetry come to prominence as an indispensable set of possibilities within poetry at large—not only as a subset of the whole, but as an inner workshop that often opens onto the larger space of the genre with critically renovative motions. Hostile readers tried, even then, to dispense with it: Gabriel Harvey (1550–1630), one of the most outspoken literary men of his generation, writes derisively around 1580 of "this odd rimage with many other triflinge and childishe toyes to make verses, that shoulde in proportion represente the form and figure of an egg, an ape, a winge, and sutche ridiculous and madd gugawes and crockchettes, and of late foolishly reuiuid."⁴ The work Harvey has in mind includes classical texts such as Simias of Rhodes's wing-shaped poem (revived early in the sixteenth century) and recent tributes to ancient models such as Giovanni Pierio Valeriano Bolzani's "Ovum dactylicum" (published 1550) (figure 1), both of which stand for a frankly grosser, more sensual poetics than the delicate experiments with quantitative meters that Harvey proposes in this period; on the other hand, these texts live by a much more abstract relation to the

Danieli Barbaro. P. V.
Ovum Dactylicum
θεομετρικῶς.

Sacram
Barbari
Thespiades
Cigite frontem
Floribus omnibus
Oebalijs, Paphijs,
Laurigerisq; Coronis.
Nā ferit hic bene Barbiton
Suaufons modulaminibus
Egregijs adco, ut data uobis
Huic rear aurea pleetra fororibus
Aonium ue de'it puero melos
Et citharam bonus addit Apollo
Indole captus, & ingenio,
Hunc Hederis igitur sacris
Cingite proctinus almæ
Pierides nouum
Poetam.

Figure 1. Giovanni Pierio Valeriano Bolzani, "Ovum dactylicum," *Hexametris, odae et epigrammata* (Venice, 1550) p. 134.

² Dick Higgins, *Pattern Poetry: Guide to an Unknown Literature* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1987), pp. 230–33, offers a useful glossary of terms such as acrostic, calligram, and *technopaegnon*.

³ William S. Walsh, *Handy-Book of Literary Curiosities* (Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott Co., 1893), p. 272. Walsh begins: "There is pity, or even forgiveness, for all forms of human folly, imbecility, error, and crime. Yet the makers of what are known [as emblematic, figurate, or shaped poems] strain the divinity of forgiveness to an

almost diabolic tension" (p. 270). Walsh is quoted approvingly by Lawrence E. Nelson, *Our Rowing Bible* (New York: Abingdon-Cokesbury Press, 1945), pp. 64–65, who adds: "When in 1589 it was solemnly announced [by Puttenham] that 'the Lozange is a most beautiful figure. . . the fuzie is of the same nature but that he is sharper and slenderer,' not nearly enough people laughed."

⁴ Gabriel Harvey, "From Harvey's 'Letter-Book,'" *Elizabethan Critical Essays*, ed. G. Gregory Smith, 2 vols. (London: Oxford University Press, 1904), 1:126.

world of events and ideas than Harvey's ideal poem would—and does.⁵ One witnesses here, among other things, a complicated generational quarrel over versions of classicism. But the interests of material poetry are not entirely with the earlier generation, since the exemplary text of Harvey's avant-garde—Edmund Spenser's *Shepherd's Calendar* (1579), in which Harvey appears (somewhat ambiguously) as a character—itself involves a self-conscious revision of available strategies for exploiting materiality. Several of the eclogues in that series depend on the play of materiality against meaning, of sound against semantics. The “August” episode includes a whole dialogue, imitated from classical pastoral models, in which two shepherds compete and collaborate to build what amounts to an exemplary material poem: that is, a poem that asks us to think about how meaning is made out of sounds and shapes, and that offers as much in the way of immediate experience as it does of ideas or argument.⁶

The recent work by Lisa Jardine and Anthony Grafton on Harvey's place in the “history of reading”—especially his deployment of what modern readers would consider purely academic knowledge for immediate political and other pragmatic purposes, what Philip Sidney (1554–1586) called “the trade of our lives”—suggests an approach to his ideas about poetic materiality.⁷ Considering the physical sites of Harvey's reading, Jardine and Grafton imagine that he might have used the contemporary invention known as the book-wheel, a “splendid combination of cabinetry and cogwheels” that “enabled its user to lay out on flat surfaces as many books as he might choose, to move them as he needed them without losing his places, and to stop at any selected text—thanks to the cogwheels.”⁸ They reproduce an illustration that shows a reader manipulating a ferris wheel-like contraption as open books rotate toward him.⁹ But an old-fashioned shaped text such as Simias's wings or Bolzani's egg would all but stop the book-wheel in its intertextual movement; such a poem's version of materiality holds the world at a distance in fashioning a perfectly self-contained and self-conscious object. Perhaps Harvey's strictures against materiality in poetry come out of his highly assimilative style of reading, where the material properties of texts would appear as obstacles to the extraction of knowledge; and perhaps the Harvey-inspired work of Spenser (1552–1599), Thomas Watson (1557?–1592), and others of their generation is to reinvent a materiality for their own outward-looking purposes, a concreteness that establishes the poem's identity as a fictional world with borders open to the material world in which it is written and read. For Harvey and the rest, the entire issue of physicality in poetry has to be rethought in a systematic way, and the result is a poetry newly adjusted to reality. In this sense, the generation of English poets born

⁵ The *Biographie Universelle*, 45 vols. (Paris, 1843–65), 42: 463–64, includes a biographical article on Bolzani, whose pen name was Pierius Valerianus. Margaret Church, “The First English Pattern Poems,” *PMLA* 61 (1946): 646–42, provides some context around his work.

⁶ For a more extensive treatment of the materiality of “August” in the context of the entire *Calendar*, see my essay, “The *Shepherd's Calendar*, Dialogue, and Periphrasis,” *Spenser Studies* 8 (1990): 1–33. In G.G. Smith's first volume of *Elizabethan Critical Essays*, the selection from Harvey and Spenser is followed by the dedicatory epistle

to the *Calendar* (pp. 127–34), whose author is the (probably fictitious) editor E.K. I mention the epistle here because one might consider E.K.—here and in his annotations on the eclogues—the first commentator on the materiality of the *Calendar*.

⁷ Lisa Jardine and Anthony Grafton, “‘Studied for Action’: How Gabriel Harvey Read His Livy,” *Past and Present* 129 (1990): 29–78. The phrase from a letter by Sidney appears at 39.

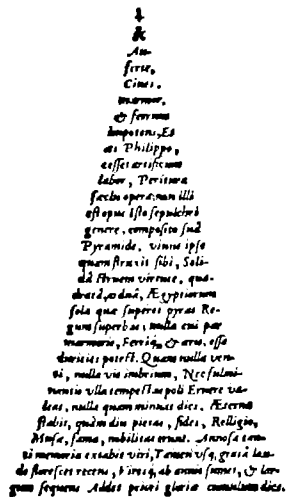
⁸ Jardine and Grafton, “‘Studied for Action,’” 46.

⁹ Jardine and Grafton, “‘Studied for Action,’” 47.

about 1550 prefigures the Brazilian Noigandres group that came to prominence in the 1950s, for whom merely shaped poems were less compelling than a new “concrete poetry” based on a principle of strategic assimilation—figuratively, digestion or deglutition—of knowledge and ideology.¹⁰

Perhaps surprisingly from a modern standpoint, Harvey thinks of even rhymed poetry in accentual-syllabic meters (in other words, what becomes, from this point forward, the norm for conventional lyric writing in English until at least the 1920s) as concrete, inasmuch as this type of writing demands “ringing,” “hunt[ing] the letter,” and other deliberate pleasures for the ear and eye.¹¹ If one tries to think as a classicist of the Harvey–Spenser generation would, of course, then the conventional rhymed poetry of a Shakespeare, a Tennyson, or a Poe is a highly material affair, designed to select a few channels of readerly experience and to gratify these again and again. In these terms, it is easy to see Shakespeare’s *Sonnets* as sustaining a few key pleasures—for instance, of his particular sonnet-form, of the rhyme-pattern, of many inventive uses of sound and even typography within particular sonnets.¹² It might be argued that more than any poet of his generation, Shakespeare (1564–1616) authorizes the material elements of his work to attain the function of tropes fully integrated into the *Sonnets* at large. Accordingly, these elements seem to lack the separate articulation they often have for a contemporary like Spenser or Watson, but they are nonetheless at work.¹³ The context around Harvey’s polemic gives us a modest theoretical insight in practical terms: that all poetry is unavoidably material in one element or another, and that at any given moment, a consensus around the notion of convention involves deciding which elements will belong to the mainstream, which to the avant-garde. The thread of disagreement that runs from the early and mid-century experiments (or more accurately, imitations of experiments) by Bolzani and others, to the strictures of Harvey and, still later, to the theoretically unencumbered trials of Shakespeare, shows us such a consensus—for English poetry, an important one—in the process of coming together.

Older, relatively conservative poets such as Richard Willes in the *Poematum Liber* (1573) having espoused the technopaegnon or shaped poem, members of the ambitious generation of Harvey and Spenser generally exploit more provisional, less totalizing expressions of materiality. Hardly an inevitable model, the technopaegnon reifies the poetic line—its line-beginnings and -endings together support the gross shape of the poem’s image—while diminishing its content, making it imperative that (say) a given line contain a certain amount of horizontal space in order to enable the shape of wings, an egg, a pillar.¹⁴ In the Harvey–Spenser vanguard, the technopaegnon is treated as an unequivocally obsolete resource. Yet



D. Ph. Sidnaei Pyramis.

Figure 2. William Gager, “D. Ph. Sidnaei Pyramis,” Execuinae illustrissimi D. Philippi Sidnaei (Oxford, 1587), sig. C2^r.

¹⁰ Haroldo de Campos, “The Rule of Anthropophagy: Europe Under the Sign of Devoration,” trans. Maria Tai Wolff, *Latin American Literary Review* 27 (1986): 42–60.

¹¹ Harvey, “Harvey’s ‘Letter-Book,’” *Elizabethan Critical Essays*, ed. Smith, 1:126.

¹² In her detailed work in progress on the *Sonnets*, Helen Vendler writes persuasively about the material play—including typographical puns and other concrete devices—that characterizes the series.

¹³ Alastair Fowler, *Triumphal Forms: Structural Patterns in Elizabethan Poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), is an inventive guide to the poetics and

practice of numerology in sixteenth-century poetry as these “implied a completely spatial conception of literature, of which figure poems [or technopaegma] were only one manifestation, noticeable because bizarre” (p. xi). He argues, I think unsuccessfully, for the place of the *Sonnets* alongside obviously numerological texts such as Spenser’s *Epithalamion* (pp. 183–97).

¹⁴ Giovanni Pozzi, *La Paola Dipinta* (Milan: Adelphi, 1981), pp. 352–56, gives a bibliography of recent commentary on the Alexandrian and medieval technopaegnon and several other topics relevant to the present essay, including anagrams, calligrams, and acrostics.

in the outpouring of verse occasioned by Sidney's death in 1586, some poems — for instance, William Gager's pyramid (figure 2), Henry Price's wings (figure 3), and John Lloyd's altar (figure 4) — seem decidedly retrograde according to the new criteria. Is the debate over materiality still obscure enough in the mid-1580s that less accomplished contemporaries do not get it? Or are these poets setting the conditions that will see the form revive in the seventeenth century, where for George Herbert and others the technopaegnon becomes a hieroglyph, the appropriate medium for supra-historical, often sacred experience?¹⁵ Even as Harvey and Spenser are issuing polemics and counter-examples, respectively, Watson's *Hekatompathia*, or *Passionate Centurie of Love* (1582) installs an ambitious, highly self-conscious "pillar" in its sequence, to mark a turning-point in the lovesick speaker's mentality. For Gager and the rest of the Sidney-inspired mourners, the technopaegnic event is the death of a unique hero (and ironically, a vanguardist) with its classical and Christian analogies. For Herbert's "Easter Wings" (figure 5) in *The Temple* (1633), the poem's dynamic shape correlates to a pattern of spiritual growth realized through consciousness of the fall of man. The process underway between Harvey and Herbert indicates how much context determines what we believe about lyric texts: first inherited somewhat uncritically from antiquity, then disparaged as an exotic medium out of the rush of ordinary discursive poetry, the technopaegnon gradually assembles fresh cultural import until another generation finds something seemingly new and urgent to build on.

Early in the career of the Noigandres circle of Brazil, which Charles Perrone brings up to date in this issue of the *Bulletin*, Décio Pignatari writes disdainfully of the calligram — which had been defined by Guillaume Apollinaire in his collection of that title (1925) — in a way that perhaps recalls Harvey. Contrasting Apollinaire's merely shaped texts with the more volatile experiments of Stéphane Mallarmé in *Un Coup de Dés* (1897), Pignatari complains that the "meaningless decorativeness" of the former "of course made any rhythmic structure whatever impossible and hindered the view of the true problem, which in substance was that of movement."¹⁶ In the same way that a younger generation of humanist poets of the later sixteenth century rejected most shaped poetry as inert and academic, Pignatari's polemic announces another shift against named and received forms, against empty convention, against any "concrete" poetry that refuses to push the boundaries of lyric possibilities forward — and of all poetry, not just that of the avant-garde. For Pignatari and his contemporaries, Apollinaire's redaction of materiality is exactly such a technological dead-end. Mallarmé's experiments, by contrast, are a vital source that makes available a new current of disciplined play with verbal space and sound: they mark the start of a twentieth-century tradition that breaks out with the high modernists of the 1920s and achieves perhaps its most emphatic successes in the 1950s and 1960s, in a kind of renaissance of material poetry.¹⁷

NOLVIT ALAS.

Altra peritura Sidera nevis noluit ALAS.
 Scilicet legem meminit, aming, ruit.
 Lingua telli figidit, a gna aguis
 Alis minata est, poddis nimula lū.
 Tangenda crebida fides aribus
 Vltura, plumar, ignibus.
 Virtus defata cum, loce.
 Fugose flangi,
 Ignibus vi:
 Illa nuntur inidā
 Sidnax, illi nec calor
 Ignis, nec vnda figexa, libatiz
 Obefit, pollit, quin politerā pēti,
 Quin prapētiū affidētiū lētiū,
 Prigenti, decorer polifilum nuntice calis,
 Adrelo illudet, inditēdum lumare terran.

Figure 3. Henry Price, "Noluit Alas,"
 Exequiae illustrissimi D. Philippi
 Sidnaci (Oxford, 1587), sig. G4.

D. PHILIPPI
 ARA.

ΒΡΗΜΟΝ ΒΑΡΕΥΣ ΘΥΑΙΡΡΟΥ,
 ΤΙ ΖΟΙ ΠΛΕΘΟΝ ΑΔΑΝΤΩ;
 ΒΥΤΕΥΣ ΠΑΛΑΑΣ, ΔΥΠΕΤΟΝ ΦΡΕΝΙ
 ΣΑΟΥΣ ΠΕΝΘΟΣ, ΕΓΧΟΣ, ΑΙΓΙΔΑ
 ΡΥΤΑΣ, ΑΡΗΟΣ ΒΡΓΑ ΔΥΣΟΡΟΝΑ
 ΔΙΠΟΙΣΑ ΜΑΙΝΟΛΑ, ΜΥΑΙΕΡΟΝΩ
 ΒΡΑ ΣΜΙΗ ΚΥΘΗΡΗ
 ΤΑΟΙΣ ΑΑΘΝΗΝ ΑΛΑΟΝ,
 ΑΑΘΝΙΣΤΕΡΟΝ ΑΛΑΟΝ
 ΑΝΑΧΙΩ, ΔΑΜΕΜΤΑ
 ΜΟΡΩ, ΒΕΑΒΙ ΑΡΗΟΣ
 ΜΥ ΑΙΔΙΟΝ ΣΥΒΝΑΣΣ,
 ΦΑΙΛΟΝ ΥΚΟΙΣΑ ΔΑΚΡΥ,
 ΘΙΟΝ ΟΒΡΙΜΟΝ ΣΥΓΟΙΣΑ
 ΕΟΤΩ, ΣΕΟΙΣ ΑΝΗΡΡΑΣΕΝ ΤΑ
 ΡΙΠΩΥΑ ΠΑΔΑΣ ΟΠΑΑ ΚΑΙΡΩ
 ΒΟΗ Τ', ΙΑΝΡΙΣ ΟΝ ΑΔΥΑ
 ΟΥΤΑΝ ΟΥΤΗ ΠΡΑΠΟΝΤΑ ΔΟΥΣΙ
 ΣΤΑΙΟΝ ΑΙΜ' ΑΡΗΣ ΔΟΥΤΕΣ

Figure 4. John Lloyd, "D. Philippi
 ARA," Peplus: Illvstrissimi Viri D.
 Philippi Sidnaci Svpremis Honori-
 bus Dicatus (Oxford, 1587), sig. A3.

¹⁵ See Joseph H. Summers, *George Herbert: His Religion and Art* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1954), pp. 123-46.

¹⁶ Décio Pignatari, "Concrete Poetry: A Brief Structural-Historical Guideline" (1957), trans. Jon M. Tolman,

Poetics Today 3 (1982): 190.

¹⁷ Pozzi, *La Parola Dipinta*, pp. 354-55, includes recent work on the visual poetics of Mallarmé and Apollinaire in his (otherwise early modern) bibliography.

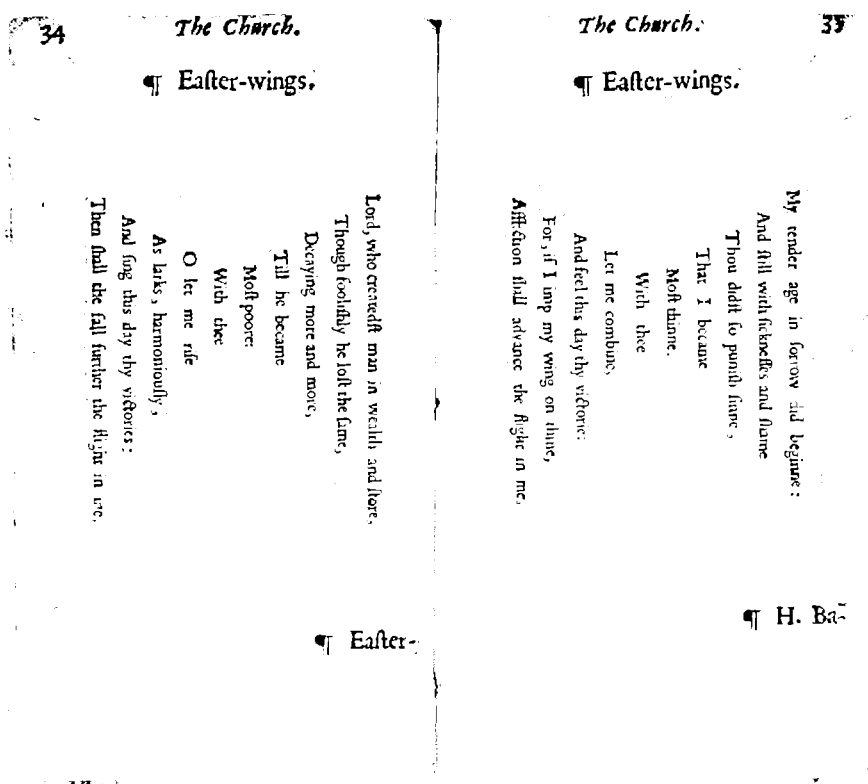


Figure 5. George Herbert, "Easter Wings," *The Temple* (Cambridge, 1633), pp. 34-35.

Octavio Paz has written provocatively of this latter-day tradition, and its bonds to, and independence from, the distant cultural past:

Although the horizon of *Un coup de dés* is not that of technology—its vocabulary is still the vocabulary of symbolism, grounded on the *anima mundi* and on the universal correspondence—the space it opens is the same as that faced by technology: world without image, reality without world and infinitely real. . . . Unlike the poets of the past, Mallarmé does not offer us a vision of the world; nor does he say one word to us about what it means or does not mean to be a man. The *legacy* to which *Un coup de dés* expressly refers—without an express legatee—*à quelqu'un ambigu*—is a form; and more than that, it is the form of possibility itself: a poem closed to the world but open to the space without a name. A now in perpetual rotation, a nocturnal moon—and a deserted here. To populate it: the future poet's temptation. Our legacy is not Mallarmé's word but the space opened by his word.¹⁸

When Paz mentions "the poets of the past," of course, he implicitly excludes most of the early modern writers whose work establishes a long-lived tradition of material poetry. But his account of that modernist legacy describes the earlier tradition with considerable, perhaps unsettling, accuracy.

To take an important medieval instance of material poetry, for instance, Hrabanus Maurus's "De imagine Christi" (circa 810, and published in a famous edition of 1503) turns away from the world deliberately in order to explore a space that has one unambiguous name: Christ. The revival of Hrabanus Maurus's work in the Renaissance answers a need for an escape-route within poetry itself, a way of writing that will not stand still to accept the world-boundaries of a Dante, a Petrarch, or a Chaucer. This kind of poetry must fix itself in a different relation to

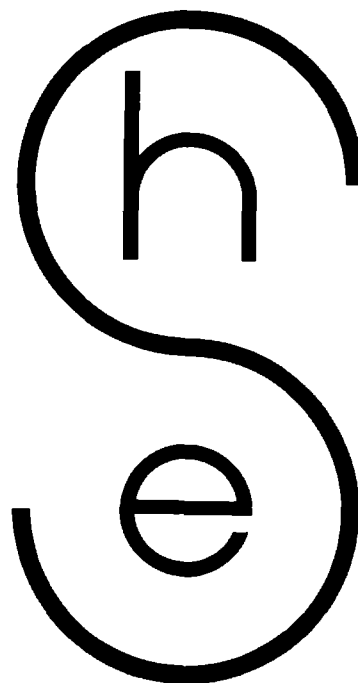
¹⁸ Octavio Paz, "Signs in Rotation," *The Bow and the Lyre*, trans. Simms, p. 254.

the everyday experience of humankind—it invokes divinity not as an idea or an experience to be spoken of in the same fashion that one speaks of a love affair or a pilgrimage, but as operating within a reality of its own, and demanding a poetry all to itself. Early modern poets and readers recover the work of Hrabanus Maurus and other ostensibly outmoded predecessors because they are in search of something analogous for themselves and their culture, an outlet for rethinking the questions that conventional poetics are unable to address. Even within the sixteenth century's outbreak of material poetry, one generation's approach to these questions is not the next's. Bolzani's engaging attempts to broach the issue of pure forms, in his eggs and pyramids, are undone by the sophisticated interrogations of *The Shepherdes Calender*, where Spenser produces something like a critical theory of poetry and society—"a poem [newly open] to the world"—while inventing a poetic language that is old and new at once. The crude but typical effort of Giovanni Battista Palatino in *Compendia del Gran Volume de l'Arte del Ben Scrivere* (1566) to have both his sonnets—the all-but-official form of conventional, discursive poetry in this period—and his play with materiality, in a piece such as the "Sonneto Figurato," is decisively answered by a material text of the next generation like the *Hekatompathia*, where the chain of Petrarchan sonnets is interrupted and discredited as being the work of a benighted lover. And Puttenham's *Arte of English Poesie* (1589), probably the most comprehensive European statement on poetics of its time, summarizes his contemporaries' determination to reshape society in the image of the new poetry—and at the same time, to produce a highly socialized and politicized poetry—without compromising the gains made feasible by decades of deliberate, collective experiment with materiality. Paz's "Mallarmé," one of several factitious sources of a "new" tradition that privileges the word over the world, stands in for a historical continuum whose history has not been written but whose momentum has always been felt by poets and readers.

The post-Mallarmaic train of poets, for whom Paz and Pignatari are important spokesmen, are aware more often than not of their Renaissance antitypes. Post-modern material poetry cultivates a consciousness of—sometimes almost a scholarly attention to—how its distant antecedents struggled against the literary and cultural order of their times. Following the examples of Ezra Pound and Charles Olson, both of whom maintain a politically tinged Renaissance scholarship within their poetics, these two or three generations of poets innovate in a trans-historical context.

Louis Zukofsky's "Julia's Wild," from his book of Shakespearean interpretation called *Bottom: On Shakespeare* (1963), was composed after a suggestion by the poet Cid Corman, who had been reading *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*: "Apart from the Sylvia Song, I like best the line—Come, shadow, come, and take this shadow up. Ring a change on that for me? A dark valentine."¹⁹ "Julia's Wild" is the object of this generational handoff between the two poets, and is mediated by two complementary dimensions of American modernist poetics: its historicism, which often produces heavily revisionary adaptations of medieval and early modern texts, and its emphasis on materiality. For instance, Pound says of his didactic writing what is even more true of his poetry: "I hope the reader has *not* 'understood it all straight off.' I should like to invent some kind of typographical dodge which would force every reader to stop and reflect for five minutes (or for five hours), to go back

¹⁹ Louis Zukofsky, *Bottom: On Shakespeare*, 2 vols. (Austin: The Ark Press, 1963), 1:393.



he = êle
& = e
she = eta

S = serpens
h = homo
e = eva

Figure 6. Pedro Xisto, "Epithalamium II" (1967), *Concrete Poetry: A World View*, ed. Mary Ellen Solt (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1970), p. 114.

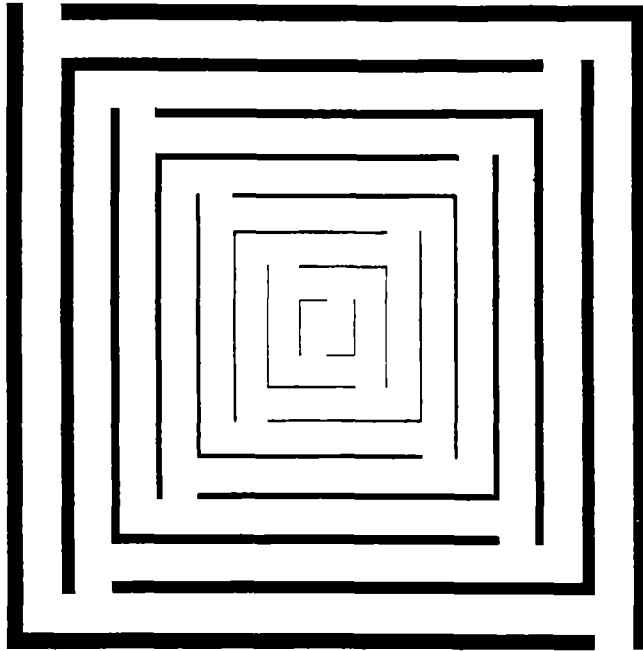
to the facts mentioned and think over their significance for himself."²⁰ In this sense, Zukofsky's poem is all dodge or loop—taking a line of authentic sixteenth-century verbal music, and reweighing it obsessively until it reappears in its original condition—and is an extension of something that Shakespeare often produces, the so-called "pure poetry" of the plays that enables characters and audience to reflect counter-logically on dramatic events. In the original passage (Act 4, Scene 4, line 197), Julia reflects on the two-dimensional illusion of her rival's picture; in Zukofsky's poem, the verbal illusion of the Shakespearean line itself is pulled apart to be brought together again.²¹ Corman's request for "a dark valentine," moreover, carries the intuition that dramatic character itself—such as the persona in this play named Valentine—can be flattened into sheer language, handled, and exchanged. The wildness of "Julia's Wild" is found in this eagerness to read the earlier work playfully, intensely, randomly—whatever might bring the present-day poem out of its (insubstantial) substance.

A different impulse moves Pedro Xisto's "logograms," the verbally spare compositions that prefer reflection and discussion over conventional reading, and often come with expository keys that unlock their dense, allusive codes. In naming several of these poems after the Renaissance subgenre of epithalamium or wedding-poem, Xisto (1901–1989) claims for concrete poetry an affinity with the often ritualized motions of celebratory lyrics like Catullus's 61 and 64 (circa 60 B.C.E.) or Spenser's

²⁰ Ezra Pound, "America, Roosevelt and the Causes of the Present War," *Money Pamphlets by E.*, no. 6, trans. John Drummond (London: Peter Russell, 1951), p. 17, quoted in Christine Brooke-Rose, *A ZBC of Ezra Pound* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California

Press, 1971), p. 258.

²¹ William Shakespeare, *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, in *The Riverside Shakespeare*, ed. G. Blakemore Evans (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1974), p. 168.



Labyrinth { Love } L { Logos } Labirinto
 Life } Leito }

Figure 7. Pedro Xisto, "Epithalamium III" (1967), *Concrete Poetry: A World View*, ed. Solt, p. 115.

Epithalamion (1595).²² Of course Xisto's poems are not epithalamia in a literal way, for they lack the usual elements such as the often intrusive poet-speaker, the mythological wedding guests, and the occasion of social moment. But Xisto accepts for his poems a more generous reading of convention: they insist that epithalamic lyrics do not record events, but make them happen; are not located at a temporal remove from the wedding, but are part of it; do not force an idealist staging onto a flawed history, but discover what is arguably ideal in those events.²³ Finding the whole story of humankind's fall in the common letters of *he* and *she*, Xisto's "Epithalamium II" (figure 6) works like a more restless, dynamic development of the Middle Ages' ingenious readings of the human face as spelling out the words *omo dei*, man of God. Its most visually active element, the *S* that gently wraps the other letters, represents the catalytic elements in both the love story and the etiology of evil. "Epithalamium III" (figure 7) domesticates the primal, mythological terrors of the labyrinth by putting one at the intersection of everyday experiences. In negotiating love and life, the word and the bed, one has unavoidably taken the part of a Theseus, and is likely to meet not a minotaur but another living, reading human being coming in the opposite direction.

²² Thomas M. Greene, "Spenser and the Epithalamic Convention," *Comparative Literature* 9 (1957): 215-28, esp. 221, gives the standard account of the subgenre.

²³ I would insist that, in fact, no epithalamium—not even Catullus's 61 or 64—is as entirely "conventional" as it might seem from a distance; Catullus 64, for example, has been described by Michael C.J. Putnam, "The Art of Catullus 64" (1961), *Essays on Latin Lyric, Elegy, and Epic*

(Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982), pp. 45-85, as both a revision of available Alexandrian models and a deliberate negotiation between idealism and contemporary reality, while 61 includes "occasional remonstrances to the happy couple concerning the preservation of marital bliss, as if the poet knew the pitfalls and was worried that the picture he was sketching could scarcely endure" (p. 84).

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Figure 8. Ernst Jandl, für alle (Darmstadt: Luchterhand, 1974), p. 233.

An index to the different strains of historical consciousness at large in what we call the renaissance of material poetry might be found in two poems not included in the Widener exhibition. "Sonett" (1966) (figure 8) by Ernst Jandl (b. 1925), one of several lyrics with a common purpose described in the German poet's essay "mein gedicht und sein autor" (1967), evidences the long-lived preoccupation with the poetic form principally identified with Renaissance humanism, its trophies and blemishes. According to this poem's program, one means of recovering the physical presence and cultural tracks of the sonnet-form is to strip that form down to its name alone and to put the name where the expressive content usually goes. The form as form virtually implodes—that is, nothing comes between the label and its realization. The effect is to reveal both name and form as indicating a historically and aesthetically contingent production, and to provoke us with the question: where does the power inhere? Material poems often pose this sort of problem, though rarely with the direct ideological routing and lack of compromise displayed in this "sonett."

Corresponding to Jandl's "sonett" is Haroldo de Campos's "Alea I—Semantic Variations" (1967), subtitled "Uma Epicomédia de Bólso" ("A Mock-Pocket-Epic").²⁴ Written from a once-legendary site of wonder, Brazil, in the language and vocabulary of Luís de Camões and other epic poets of the Renaissance, Campos's text accumulates epithets ("the admirable" / "the fabulous" / "the spectacular") in warehouse fashion, then takes apart its inventory (roughly translated, "the adshitable" / "the flatulous" / "the spermtacular") emphatically, perhaps gleefully. Where Jandl's poem condenses the sonnet-form to disclose its mysteries, Campos (b. 1929) dissects the object of generic and rhetorical attention and asks: What is all this power expended about? In both of these cases, post-modern poets go at early modern conventions with a historical conscience and a material vengeance. Zukofsky, Xisto, Jandl, and Campos all test the dimensions of a surviving world-view that has tested their dimensions as poets, perhaps as human beings.

The present issue of the *Harvard Library Bulletin*, like the exhibition in which it is grounded, identifies many common spaces between the material poetry of the Renaissance and what we call the post-1950s renaissance of material poetry. The texts exhibited in May 1992 and recorded here testify to the breadth of the category of material poetry, early modern and post-modern. Kevin Young widens the received history of the experimental sixties by recovering the career of a Black American concretist, Norman H. Pritchard. Marjorie Perloff's essay confirms that the category of material poetry includes the current American avant-garde in such productions as Johanna Drucker's *History of the/my Wor(l)d*. And continuing work with the topic by other scholars, perhaps the students whose work is featured here, will show it to draw in not only the direct line of poetry descended from the international concrete movement of the 1950s and 1960s but artists' books, "language" poetry, cinema, music video, holography, and more.²⁵ Old and new at once, culturally and politically and aesthetically particular to its many situations, the material poem is the historical concrete.

²⁴ Haroldo de Campos, "Alea I—Semantic Variations," *Concrete Poetry: A World View*, ed. Mary Ellen Solt (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1970), p. 105, with the translation by Edwin Morgan on the following page.

²⁵ On the latter, see, for instance, Eduardo Kac and Orneio Botelho, "Holopoetry and Fractal Holopoetry: Digital Holography as an Art Medium," *Leonardo* 22 (1989): 397–402.