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Foreword to Visual Imagery, Metadata, and Multimodal Literacies Across the Curriculum

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Foreword

As one of those educated to consider the primacy of the word – written and spoken – as the vehicle for creating and transferring knowledge, I am often surprised by the evidence around me that we live in a world in which technological devices of various shapes and sizes have blunted the reliance on the layerings of words to define and engage in favor of various shortcuts to knowledge. Complexity of expression in the textures of language has given way, because of those devices and their applications, to abbreviations, neologisms, emojis, deliberate misspellings, instagrams, tweets, and other avenues of expression that focus both the sender and the recipient on a screen rather than on a page, on immediacy of connection and information (even about emotions, now presented through various forms of round faces) rather than on the subtleties and nuances of words. Of course, those new forms are a language as well, and they are helping to reshape the dimensions of how those of us in traditional academic roles might consider language as object, as visual form, and not necessarily, as I learned it, a system of sounds and signs.

I have been thinking about such a prospect for several years. As a poet, my goal is to gather sounds and meanings together onto a page as I write a poem. I have long understood that poems have forms, even those poems which are perhaps fundamentally formless, and was taught that both traditional and nontraditional forms often tend to behave in certain ways, carry certain kinds of messages, make use of internal melodies and rhythms and linguistic musics as they engage the reader. The emphasis in that understanding is on content, even as we consider form, and on how those contextual parts all work together to create meaning in and through the aesthetic whole we call a poem.

These elements are essential in conversations with students. But the slipping in of elements that are outside the contextual significances and traditional meanings of words, shaped by those screens and the characters that cross them, have lately added a new consideration in my teaching of literature and imaginative writing. This is nothing new, of course, since we have for centuries been aware that poetic texts can look like something and we have seen experiments with “concrete poems” – poems written and printed in the shapes of the objects they describe – that provide us with an awareness that a poem can be considered to be a text as well as a visual image, a representation of the object discussed. But this is not fully what I have in mind in this new consideration. A “concrete poem,” I would argue, still places emphasis on words first and then on how those words are molded into a picture of some sort. That picture attracts the reader’s eye as a clever presentation of the words he or she is reading. I also do not enfold my sense of form, in all its technical beauty, fully into this consideration.

I have of late, rather, been thinking of poem as a framework of precisely the sort of aspect of “meta-data” that the essays in this volume consider. That is, I have been talking with my students and with colleagues in this country and in others, about the fact of poem as object in itself, as a sculpture of shadings and spaces, a visual image in its own right that contains and carries other visual images. This may be especially so for the lyric poem, which is committed to the moment and therefore is an object of space, and perhaps less so the narrative, which is marked more by a linearity and chronology which mark it as an object of time. Both, though, in fact, do have a similar visual impact on the page as two-dimensional sculptures. My students understand that. They are used to seeing such two-dimensional objects on the various screens they scroll through, and when we talk about a poem as a visual object – long before we talk about its content – they understand with a kind of innate sensibility born from the shaping of the eye by ever-present screens what I am talking about. They trust the eye more than they trust the ear; they understand what they see in front of them without needing to reflect on undercurrents or strategies for unraveling contextual baggage. That is precisely the use of the visual to frame and decipher information.

The encounter with a poem, at first glance in the sense I am considering, is an encounter with a visible and tangible structure. That structure is a container, I tell my students, that holds other images, many of them formed through visual and other sensual encounters with the world, that generate internal visual images through the denotative and connotative power of the words within that frame. Though the words form that external structure – the exoskeleton of the poem – they do so only through their combinations of ink and white space. Their “meaning” is separate from the visual frame they constitute and yet they carry meanings – often visual in nature in their own right – because words are also signs and symbols with agreed upon significances, the products of something often seen and often imagined. I also focus, in those discussions, on something that may help to make all this more accessible: I tell my students that a poem is like a painting and that it must be experienced as an aesthetic object, as something first seen and explored visually, a gathering of empty places and the lines that divide them, just as a painting is experienced as a gathering of brushstrokes and textures of light.

In this way, the poem-as-visual-object provides readers, as they encounter it at first with their visual senses, with two kinds of meaning. First, of course, is the kind of meaning that we learn about in preparatory school when our teachers first ask us “what does the poet mean?” and we flounder about the flood of words whose meanings seem so out of reach. The second, and perhaps a more important defined or revealed meaning, is a moment of epiphany, of a sudden and deeply powerful realization of significance, of the thing seen and of the effect felt or understood. This is so because a poem is a tangible structure, composed of words and containing revelations of the pinpoint of experience, often free of narrative progression but not necessarily free of the concentric circles of the presented moment. Those moments have to do with the layering of the world and with the act of unfolding those layers, not to define progression to some conclusion that reveals “what the poet means” but to encourage immediacy of connection. That connection begins with the poem as a visual object in and of itself. There is simplicity in the sculptural textures of that visual object and, in like fashion, complexity in the simple resonances of its words and lines.

My sense of the poem-as-visual-object, as a two-dimensional sculpture on a page, is predicated on the firm belief that it is the eye that draws us into the resonant aesthetic moment, into the very heart of human truth as it lives in a world of insight and revelation that poetry as object and poetry as contained message makes possible. The conversation in these pages highlights a variety of considerations that

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concern the significance and process of the learning experience; how meaning across many horizons has evolved as new screens drive students to new understandings, often unconventional and unfamiliar to many of us who teach them; and how our commitment to shaping our engagements with the materials and subjects we teach will require us to look at the world differently, looking at new angles and reflections on screens of many sizes in our students' hands. These essays will help all of us widen our essential understanding of how the irreversible wizardry of new technologies defines the ways in which our students now create the world.

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