

**Poems That Open and Shut: The Accordion-Fold Creations
of Blaise Cendrars and Octavio Paz**

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ABSTRACT

The accordion-fold poems of Blaise Cendrars and Octavio Paz challenge readers to explore the many ramifications of poetry that must be physically acted upon in order to be read and duly appreciated. Almost immediately, we discover that this poetry gives vivid amplification to themes of opening and closing (revealing/concealing, appearing/disappearing etc.) together with more customary considerations (meter, repetition, metaphor) that arise in the progressive *unfolding* of almost any poem in the most traditional sense. Moreover, the physical metaphor and related aesthetic considerations of the accordion-fold format lead us to uncover quite astonishing parallels between our chosen poems and areas as far-reaching as cinema and “performable objects” --the minimalist, folded paper constructions of James Lee Byars, for example. These, in turn, predictably stimulate exciting new perspectives on the unique creations of Cendrars and Paz --poems that are books that can also be paintings and even pieces of moving sculpture-- while they prompt compelling insights into poetry in the broader sense. The storehouse of such discoveries, together with the recurring motif of Dogen’s “Mountains and Rivers Sutra,” the philosophical ruminations of Octavio Paz from *The Monkey Grammarian*, and fresh readings of ancillary material by poets as diverse as

Christian Morgenstern and Gary Snyder, individually and by accretion suggest new approaches to thinking about poetry. They also prompt original musings on the profoundly intimate association between poetry and the expansions and contractions of consciousness --both within a given poem and on the part of readers-- for as these readers enter a poem they also enter, as if pilgrims, the realm of creations that are themselves models of consciousness and the universe. Indeed, it is appropriate that our two folding and unfolding accordion poems, prime examples of “journeying poetry” in their own right, should move as pieces of performance sculpture. After all, they are poems about movement and, in an ultimate sense, are fitting metaphors for the continuous flow of consciousness both in human awareness and throughout creation.

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Poetry

is a sudden rupture

suddenly healed

and torn open again

by the glances of the others

-- Octavio Paz, "Letter to Leon Felipe"

PRELIMINARY REMARKS

What reader of poetry has not experienced the "Open Sesame" effect while reading a poem? It will be remembered that, in the tale from *The Thousand and One Nights*, Ali Baba was told to utter these magic words before a sealed mountain cave, and when he did the cave opened up to disclose the eye-dazzling wealth hidden there by the forty thieves. The opening up of a poem --the sudden outpouring of wealth from that self-contained enigma--is a similarly magical event for readers and writers of poetry.

When we read a poem --a fixed text-- it opens up and, flowing like a river, pours out a vast richness of changing words, images, and ideas that rapidly multiply and grow, undergoing transformations from line to line and moment to moment. But then another curious event occurs, in every way as magical as the first. When one concludes the reading, eyes lifted from the page, the poem reverts to its former fixed state --the whirling, dynamic universe collapses onto petrified silence. And it is then we see that the poem that began to flow like a river, embodiment of movement, has remained solid and

stationary as a mountain through it all. Somehow, while remaining both “river” and “mountain” (movement and fixity) these two metaphors, these two realities of the poem, of poetry in fact, have become simultaneous and interchangeable –much as Dogen intuited in his classic disquisition of the terms from a Buddhist perspective.¹ Mountain and river, movement and fixity, can now be perceived as interchangeable and simultaneous in the same way that open/shut, hidden/revealed, are no longer separate and opposite terms but co-existing operations of the revealed mystery (another oxymoron) that is the poem. A poem opens and shuts. It alternately, and even simultaneously, conceals from view and reveals that which is hidden, that which is customarily beyond the reach of everyday language, perhaps even beyond the scope of ordinary thought and human comprehension.

There is more. Without acknowledging it explicitly, we have also observed that the poem, a product of human consciousness, requires a sympathetic human consciousness --the reader’s attention-- for its activation, to stir it to life. The attention of the reader effectively activates and gives meaning to an otherwise silent, stationary structure comprised of mute, printed symbols on a page. This point will be revisited later in the paper when certain performative aspects of the poetry are discussed.

Octavio Paz’s *Blanco* is an ideal case in point because the poem opens and shuts on both figurative and real, physical levels. The poem exists in a totally contained, inert or latent state when it is shut. Being shut, in the example of this poem, means closed and inserted into the sleeve of a box upon which are inscribed two square figures, one on each side; one is yellow on white, the other yellow on black. Even shut, of course, this poem announces the potential of a poem and in a way prefigures it. There is a dynamic tension

and interaction established between, at the very least, black and white (or yin and yang); and the inscribed yellow squares give the additional suggestion of an emerging structure of attention moving within an enclosed space (sacred precinct, temple), a sacred geometry with cardinal direction points (N, E, S, W) already in place.

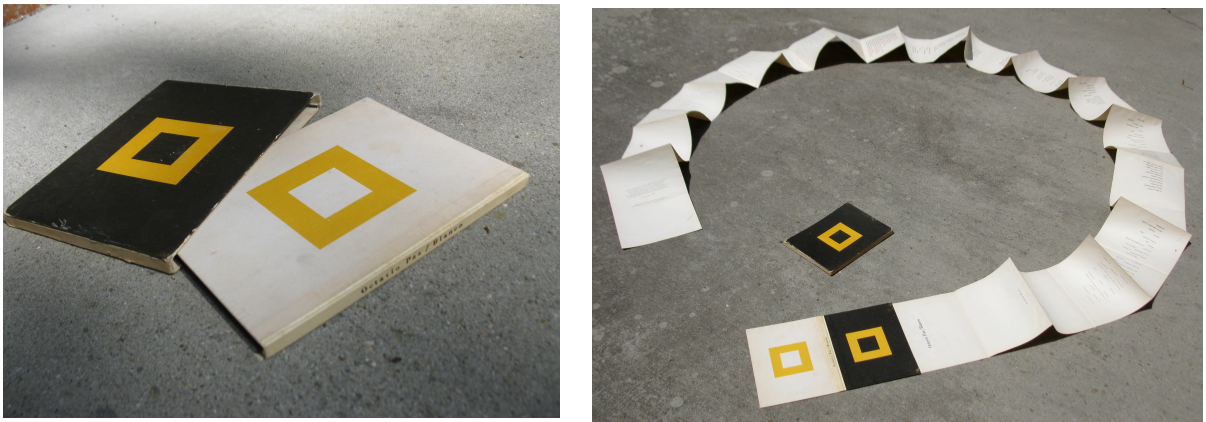


Figure 1. Blanco

This poem opens, it begins to disclose its hidden contents, by being acted upon by the reader. Notice, however, that this action is not yet the attention of the eye on the page or the act of deciphering a text; rather, it is the simple physical action of removing the body of the poem (what will be revealed as an accordion-fold book) from its slip/box cover. The first act of discovery occurs on a level prior to language. It precedes the act of language, and like sacred ritual it is meaningful before and beyond language on a sheer physical level (compare it to a ritual bow, for example). Finally, as successive folds of the accordion book are drawn open, the poem (the intellectual content) is revealed in successive layers as lines of text in multiple fonts, colors, and columns extend *vertically down the length* of a nearly 20-foot stretch of paper.

In an age when accordion books, cards, photo albums etc. are commonplace, it may be difficult to re-capture the sense of novelty and excitement generated in their day

by the accordion poems of Blaise Cendrars (France) and Octavio Paz (Mexico).² In the West, the accordion book seems to have been a unique discovery of the Parisian avant-garde, who no doubt found it satisfying to their cravings for experimentation. We know that it has been widely used in Asia for centuries and was also the preferred book form of the Aztecs and Mayas in Ancient Mesoamerica. What is significant, however, is that our two chosen poets apparently found the fold-out book appropriate for their works in a way that an ordinary book was not. That is, the accordion format was a necessary choice, one that met with the demands of their respective aesthetic and/or philosophical platforms and agendas of the moment. Moreover, the accordion-like format chosen by the poets as vehicles for their respective poems both complements and serves as metaphor for what it is that a poem does and is; that is, how a poem opens and shuts, how it reveals that which is conceals, and how it uniquely operates and lives in the awareness of its readers. And let us be very emphatic: these poems are different from other poems. Beyond static verbal constructions, the poems examined in this essay are unique creations tied to a space of kinetic movement and changing colors that are part and parcel of the poetic experience.

The focus of this paper falls decidedly on the unique merits of the accordion-fold format as it relates to poetry. Specifically, we hope to discover what insights this format can bring to further our understanding of the origins, nature, functions, goals, and reception of poetry. Although the accordion-fold poems of Blaise Cendrars and Octavio Paz constitute the focal point of the paper, the ideas generated from that focus are myriad and far-ranging. Accordingly, the material that follows is divided into two parts. Part I is primarily expository; it deals with physical description of the poems, pertinent

background information, central ideas and themes, circumstances of composition, and immediate observations that arise from their comparison with each other and with poems of standard format. Part II expands on material presented in Part I but can in no way be considered of lesser importance. On the contrary, it marks the place where points previously made in isolation begin to intersect and engage in dialogue with one another. In the various sections of Part II, several trains of thought introduced in Part I are explored in greater depth. In particular, the discussion branches into issues of critical reception, aesthetics, philosophy, and the inherent relationship between human consciousness and modes of poetic expression.

PART I

The Primacy of Pleated Folds

Before beginning a detailed examination of each of the accordion poems, let us briefly turn our attention to a short poem, “Fisches Nachtgesang”/ “Fish’s Night Song,” from the *Galgenlieder/Gallows Songs* (1905) of Christian Morgenstern:

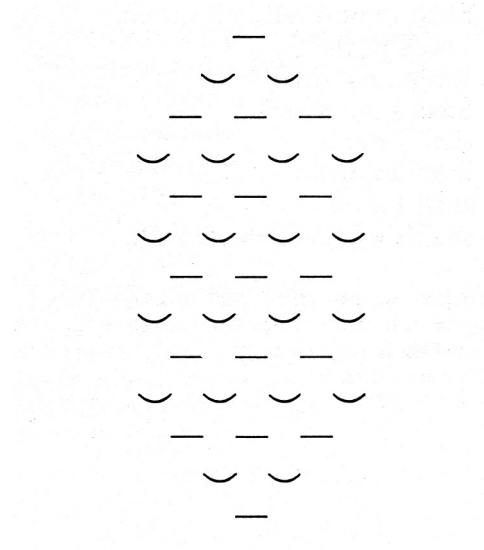


Figure 2. “Fisches Nachtgesang”

Although the suggestion of fish, or even moonlight on a rippled pond, is an intriguing visual aspect of Morgenstern's poem, it is not our intention here to analyze or suggest any potential "narrative content" of this curious visual poem. Rather, we cite the poem solely for its very clear and prominent structure, a structure which can be highly useful for highlighting fundamentals of the accordion poems about to be discussed.

First of all, Morgenstern's poem serves as a kind of schematic representation for "the poem" in general reduced to its barest essentials --a form or body, sequential development in space/time, rhythm or meter, and a collection of self-referral elements. Second, and most importantly, it might also be conceived as a two-dimensional model of an accordion-fold poem, with each line of Morgenstern's poem representing a separate fold of the unfolded accordion. Finally, as a dynamic whole and a conceivably open-ended process, Morgenstern's composition reminds us that a poem can be considered a model of the universe, much as Octavio Paz has asserted on numerous occasions. It might require a stretch the imagination, however, to see "Fisches Nachtgesang" as a model of how the universe, and the teeming life forms it contains, evolves --moves forward-- on steps of activity and rest, or stop and go.

We can envision it, however, if we think of the odd-numbered "verses" of this poem (those with flat lines) as "rest" and the even-numbered "verses" (comprised of curves) as "activity." The dynamic alternation between even- and odd-numbered verses --activity and rest-- thus establishes a figurative movement forward in space and time (and down the length of the page) in much the same way as the progressive expansion/contraction of the universe is represented in a figurative sense when the accordion poem of Cendrars or Paz is *physically unfolded* by an act of the prospective

reader and read *vertically down the extended sheet of paper*. The fundamental act of *unfolding* is essential to what any poem *is* (whether it is an accordion poem or not). In the case of an accordion-fold poem, however, the primacy of pleated folds cannot be overstated, for these folds constitute an indispensable infrastructure that both enables and promotes the physical opening and closing of the poem. Needless to say, they are also the poem's primary metaphor. The accordion-fold format is a creation of contrived evanescence, and, like our poems, it is designed to open and subsequently collapse.

No doubt the flat and curved lines of Morgenstern's poem unconsciously suggest diacritical marks commonly used to distinguish foot types in poetic meter (iamb, spondee etc.). There is more: this observation leads us to appreciate how Morgenstern's poem provides an approximate visual representation of how the accordion-fold poem, in its (literal) unfolding, evokes the sound waves of spoken language that are imbedded implicitly in the words inscribed on each fold of the pleated paper. The poem alerts us to the fact that the undulating up-and-down movements of the unfolding scroll are entirely analogous to crest-and-trough undulations of a sound wave, a matter that will acquire mounting significance in the course of this paper. In the case of the collaborative work of Cendrars and Delaunay, the undulations of the unfolding book remind us that both sound (implicit in the words) and light (Delaunay's painted colors) are wave forms. Both are forms of vibration. And finally, the physical "vibration" of the accordion-fold poem very pointedly underscores the wondrous marriage of art and poetry, word-sound, color and light that is *La Prose du Transsibérien et de la petite Jehanne de France*.

Pleats, Folds, Words, and Color: Cendrars and Delaunay

The unprecedented creation of *La Prose du Transsibérien et de la petite Jehanne de France/The Prose of the Trans-Siberian and of Little Jeanne of France* (1913), a product of collaboration between Blaise Cendrars and Sonia Delaunay-Terk, appears to be the first instance of an accordion book conceived as an appropriate vehicle for poetry in the West. If the intention of the creators of the poem was to dazzle the European avant-garde, their efforts met with a resounding success that has endured over time.



Figure 3. *La Prose du Transsibérien*

Even before reading Cendrars' poem, readers encounter the colorful book jacket/envelope design conceived by Sonia Delaunay. Although less enigmatic perhaps than the book jacket of *Blanco*, described earlier, it nevertheless offers a tantalizing foretaste of the rare delights to be encountered inside. *La Prose* does not disappoint on any level, and there are many! These range from the simultaneous presentation of two parallel and complementary "texts" (one visual, the other linguistic) which extend unbroken for some two meters (445 lines of free verse) in length down over a series of multiple folds; colors which bleed from Delaunay's painting into the background of

Cendrars' poem; and even the changing colors and typography of the printed words themselves. Then there is a bold, almost riotous display of linguistic and visual images that assail the reader with novelty of content, expression, and representation.

Built around a (perhaps invented) Trans-Siberian journey by train, their unique creation was proudly heralded by Cendrars and Delaunay as “le premier livre simultané,” the first book of *simultanéisme* (Bochner 1978, 51-52, 98). Hajo Düchting notes (1994, 35) that the term *simultanéisme* originated in the law of simultaneous contrast in painting, the heightened intensity of the color field when certain colors are adjacent or juxtaposed



Figure 4. La Prose . . . (detail)

to one another (as vividly demonstrated in the paintings of Vincent van Gogh, for example); however, “*simultanéisme*” here equally denotes the compression of word, image, and movement into a parade of singularly creative gestures. In much the same way that *simultanéisme* in painting creates an “exalted vibration” in the eye of the viewer, so new “vibrations” may arise from within the poem via the contrasting interplay of painted image and text. Additional charges of energy result from rapidly merging intersections between and among no less than twelve different typographical features and an explosive array of painted images. The wide range of emotions portrayed or elicited by individual verses and word choices also contributes sometimes

violent or disorienting elements of novelty and surprise. In short, theirs is a poetry made via creative juxtapositions of themes, ideas, colors, feelings, startling vocabulary, incantatory motifs, and unorthodox versification that, in a manner akin to improvisational riffs of a skilled musician, result in a dazzling flow of images moving seamlessly down the length of the page.

For today's reader, the work is an exuberant celebration of invention that incorporates the sounds, emotions, dreams, and frustrations of the nascent avant-garde. Associated with these are pulsating currents of electricity and the speed and movement characteristic of novel modes of communication and transportation (telephone, train, airship, ocean liner); and extreme experiences ranging from hunger, cold, poverty and disease to the ravages of war and love's disillusion. Cendrars frequently cites trains and their role in the composition of his poem: ". . . vont en sourdine sont des berceuses / Et il y en a qui dans le bruit monotone des roues me rappellent la prose lourde de Maeterlinck / J'ai déchiffré tous les textes confus des roues et j'ai rassemblé les éléments épars d'une violente beauté / . . . qui me force" (Cendrars 1992, 245).³ The relentless energy and jostling, forward-lurching movement that characterizes much of the text seems entirely appropriate given the realities of train travel and the general disorientation of our poet-narrator as an adventuresome sixteen-year-old journeying with "la petite Jehanne" (a melancholy young prostitute) at his side.

In Cendrars' poem, the train is both a real, mechanical object hurtling across a rapidly scrolling landscape and also a metaphor for the early twentieth century. Unparalleled possibilities of speed and movement deriving from new forms of transportation (such as the train) provided unique new experiences of time and space.

The rapid-fire images of Cendrars' poem –images of violence, sadness, love, introspection, despair-- shuttle swiftly before the reader's awareness in much the same way that light and shadow and rapid glimpses of scenery flash swiftly past the burdened gaze of a passenger peering out the window of a train. These images, are accompanied, moreover, by the poem's clickety-clack rhythms so similar to those of a train . . . and those of a movie projector! One might suspect that the nascent cinema, with its play of light and shadow across a movie screen, was very much in the poet's repertoire of conscious and unconscious associations.

The simultaneous, accordion-fold format of Cendrars' and Delaunay's composition seems perfectly suited to the poet's compressed, soaring flights of lyrical invention as, in stream of consciousness fashion, he relates random thoughts and musings during his journey from Moscow to the Sea of Japan, theater of the Sino-Russian war, and back west again to Paris, site of the engineering marvel that is the Eiffel Tower. This "premier livre simultané" represents, for Jay Bochner, "the wedding in the twentieth century of a new, material, and outside world with the world of the imagination" (1978, 257, note 20). In this poem we discover simultaneous contrast (*contraste simultané*) of "lyrical mysticism with the seemingly transitory, contingent nature of all the terribly solid, real objects and terribly passing acts" (Bochner 1978, 123). The poem also satisfies what Octavio Paz considers the "double imperative" of the long poem: "that of variety within unity and that of the combination between recurrence and surprise" (Quiroga 1999, 150). Consider this parting sample of Cendrars' portrait of modern society in motion, and note, in particular (in line 1), how the world stretches out and snaps back *like a concertina-accordion!*

Le monde s'étire s'allonge et se retire comme un harmonica
qu'une main sadique tourment
Dans les déchirures du ciel, les locomotives en furie
S'enfuient
Et dans les trous,
Les roues vertigineuses les bouches les voix
Et les chiens du malheur qui aboient à nos trousses
Les démons son déchaînés
Ferrailles
Le broun-roun-roun de roues
Chocs
Rebondissements . . .

(Cendrars 1992, 240)⁴

The Eternally Recurring Journey: Paz

Separated from *La Prose du Transsibérien* . . . by a period of over fifty years, Paz's *Blanco* (1966) stands in marked contrast to Cendrars' dazzling creation in many respects. While it too is a poem of self-propelling, surging energies, these energies -- moving from subtlest, unmanifest levels on through the diverse forms of manifest creation and the intricacies of human thought, emotions, and physical interactions-- are working on a much larger, cosmic scale and are much more consciously directed and controlled. It is Cendrars' concept of *simultanéisme*, if anything, that most strongly coincides with the creative dynamics of Paz's chronologically later poem. The

simultanéisme of *Blanco*, however, occurs almost exclusively with regard to the sustained play and interplay between complementary opposites that weaves like a kind of “alternating current” throughout the extended, undulating folds of *Blanco*. Eschewing “contrastes simultané” between text and color (although he does employ red along with a variety of black fonts and typefaces), Paz seizes upon the creative potential of tensions inherent in such powerfully charged *conceptual* contrasts as movement and fixity, spirit and matter, wholeness and fragmentation, word and silence. In this regard we can readily see that Paz’s work is significantly more ambitious than his predecessor’s in scope, choice of abstract themes, intellectual complexity, and depth.

The incorporation of movement and change into the work of art, so fundamental to the Pazian oeuvre, was of course also a primary obsession of the turn-of-the-century avant-garde practitioners of cubism and futurism who formed the literary and artistic coterie of Blaise Cendrars. However, Cendrars was a people’s poet, a poet of the streets and swaggering adventurer who seemed to grip life by the tail with one hand while writing with the other. His friendships with Picasso, Léger, Chagall, and Modigliani mark his artistic temperament and “well indicate his taste” according to one observer (Bochner 1978, 53). Above all lyrical, his works are now tender, now violent, and move with a kind of “muscular, even mechanized grace” sometimes used to describe the painting of Léger.⁵ Although Paz was also a fervent art enthusiast (he applied his critical skills to the work of Marcel Duchamp on numerous occasions), the meticulously structured and scrupulously executed mental construct that is *Blanco* exists at a far remove from Cendrars’ own accordion-fold creation.

The accordion-fold format is extremely well suited for the philosophically complex ruminations of *Blanco* (= target, goal = white = space, void, emptiness). Like *La Prose du Transsibérien*, Paz's poem tells the story of a journey, and according to Wilson (1979, 142) the accordion-fold *Blanco* was modeled after a tantric scroll. Writing from within the tradition of the so-called "critical poem" initiated by Mallarmé, however, Paz serves up a poem about the evolution of language and poetry itself –while simultaneously telling a story of language, erotic love, the world, and consciousness! When the reader unfolds the text and body of *Blanco*, he or she follows the journey of language from its silent origin in pure, undifferentiated consciousness (*el comienzo, el cimientto*) along its course to fullness of creation and the complex drama of human experience within a diverse and dynamic universe. As it reaches its climax, however, this elaborate journey is marked by dissolution and a precipitous return to silence --the silence of the blank page and book of closed pleated folds.

Having consciousness as its basis, *Blanco* is a poem wherein the full range of consciousness is explored with regard to its various unmanifest and manifest expressions, among which language is primary and fundamental. Consequently, the work commences with an almost ritual incantation evoking the birth of the Original Word from silence; this moment of the poem transpires in an atmosphere pregnant with expectancy as one by one words slowly emerge from the blank page. Gathering momentum, the poem then proceeds gradually through the formation of language, desire, grammar, and duality as the predominant central column begins to split into two, left and right, at several points. It subsequently moves on to body, mind, senses, and intellect (as per yoga philosophy of India) and culminates in the wealth of human experience in a complex universe charged

with eros and imagination. At the moment of greatest integration of forces, however, and at the height of material differentiation and mundane proliferation, the poem begins to dissipate and fade away. It finally dissolves in an ecstasy of heightened eroticism as spirit, body, and world/word converge and melt away in a lovers' embrace. Everything -- bodies, language, the world-- literally dissolves on the page before our eyes, ironically vanishing at a point of maximum plenitude. As the poem reverts to silence, we are left with the impression that silence alone has had any real substance in the poem, that no doubt it is silence that held the poem together all along, both propelling and sustaining it in its winding trajectory through the world of phenomena. Reading *Blanco*, one has a profound sense of bearing witness to an eternally recurring birth and collapse of language/created universe in an omnipresent Now.

At the end of the poem, we look down at the page, now silent and empty, and we recognize it as the same origin seen at the poem's beginning. The poem opened up and now it has shut, just as we physically close the accordion-fold structure that is its vehicle. The universe of the poem is thus revealed as a kind of cyclical, even simultaneous enactment of Ouroboros, a serpent swallowing its tail. "*La transparencia es todo lo que queda*/Transparency is all that remains." And perhaps transparency is all there really ever was, or is --the ultimate reality.

Since it is a perennially recurring symbol in his poetry,⁶ readers already familiar with Paz's oeuvre might conjure up the image of a tree. *Blanco*'s accordion book format brings to the fore structural similarities between the journey of language as depicted in the poem and the growth of a tree, whose body comprises the trunk, limbs, and several branches of the poetic text prominently inscribed along the vertical path of the fully

extended (unfolded) poem. Tree of language, tree of images, consciousness pervades like an animating, colorless sap the manifest trunk, branches, and individual leaves of *Blanco*; it also extends beyond the fated dissolution of these elements, thus supporting the cyclical recurrence of seed→ tree→ seed. And that which remains when the poem has run its course --the blank page, the accordion-fold format now stripped of the poetic event-- what is that but pure, undifferentiated consciousness eternally existing before the event, during the event, and beyond the event. As duly noted by Gimferrer, Paz's poem is entirely self-contained (1980, 61). The poem and its dissolution is its primary subject - -and its sole object, too; image and reflection are here complementary and interchangeable.

Unfolding the Poem and Unwinding the Reel

Examining the accordion poems of Cendrars and Paz, one has a strong sense of the underlying presence of cinema. The influence of emerging cinema on Cendrars in particular, and on the European avant-garde in general, is well documented and can be sensed both visually and formally in the complementary flow of coloristic imagery (Delaunay's contribution) and free verse with its wealth of verbal imagery. Just as the poem's utterances --rapid flashes of sound/word and meaning, light and shadow-- are as if fleeting glimpses through the windows of a speeding train, they can also be compared to the play and interplay of light and shadow in the moving frames of film. There is an easy kinship between Cendrars' poetry and the motion picture film --a succession of stills/frames, each one the visual equivalent of a word, phrase, or line of poetry. Critic Jay Bochner has even called his *Poèmes élastiques* (1919) "a grab bag of seemingly unrelated

film clips, each without context, all hastily edited together . . .” (1978, 131). Furthermore, the relationship seems to be forged largely by the fundamental role of values of light in the respective media. Cinema is inconceivable without light, and according to Cendrars’ own affirmation *La Prose* is a “sad tale written on (sun)light” (Sidoti 1987, 23) quite the same as a motion picture is story written on values of light.

In this regard, it is interesting to note that only a matter of a year or two separates the first talking film (that is, a motion picture with image and soundtrack *simultaneously* recorded and reproduced) from the composite/simultaneous work of Delaunay and Cendrars.⁶ And it is no less significant to note that Octavio Paz expressed on several occasions his wishful intention of adapting his accordion poem *Blanco* to the movie screen. Although his dream never materialized, Paz was long involved in “visual poetry,” “*poesía en movimiento*,” and even produced film compositions of shorter works. From its initial flickerings around the time when Freud was working on *The Interpretation of Dreams*, cinema seems to have replicated the uncanny image-making power of the mind, much as still photography did in prior decades. It would seem that just as cinema derives much from, and contributes much to, the culture of turn of the century Europe, so the accordion poem in the West betrays intimate links to cinema. The two of them undeniably “breathe the same air.”

Moreover, if Cendrars’ journeying poem can be related to the author’s fascination with nascent cinema and movement of all kinds (including oriental scrolls), then Paz’s own Asian experience (as traveling diplomat with posts in Japan and India) and his fascination with the kinetic potential, both visual and physical, of poetry are readily apparent in *Blanco*. In fact, Paz’s poetry displays a certain affinity with the period’s

developing performance art. As a case in point, consider for a moment *A 1,000-Foot White Chinese Paper* (1963), a “performable object” by James Lee Byars. This amazing work, “folded like an accordion,” was unfolded to an oval shape by a Japanese woman in ceremonial dress during its inaugural performance in the Shokokuji Monastery of Kyoto. The same work was subsequently enacted or “performed” in the Grand Sculpture Hall of Pittsburgh’s Carnegie Museum of Art in 1965 (one year prior to the publication of *Blanco*), this time unfolded by a Roman Catholic nun (Mansoor 2011, 220).



Figure 5. “A 1,000-Foot White Chinese Paper”

That *Blanco*, in the original edition of 1966, was also conceived as a piece of performance art/poetry there can be little doubt. The author’s “Notas” at the end of the poem make this point clear by proposing to the reader no fewer than six (6) different manners of reading the poem corresponding to as many as fourteen (14!) different poems. All this is offered the reader, of course, in addition to performing the necessary physical action of unfolding the pleated pages of the accordion poem itself.

Notwithstanding such earlier precedents as the live performances of the Dadaists and certain other groups who meshed poetry and the visual arts in living performance,⁷it

may be remembered that the term “performance art” became relatively widespread in the United States during the great variety of “Happenings” and “Events” etc. (usually distinguished from other art forms by their ephemeral nature) that proliferated in the 1960s. This was also the period when Julio Cortázar, a writer of Latin America’s “Boom” generation and personal friend of Paz, engaged in such literary experiments as *Rayuela/Hopscotch* (1963) and *62: Modelo para Armar/62: A Model Kit* (1968). These two works are more than mere contemporaries of *Blanco*. *Rayuela*, with its notoriously open-ended structure, similarly invited readers to choose among several suggested linear and non-linear ways of reading the text.⁸

It is interesting to note that all these works were composed only a few years before Reader-Response theory came into prominence. In the 1970s, the theory’s leading representatives --among them Wolfgang Iser, Stanley Fish, and Roland Barthes-- began promoting the reader as a collaborator and co-creator of meaning in works of literature. The divide between the consciousness of the writer and consciousness of the reader was thus considerably narrowed as the two were invited to commingle and engage in dialogue. No longer viewed as merely a passive recipient of knowledge, the reader was accepted as a participating agent in the shaping of meaning through his or her own personal interpretation. Reader-Response criticism reflects the period’s general loosening of boundaries and, in particular, represents a great advance in blurring rigid distinctions between objectivity and subjectivity (Tomkins 1980, xv-xxiv). It is relevant to our discussion of the accordion-fold poem because it opens the door to acknowledging performative aspects of the work of literature.

Accordion-Fold Format and Scroll

For a change of pace and perspective at this juncture, it might complement our understanding if we were to turn the attention briefly to a book-length poem that is not an accordion book at all. *Mountains and Rivers Without End* (1996), by Gary Snyder, takes its inspiration from an ancient Chinese scroll painting. The opening poem, first of thirty-nine entries, relates the Poet's vicarious journey along streams and footpaths depicted in a painted landscape from the Sung Dynasty. In a sense, Snyder's introductory poem might seem to replicate the underlying innovation of Cendrars' and Delaunay's simultaneous creation: the scroll's landscape and Snyder's poem are realized in conjunction with one another. Anthony Hunt writes:

Because the end papers reproduce images taken from a well-known Chinese horizontal hand scroll . . . the thirty-nine sections of Snyder's long poem appear as an interconnected extension of that horizontal turning. Nor is it a surprise to discover that "Endless Streams and Mountains," the opening section of *Mountains and Rivers Without End*, has been inspired and shaped by the scroll it describes, Ch'i-shan wu-chin. (1999, 7)

Via the technique of *ekphrasis*, in "Endless Streams and Mountains" Snyder initially describes, then fully enters the painted landscape of a thirteenth century Chinese scroll. The Poet enters the landscape of a scroll that is alternately and simultaneously a journey through a painted Chinese landscape and his own poem. There for a while he lives the contents of the scroll. Ultimately, however, he transcends the space that serves as his template and, in the final verses of the poem, his focus widens to encompass the shores the shores of contemporary Lake Erie and beyond --in twentieth century America.

This initial poem serves as the preamble for a more extensive account of Snyder's own existence as a traveler throughout America and the world as portrayed in subsequent entries --the entire book mimicking the unwinding of a scroll. The *book as a whole* is conceived very much like the sort of scroll painting from which the first poem derives; it even incorporates the author's knowledge of Asian calligraphy and brush painting!

Most astoundingly, in one of those thrilling instances that attest to embedded truths and hidden alliances throughout the intricate webs of life and literature, a character in Jack Kerouac's *The Dharma Bums* (1958) by name of Japhy Ryder (alias for Gary Snyder) asserts the following in Kerouac's novel: "I'll do a long poem called 'Rivers and Mountains Without End' and just write it on and on on a scroll and unfold on and on with new surprises and always what went before forgotten, see, or like one of them real long Chinese silk paintings . . ." (cited by Kern 2000, 124). What has already been stated about the work, together with what we know about the decades-long period of its genesis, makes it fairly certain that Japhy's musings in Kerouac's *Dharma Bums* became, years later, the concrete reality that is *Mountains and Rivers Without End*. We might also conclude that, while not published *in the form of* a scroll, Snyder's work is conceived *in the manner of* a scroll and purports to "unwind" accordingly. Robert Kern acknowledges as much, stating that "the book as a whole is not unlike the sort of scroll painting after which it is named, and that both are merely human approximations of the processes outside them which they attempt to portray" (2000, 126). He adds that Snyder explicitly compares writing with Asian brush painting and implicitly figures the experience of reading the book as "the act of unfurling and viewing a scroll painting . . ." (2000, 126).

There is much that could be said about “the processes outside them which they attempt to portray,” and about artistic composition and natural processes as well, for it is in this regard that the poem *qua* scroll, and its assumed relevance to our discussion of Cendrars and Paz, becomes patently clear. Framed within the poem’s Buddhist world-view, multiple layers of philosophy, sacred lure, ecological concepts, encounters with fellow human beings, animals, deities, and mythological entities are interwoven throughout the various individual poems in Snyder’s book-length poem. The book incorporates verses and even lengthy passages from a range of oral and written traditions. Numerous sections pick up and expand upon themes from Dogen’s sutra, cited earlier, and the Japanese Zen master himself is cited explicitly on occasion.

Broadly speaking, the book consists of an episodic procession of travel narratives related in thirty-nine individual poems. Reverting to the cinematic theme established earlier in this essay, we might even consider Snyder’s book a travel documentary, a poetic rendering of the unfolding tale of the Poet’s travels at home and abroad wherein places he visits (mostly on foot, “walking on walking”), his human encounters, and interactions with the ever-changing landscape are presented as meditations on such observed natural processes as life and death, floods, passing clouds, drought, erosion etc. Throughout, normal boundaries of time and place are kept flexible to the point of transparency, and the book exudes a sprightly gaiety in recounting life adventures as Snyder and his friends practice walking meditation, sing songs, or chant invocations and praises. Finally, in inspiration, structure, and content Snyder’s book succeeds remarkably in generating a sense of “endless unfolding” as it chronicles “the endlessness and uncontainability of natural processes that constitute the earth” (Kern 2000, 125).

From even this cursory sketch, no doubt the reader can identify certain points of commonality linking Snyder's paginated book-length poem and the accordion-fold creations of Cendrars and Paz. However, it can also be appreciated that Snyder does not strive for the sort of unity and purposeful design that are found (for what little else they may have in common) in the two accordion books. Overall, Snyder's work seems to obey a different aesthetic and creative intent, one apparently linked to the *horizontal* orientation of traditional Chinese landscape painting found in his scroll model. This is an aesthetic, we submit, more rooted in multiple focal points, segmented duration, and discontinuity; it prizes varying perspectives, change of mood, part over whole, and semblance of spontaneous, random development over the sustained intensity of focus that shines so strongly --by comparison-- in the two vertically unfolding accordion poems.

Of course, the truth of the matter is that Snyder's book is neither an accordion-fold poem nor the scroll he envisioned forty years prior. It can reasonably be argued that Snyder has succeeded remarkably in creating and maintaining *the illusion* of a scroll painting throughout his lengthy poem, even going so far as to employ the ubiquitous "wet black brush" and "moist black line" and liken the entire book to one of those colophons traditionally inscribed at the end of an ancient scroll. Above all, in choosing book over scroll, Snyder has accepted a challenge that seems to have taken the concept one step further. By internalizing the vision of a scroll, and exploiting the possibilities inherent in that primary inspiration, Snyder has demonstrated in his own way the power of poetry to transcend conventional limitations, including those of the traditional book.

PART II

Oral-Traditional Poetry and the Art(s) of Performance

From the songs and dances of early primitive societies onward, the essence of poetic expression has been the rhythmic, or “metered,” production of sound --not necessarily words but sound plain and simple (whether connected with meaning or not), commonly displaying frequent use of repetition. On several occasions, most notably in commentary on rhythm and respiration in *El arco y la lira/The Bow and the Lyre* (1956), Octavio Paz has cited the intimate relationship between respiration --the rhythmic breathing in and out that is the hallmark of human life-- and the art of poetry.¹⁰ To illustrate his point, Paz cited the “old octosyllable” of the traditional Spanish ballad, or *romance*. What the Mexican poet might have had in mind but did not state expressly, is that the alternation between odd and even lines in such ballads corresponds quite naturally to the inhalation and exhalation of breath, respectively. Thus, a kind of see-saw delivery is established as the ballad is rendered orally (this trait is also reflected in early musical transcriptions).

At the same time, there is in these poems a figurative movement forward in space and time on steps of activity and rest much as we have observed in Morgenstern’s “Fisches Nachtgesang,” and this figurative movement could be likened to the unfolding of an accordion-fold poem. The fact that the old *romance* is essentially an *oral* verse form highlights yet another aspect that is highly significant for consideration here. Just as the alternation of odd and even lines can be said to parallel the rhythmic unfolding of an accordion poem, that same rhythmic unfolding --crest and trough, crest and trough-- mimics quite remarkably the trajectory through space of a sound wave. The physical unfolding of the accordion-fold poem, therefore, can be said to parallel and even evoke,

in almost ritualistic manner, the element of sound that is fundamental to all poetry. But there is more. Let us leap momentarily to the musical instrument known as the accordion. As the accordion gathers and expels air in its unfolding and folding back again --as it functions as a bellows to create sound-- it is working in a manner in every way analogous to a pair of human lungs breathing in and out. The accordionist uses a musical score and keyboard to produce single musical notes, chords, and phrasings --the rising/falling tones of sound we hear as music. Are these not approximate analogues for the letters, words, and verses impressed upon the folded and unfolded panels of the accordion *poem*?

While neither of our two poems --not Cendrars', not Paz's-- was conceived for oral delivery, the incorporation within these poems of a wide variety of visual stratagems seen earlier, lends amplification to the printed text in a manner not entirely unlike the amplification that occurs by way of oral delivery. Call it a type of nostalgic recall if you will, a tacit acknowledgement of poetry's extra-textual oral roots. Oral-traditional poetry has ancient ties to magic and ritual and is commonly associated with situations that are communal and participatory, usually involving song and dance. We would submit that accordion-fold poetry is similarly expansive: no remaining seated here! These rare, beautiful poems are uncommonly unwieldy. They have an intrusive, in-your-face quality, and once the unfolding begins, there is almost no stopping it. As they are literally unfolded by our hands, our bodies too are required to flex, bend, fold, and unfold as we variously stand, twist the torso, raise the arms, and even kneel on the floor to absorb the contents disclosed and lying open before our eyes. It could truly be said that the activity

of reading such a poem necessarily occasions the development of a symbiotic relationship between reader and poem.

Finally, as we consolidate observations and thoughts regarding the physical and aesthetic qualities that distinguish the accordion-fold format from conventional book format, let us return to James Lee Byars. For demonstration purposes this time around, we've chosen Byars' "Untitled Object" of 1962-64, primarily because its minimalist design lends itself well to a consideration of basics, to matters fundamental and universal. As seen below, "Untitled Object" allows us to contemplate the accordion-fold format in its purest, most essential form:

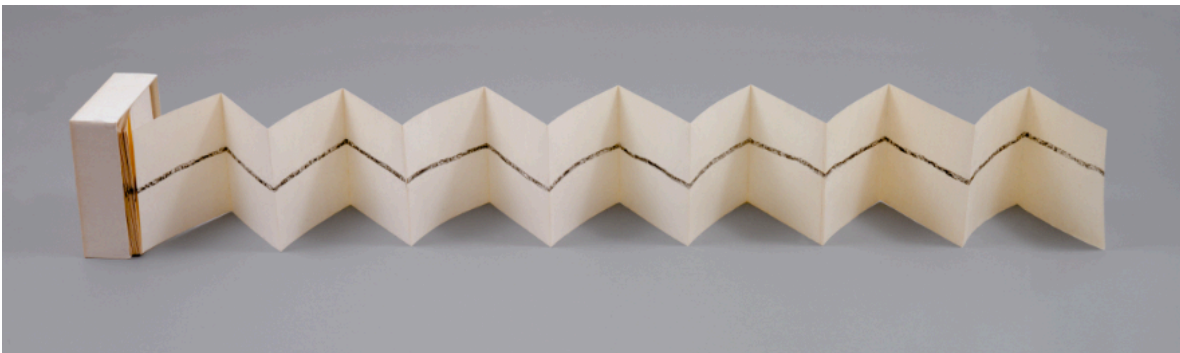


Figure 6. "Untitled Object"

When Byars' piece was first shown in performance in Kyoto, the 210-foot long strip of folded paper was slowly unfolded and arranged in various configurations by a woman dressed in black ceremonial garb. Examining the image reproduced above, the reader will notice a thin black line running down the center of the folded paper as it is removed from its boxed enclosure.¹¹ The curator's notes accompanying the piece at the Museum of Modern Art state that this continuous black line appearing on the "rhythmically arranged surface" highlights the "performative nature of the drawing and creates a link with the ritualized elegance of traditional Japanese theater production"

(Curator's Notation, MoMA). After noting the similarity between "Untitled Object" and the physical properties of Paz's *Blanco* outlined at the onset of this paper, the reader can readily appreciate the enormous impact that the rhythmically folded paper surface of Paz's poem must inevitably have on the lines of poetry inscribed upon its twenty-foot extension. The same might be said of Cendrars's *La Prose du Transsibérien*.

Universal Life Principles and the Accordion-Fold Poem

As we have just seen, MoMA has established links between the performative nature of Byars's "Untitled Object" and traditional Japanese theater. In the same way, we have pointed out the performative nature of Paz's poem and also discussed ties linking both Cendrars and Paz to cinema. Let's revisit now the likely connection(s) between cinema and the accordion-fold poem. Having done that, perhaps we can better understand how rhythm, breathing, the musical accordion, and cinema all intersect and resonate sympathetically in this discussion.

In an unpublished online essay, Kati Rubinyi notes that, while performance is underway, the folded frames of Byars' performance pieces together configure a sort of "visual grid." Moreover, she states that, as a motif and means of spatial organization, the space created by the grid is cinematic; the performance piece, that is, becomes "the analogue for a film screen" (2002, 9). She describes a particular piece as "film reconfigured" (2002, 17), adding that "the folded paper is the celluloid, the units of the folded sections are frames." Seriality of the folded "frames" also introduces the element of time: "the audience watches [reads] for the length of time it takes to unfold the paper in attentive silence" (2002, 17). Almost in passing, Rubinyi alludes to the "mood of

religion” created by these pieces of performance art, stating that the *mise-en-scène* they create has an air of “ritual enactment,” of something as if “extracted from another world” (2002, 10). Nevertheless, they do remain entirely of this world, only larger.

How similar are Rubinyi’s remarks to those already voiced in the discussion of our poems by Cendrars and Paz! With demonstrable ties to cinema and the performative arts of the grid; and to the measured/metered rhythms of breathing in and out and wave formations of sound and light; and as an analogue to its musical counterpoint, the accordion of polkas and tangos, the accordion-fold poem embraces, largely by virtue of its unique format, a number of very fundamental and universal principles of life and creativity. It even has, or suggests, ties to painting, sculpture, dance, theater arts, and film as well as science, yoga, oriental philosophical concepts, and no doubt other unmentioned expressions of human thought and creativity.

Last but certainly not least, *as a poetic format* the accordion-fold poem embraces and fully reconciles, as the best of poetry can and does, what are otherwise (in everyday reality) fundamental opposites; for example, the accordion-fold poem can be at one and the same time --like the mountains of Dogen’s sutra-- stationary and moving, fixed and changing. As has been demonstrated, the imposing universality of life principles embodied in this format can only render richer and more profound those individual words, techniques, images, and themes developed within the poems’ textual bodies.

But returning briefly to Byars: That black line (drawn in crayon) running down the center of the 210-foot extension of unfolded paper is, for us, the master stroke of genius in his “Untitled Object.” It has a profoundly moving gestural quality that eloquently attests to the artist’s interest in dance, particularly dance of minimalist nature.

And this gestural quality is also what humanizes --puts in a human context and lends human presence to--what would otherwise be a beautiful but rather cold, abstract object. That line humanizes the work in much the same way that a poet's words humanize the blank page by inhabiting it. Perhaps it is this notion that invites the viewer to see that solitary black line as a kind of condensed shorthand or glyph for writing, writing on the blank page --indeed, lines of written words printed on the accordion-fold platform of poems by Cendrars and Paz.¹¹ And yes, as intuited and promoted by Paz in *Blanco*, this black line *as writing* underscores the notion of the poem as walking, as a journey. But a journey to where?

To venture a tentative answer to this question we turn once again to Octavio Paz. Written only a few years in the wake of *Blanco*, and in many ways an extended prose commentary on that poem's primary themes, *El mono gramático/The Monkey Grammarian* (1974) is a paramount work that shares, at the very least, qualities of prose poem, travel narrative, and essay on language, myth, and philosophy. This work characterizes the ruminations of poetry as walking along a path leading to . . . some unknown but vaguely felt and anticipated final encounter. In the course of this complex narrative, the Poet repeatedly evokes images of "the path," "pilgrimage," and "travelers/pilgrims." Much the same as in religious pilgrimage, Paz seems to say, the poet's journey is undertaken with a transcendental purpose: to discover the nature of the fated encounter, perhaps to learn what lies beyond the terminus (1981, 1-2).

But what does Paz finally learn about the end of the text and its journey? He says that it goes "nowhere --except to meet itself" (1981, 157). As suggested above re *Blanco*, the poetic text is a self-reflexive creation, ever curving back upon itself to create and

erase itself simultaneously. “Each page reflects all the others, and each one is the echo of the one that precedes or follows it . . . There is no end and no beginning: everything is center. Neither before nor after, neither in front of nor behind, neither inside nor outside: everything is in everything” (1981, 153). Snyder expresses a similar sentiment: “Sounds of streams and shapes of mountains. / The sounds never stop and the shapes never cease” (1996, 138). No doubt this is why Paz can confidently state that, when properly understood, nothing really has a name; the letters on a page “simultaneously describe it and conceal it” (1981, 109), and “the poet is not one who names things, but one who dissolves their names, one who discovers that things do not have a name and that the names that we call them are not theirs” (1981, 110). Names grow “thinner and thinner” to the point of transparency, of evaporation.

Such is precisely the case of *Blanco*, as described earlier. “Thanks to the poet,” Paz writes, “the world is left without names.” Then, for the space of an instant, we can see it “precisely as it is --an *adorable azure*” (1981, 110). That is, words drop away and the poem stands alone, pure. The poet’s mission, consequently, is “not to think; to see, rather, to make of language a transparency” (1981, 114). And this is how the poem ends, by erasing itself and disappearing in a kind of transparency. *La transparencia es todo lo que queda*.

By an odd coincidence, the journey of *La Prose du Transsibérien* is also a return to origin that ends by fading away as the poet-narrator, despondent and riddled with doubt, drifts off to the Lapin Agile for a few drinks. Meanwhile, as if the poem were a mere colophon added to the end of the Chinese scroll that served as his model, Snyder lifts his “wet black brush” from the page; and as writing ceases he pronounces the sage

admonition, “The space goes on” (1999, 152). *La transparencia es todo lo que queda*.

Poetry and the Metaphysical Universe

The preceding discussion provides a convenient opportunity to segue to the matter of the blank page. As is commonly known, from about the time of Mallarmé (“Un Coup de des”/“Dice Thrown,” 1895) and others in his wake, the tense and challenging relationship between the poet and the virgin page, upon whose blank surface are written the words of a poem, became a driving dynamic and major thematic source of poetry. It remained so throughout a large portion of the twentieth century and beyond. The relationship between the poem and the blank page, the ensuing dialogue between the two, was commonly fraught with tension and anxiety because of the overwhelming philosophical significance associated with the awesome defiance of that blank space --or void-- and the relative insufficiency and powerlessness of human gestures made in the face of its looming, unfathomable presence. But the blank space of the page also offers significant opportunities for creative innovation.

The discovery is not a new one by any stretch of the imagination. In Spanish, Octavio Paz was one who early on explored the untapped potential of the blank page and the empty spaces between and around words and groups of words --in effect incorporating these into the language of his poetry. Of *Blanco*, for example, Eliot Weinberger has written the following: “The typography and format of the original edition of *Blanco* were meant to emphasize not so much the presence of the text but the space that sustains it: that which makes writing and reading possible, that in which all writing

and reading end . . . a space which, as it opens out, allows the text to appear and, in a sense, creates it” (1987, 311).

In quite another sense, the blank space, or void, of the empty white page has also been associated with the metaphysical Absolute, the enigma of which is well documented in the West by poets from Mallarmé and Apollinaire through Surrealism. A source of linguistic renovation, artistic revolution and even societal renewal, notions of the “higher reality” associated with a philosophical Absolute entered Western consciousness largely through the influence of Eastern mysticism and related philosophical concerns that came into vogue at around the turn of the century. The ancient sages of the Upanishads, for example, teach that Brahman is the absolute reality behind changing appearances.¹² It is the origin, support, and universal substrate from which material phenomena originate and to which they return after their dissolution. That philosophical Brahman informs Paz’s *Blanco* (at the time of the poem’s writing Paz was completing a six-year term as Mexico’s ambassador to India) is already apparent in the poem’s opening lines:

el comienzo

el cimiento

la simiente

latente

la palabra en la punta de la lengua

inaudita

inaudible

impar

grávida

nula

The beginning (*comienzo*), the foundation (*cimiento*), and the latent seed (*simiente/latente*): this is the as yet unspoken word (*la palabra en la punta de la lengua*) about to manifest as the poem-model of the universe. In a philosophical context this is Brahman, Totality on the cusp of manifestation.

Poetry also has a unique capacity to build bridges between polar opposites. The poet takes us back and forth over the bridge between life/death, large/small, inner/outer etc. and leaves us to settle in the charged *space between*, which, while being neither, is *both*. In this regard, Paz himself has written (in “Letter to Leon Felipe”): “Poetry/ is the crack / the space / between one word and another / a configuration / of the incomplete” (Weinberger 1987, 251). Poetry is also the crack between one *world* and another. Like the masks of ancient Greek tragedy, it can both conceal (the physical) and reveal (the metaphysical) at the same time. With the capacity to draw a reader’s awareness --for a tenuous instant-- out of the realm of ordinary boundaries of thinking and existing, poetic language frees us from the bondage of ordinary reality and ordinary perception; it throws us out of bounds.

If poetic language can free us --for an instant, a series of instants-- from the boundaries of ordinary reality, it is because it strikes “configurations of the absolute,” chance convergences of word-signs, images, metaphors, analogies that quite literally draw us out of our customary boundaries. As it takes us back and forth from this world, this language of the everyday, to that other world, and to poetic language, the poem provides ephemeral exposures to a sense of underlying wholeness or totality. With luck,

the poem and the reader will begin to breathe Brahman to the degree that, at some point, writing momentarily disappears in the all-encompassing reality of the absolute. The poem will then dissolve, drop away in the ultimate realization that all this --words, objects, senses, world-- is That.¹⁴ Such is the condensed wisdom of ancient sages (*Tat Tvam Asi*) recorded in the Upanishads of India. Paz's *Blanco* leads us to this discovery, and *The Monkey Grammarian* becomes a kind of detailed commentary of that experience.

The blank page is the sole constant of a poem. Words, images, lines of poetry come and go; they lock in momentary embrace, form ephemeral constellations of meaning, but their apparent fixity is always a fleeting thing --“La fijeza es siempre momentánea” / “Fixity is always momentary” (Paz 1981, 9)-- as words engage in a game of endless, ongoing creation and self-destruction to the point of total erasure.

It is worth remembering that the monkey grammarian of Paz's work is that divine Hanuman, devoted servant of Rama in the *Ramayana/Rama's Journey*. Hanuman is the ultimate trickster warrior, capable of shifting shape and executing giant leaps comparable to flying, much the same as the poetic language for which he serves as icon.¹⁵ But above all, Hanuman is a devotee of Rama, who as avatar is simultaneously body and universe, embodiment of Totality and the Supreme Reality Itself. Recalling Hanuman and his master Rama, the poems we have been studying are also --quite emphatically-- language, text, body, and universe. They are alternately and simultaneously language and silence, movement and fixity. Literally and figuratively they are now open, now closed; now concealed, now revealed; now petrified, now dancing. They invite such metaphors as rising and falling, breathing in and out, and walking/traveling in space not only because

they remind us of these activities, but because they literally house and solicit them by virtue of the pleated folds of their performed and performing bodies.

CLOSING REMARKS

Yes, a poem opens and shuts; and no poem opens and shuts so emphatically or with such eloquence as the accordion-fold poem. These poems are different from other poems. Far from being static verbal monoliths, they are unique creations conceived within a visual space, a dynamic space of kinetic movement and changing ideas and colors. In these rare poems, space and text together constitute a unique vision; paraphrasing McLuhan, it might be said that the medium and the message are one and indivisible. This creative union offers many opportunities for the skills of the poet and the skills of the reader to intersect and conjoin, and when this occurs the convergence of their shared and commingled consciousness results in a rare outpouring of powerful images and profound insights. In fact, the myriad possibilities which open to the poet and his/her readers --co-creators, by virtue of the performative, accordion-fold format-- represent the most reasonable explanation as to *why* these poems were created as they were. Conceptually, therefore, the accordion-fold poem represents a great leap of creativity.

Robert Bly has often spoken of “leaping poetry,” a “poetry of leaps.” Perhaps no other poems contain so many leaps embodied in single works as do these accordion-fold poems.¹⁶ On many levels, of course, they are much the same as other poems --only more so; for this reason they are able to reveal much about poetry and the writing of poems. Distinct from other poems, the accordion-fold poem opens and shuts on many levels. As

we have seen, first of all it opens physically; to our knowledge, this cannot be said of other poems. Then, while it is performing or being performed, the accordion-fold poem is analogous to the breathing in and out of living creatures, a music-producing instrument, walking, and even the unfolding universe in its infinite series of expansions and contractions. In this poetry, “human writing reflects that of the universe: it says something totally different and it says the same thing. It is its translation, but also its metaphor” (Paz 1981, 155).

Analogies with the operations of sound and light waves have shown how the accordion-fold poem can be illumined by striking comparisons between it and film. The “stationary” lines of the poem have been shown to be awhirl with movement and change --and erasure. The poem --like the poet her/himself-- is a mirror of the universe; it mirrors universal operations of that consciousness which binds all things together in a unique and dynamic Wholeness. Human writing reflects that of the universe; the poem represents words and worlds at play in a game of similarities and analogies; it is creation, transformation, erasure. The poem follows a path, traces a trajectory, and ends by erasing itself, its dissolution ironically effectuated by means of those very same language tools that were responsible for all possibilities of creation within the poem.

The accordion-fold poem is a fountain of life and consciousness that lights up and is extinguished in order to resume with renewed power and complexity: *La fijeza siempre es momentánea*. The poem flickers in consciousness for a precious moment and then disintegrates and is gone. *La transparencia es todo lo que queda* --at least until the poem is re-activated and the experience revived through engagement with yet another human

awareness. The poem is a marvelous testimony to the power of a reader's attention. It opens. It shuts. "By the glances of the others" the poem opens up again and again.

NOTES

¹See, for example, his “Mountains and Rivers Sutra.” Throughout the book-length poem *Mountains and Rivers Without End* (to be discussed later in this essay), Gary Snyder invokes and plays creatively with the various Buddhist philosophical concepts contained in this “pearl of a text.”

²For other examples one might look at the work of ill-fated poet of the Peruvian vanguard, Carlos Oquendo de Amat. His *5 metros de poemas* (*5 Meters of Poems*) was published in 1927. One should open this book of poems, the Poet says, “como quien pela una fruta,” the way one peels a fruit. So far so good; however, despite the accordion-fold format, this book is not a single, continuous, and unbroken poem. Rather, it comprises a series of separate, individual poems arranged sequentially, one on each page/panel, with an overall effect much like reading a normal book --but without the binding. There are even page numbers in some versions of this book, which totally destroys the continuity we desire. Finally, the fact that Oquendo de Amat’s pages unfold *horizontally* rather than vertically, as is the case with Cendrars and Paz, disqualifies the work from consideration here.

Another likely candidate would seem to be the *Codex Espangliensis* (2000) by performance artist, activist, and writer Guillermo Gómez-Peña. This work of collaborative artists is an accordion-fold book whose pages open out to a length of over twenty-one feet. In its vivid juxtapositions of pre-hispanic art and images from contemporary pop culture, comic book heroes and historical figures together with interwoven themes of race, borders, religion, technology, political oppression and economic exploitation, the book’s flamboyant, panoramic presentation of latino history

and culture via a mix of prose and poetry is a very fine representation of the fronterizo/chicano identity of its collaborators. In this particular regard the book also certainly does evoke the sort of “simultanéisme” we find exalted in the Cendrars-Delaunay collaboration. However, once again the pages are pages, and text and images move *horizontally* (!) along the fold-out extension much like the figures on a mural--rather than *vertically down* the entire strip of paper. In addition to being fiercely didactic, for all its bombastic originality the work remains “bookish” in concept and has little in common with the singular creations of Cendrars and Paz.

Finally, Anne Carson has also produced an accordion-fold book and “poem” (*Nox*; New Directions, 2010) that Publishers Weekly calls “a Jacob’s ladder collage of letters, photographs, and poetry” commemorating her brother’s death. The work contains some 10 feet of paper folded and packed into a small coffin-like box; however, like Gómez-Peña’s production, above, her book consists of right- and left-handed “pages” (unnumbered) that extend *horizontally rather than vertically*. Her right-handed pages consist of an extended glossary of latin terms.

³“ . . . go humming along [. . .] like lullabies / And there are some whose wheels’ monotone reminds me of the heavy / prose of Maeterlinck / I deciphered all the garbled texts of the wheels and united the scattered / elements of a violent beauty . . . ” (Cendrars 1992, 28)

⁴“The world stretches out elongates and snaps back like an accordion [*concertina*] in the hands of a raging sadist / Wild locomotives fly through rips in the sky / And in the holes / The dizzying wheels the mouths the voices / And the dogs of misery

that bark at our heels / The demons unleashed / Scrap iron / Everything clanks / Slightly off / The clickety-clack of the wheels / Lurches / Jerks . . .” (Cendrars 1992, 21)

⁵While writing these pages, I thought often of Vicente Huidobro, the founder (in 1916) of *creacionismo*. I sensed a profound complementarity between *simultanéisme* and *creacionismo*, and it occurred to me that the format of Cendrars’ poem could have been used to great advantage by the Chilean poet in his own *Altazor*. In the course of my research, I discovered that Huidobro was indeed well acquainted with the Delaunays and had in fact collaborated with *Robert* Delaunay, Sonia’s husband, on more than one occasion. For example, Robert created the design for Huidobro’s poster-poem “Moulin”/”Windmill,” one of 13 such poems exhibited in 1922 in the Théâtre Édouard VII in Paris. It is a poem done in Huidobro’s characteristic *caligrama* visual style, a marriage of text and form. (See Saúl Yurkievich, 2007. *A través de la trama: sobre vanguardistas y otras concomitancias*. Madrid: Iberoamericana Editorial, pp 58-59.) More notably, perhaps, Huidobro also executed (alone?) a few “poemas pintados,” painted poems, one of which, “Paysage”/”Landscape” certainly betrays familiarity with the Cendrars-Delaunay project.

⁶See, for example, Paz’s “Himno entre ruinas”/Hymn Among the Ruins,” “Piedra de sol”/”Sunstone,” and “Arbol Adentro”/The Tree Within.”

⁷Early systems of film making (Edison et al) recorded sound and film *separately*. The *simultaneous* capture of sound and image together on a piece of film was the innovation of one Eugene Lauste, ca. 1912, in London. His British patent for this process, granted in 1907, reads, “ . . . a means for simultaneously [sic] recording and reproducing movements and sounds.” Born in Montmartre, Paris, in 1857, Lauste

emigrated to USA in 1887, where he worked with Edison and other important pioneers of film. His expired patents were bought up by Hollywood in 1929. Lauste died in 1935 in Montclair, NJ. (Stephen Herbert. 1996. *Who's Who of Victorian Cinema*. British Film Institute, OOP. www.victorian-cinema.net/lauste).

⁸Noted curator and writer Klaus Ottmann has written that “performance art in the U.S. began to emerge in the late ‘30s with the arrival of European art exiles in New York.” He also cites the central role of Black Mountain College in North Carolina in this development, beginning with the residencies of Annie and Josef Albers in the 1930s, adding that the college’s influence “surged with the music and dance activities of John Cage and Merce Cunningham, which were inspired by Zen Buddhism.” With regard to Byars’ performance pieces in particular, Ottman cites the experimental choreographies of the Judson Dance Group (established in 1962 in San Francisco), themselves strongly influenced by the move to Minimalism in art, as being key reference points. See his “The Art of Happenstance. The Performative Sculptures of James Lee Byars” in *Sculpture* 21. 9 (November 2002): 32-37.

⁹Note: Cortázar visited Paz in New Delhi in the mid 1960s, at the time of *Blanco*’s composition.

¹⁰In the short essay “Poetry and Respiration,” Paz briefly addresses the “old octosyllable” of the Spanish *romance* (ballad) of oral tradition. What Paz fails to mention (or perhaps did not know) is that the non-stanzaic *romance* was originally conceived as having an indeterminate number of *16-syllable* lines, each with a brief hiatus separating two hemistiches of eight syllables. The “old octosyllable” of which Paz speaks owes its existence to the earliest printed broadsides where, owing to spatial

limitations, each single line of sixteen syllables in the oral *romances* was reduced to two single lines of eight syllables. Conveniently enough, the octosyllable of the broadside ballads (and all subsequent ballads) operates functionally, in ascending/descending lines, in much the same manner as Morgenstern's poem, "Fisches Nachtgesang," cited earlier.

¹¹While writing this paper, I chanced to see an exhibit of recent work by Xu Bing at the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts (Sept.-Dec. 2011) entitled "Tobacco Project." Among the wide variety of traditional and experimental pieces on display was a magnificent reproduction of the 41-foot long classical Chinese painted hand scroll known as "Along the River during the Qingming Festival." Xu Bing's recreated version (which he titled "Traveling Down the River") featured a thirty-foot long cigarette placed along the center of the scroll's fully unrolled extension that the artist subsequently allowed to burn partway down its length. "As the cigarette burned, it left scorch marks on the image, inscribing time as a serpentine scar and *the journey as a residue* of ash [our emphasis]" (Ravenal 2011, n. pag.). Conceived as an exploration of the complex connections between people and tobacco, the relevance of Xu Bing's work to our own project, not to mention a very obvious (but apparently unacknowledged) debt to Byars, should be readily apparent.

¹²In our own time, Maharishi Mahesh Yogi has spoken of Brahman in the following terms: "In the unity of Brahman, eternity is established in the field of change. This is it . . . the unmanifest --that eternity of the unmanifest-- is imprinted on the manifest field; and that is the state of Brahman." Quoted in Vernon Katz, *Conversations With Maharishi*, Vol 1 (Fairfield, IA: MUM Pr, 2011), p. 148. On another occasion, Maharishi noted that language, like consciousness, has the goal of integrating

unboundedness with boundaries. It can “convince infinity to get down to the finite value and still be lively there. It can convince its finite value to enjoy the infinity, and yet maintain its existence.” Its goal is the integration of absolute and relative phases of life. Cited by Susan Anderson in *The Flow of Consciousness. Maharishi Mahesh Yogi on Literature and Language* (Fairfield, IA: MUM Pr, 2010) p. 135.

¹³“a stirring / a steering / a seedling / sleeping / the word at the tip of the tongue / unheard / unhearable / matchless / fertile / barren / ageless . . .” (Weinberger 1987, 313)

¹⁴See, for example, the *Chhandogya Upanishad*, VI, x. 3. Also this from Tony Nader: “From the perspective of Unity all of creation is nothing but oneness moving within itself, but from a relative perspective we see time and motion, objects and places, and differentiation and change . . . The true reality, however, is that every fiber of existence is nothing but absolute pure eternity moving within itself . . .” Quoted from *Ramayan in Human Physiology* (Fairfield, IA: MUM Pr, 2012), p. 379.

¹⁵Paz heaps loads of praise upon the venerable simian: “Hanuman, like his father, is wind, and that is why his leaps are like the flight of birds; and while he is air, he is also sound with meaning: an emitter of words, a poet. Son of the wind, poet and grammarian, Hanuman is the divine messenger, the Holy Spirit of India. He is a monkey that is a bird that is a vital and spiritual breath” (Paz 1981, 146).

¹⁶For details, see Robert Bly, ed. 1975. *Leaping Poetry: An Idea With Poems and Translations*. Boston: Beacon Press.

CREDITS AND PERMISSIONS

FIGURE 1. *Blanco*, by Octavio Paz. Photographs by the author.

FIGURE 2. “Fisches Nachtgesang,” by Christian Morgenstern.

Image courtesy University of California Press, Berkeley.

FIGURE 3. *La Prose du Transsibérien et de la petite Jehanne de France*, by

Blaise Cendrars and Sonia Delaunay-Terk. Image courtesy

Sotheby’s, Paris.

FIGURE 4. *La Prose du Transsibérien et de la petite Jehanne de France* (detail).

Image courtesy Sotheby’s, Paris.

FIGURE 5. *A 1,000-Foot White Chinese Paper*, by James Lee Byars.

Images courtesy Carnegie Museum of Art, Pittsburgh.

FIGURE 6. *Untitled Object, 1962-1964*, by James Lee Byars (1932-1997).

© Copyright. Crayon on Japanese paper, joined and folded, unfolded

12”x 210’ 9” (30.3 cm x 64.23 m); folded 12 x 12 x 3 3/4” (30.3 x

30.3 x 9.5 cm). Gift of the artist. By permission The Museum of

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