

The Book as Machine

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It would be a mistake to suppose that the trend towards the oral and acoustic means that the book is becoming obsolete. It means rather that the book, as it loses its monopoly as a cultural form, will acquire new roles.
—Marshall McLuhan

Don't look around yourselves for inspiration. We have only one teacher: THE MACHINE.
—Nikolai Foregger

In the beginnings of our research into narrative we ran up against the inescapable fact that "there exists no standard definition of narrative in the sense that writers seem to use the word." There is so much confusion particularly between narrative and plot, the two terms being used almost interchangeably. Thus we feel free to create a definition which is not in the strictest sense new because there is no existing old definition. What we need to establish is a working definition of narrative and then discard it if further research proves it false or inadequate in scope.

For the purpose of this report we will deal with narrative in print rather than as an oral phenomenon. This will allow us to eliminate consideration of the innumerable narratives of daily living that are characterized by their provisionality, evanescence and intractability. In the strictest sense the most comprehensive definition of narrative would be simply our sequential life experience. We will not address this comprehension but rather deal with narrative as it occurs within the specialized area of the print experience.

Gertrude Stein put it most simply when she pointed out that narrative was anyone telling anything to anyone anytime. When we transpose this definition into print we begin to recognize two distinct experiences:

1. The physical experience of print as word and ink and the book itself as a physical object.
2. The psychological and psychosemantic experience of operating verbal signs.

In this first part of our report we will deal with the physical aspects of the book as machine, documenting some of the attempts made toward an understanding and reassessment of physical forms the book has already acquired and the emerging outline of future forms, considering the implications of the book's mechanicity and the active application of such considerations.

Backgrounds

By machine we mean the book's capacity and method for storing information by arresting, in the relatively immutable form of the printed word, the flow of speech conveying that information. The book's mechanism is activated when the reader picks it up, opens the covers, and starts reading it. Throughout its history (and even prior to Gutenberg) the

book has possessed a relatively standard form varying only in size, color, shape, and paper texture. In its most obvious working the book organizes content along three modules: the lateral flow of the line, the vertical or columnar build-up of the lines on the page, and thirdly a linear movement organized through depth (the sequential arrangement of pages upon pages).

Significantly the book assumes its particular physical format through its design to accommodate printed linguistic information in a linear form. Taking the line as a practically impossible continuum, it breaks it up into discrete units of equal length, placing them one above the other in sequence until a page unit is filled. Similarly the page units are ordered sequentially and the whole sewn or glued together to form the complete book. Already it is possible to note that the linear experience as continuum has been significantly altered, for the second and third modules mentioned are the ones which the book has placed before our reading pose. In addition the book has underlined and reinforced the first module so that we now accept all three as not simply modules but constants which are seldom questioned. Hence the surprising shock value of typographic experiments (evinced by the very fact that they are labeled *experiments*).

So far in our description of the book as machine we have dealt with it as a prose print experience. It is important, however, to point out the difference between the reading experience of prose and poetry. Prose as print encourages an inattention to the right-hand margin as a terminal point. The tendency is encouraged to read continually as though the book were one extended line. In poetry, by contrast, the end of each line is integral to the structure of the poem whether it follows older metrical prosodic models or more recent types of breath-line notation. This emphasis upon the structural aspects of the terminal point of each visual line unit in the poem is why concrete poetry is called, in fact, poetry and why the latter word is apt in its description. In poetry, where the individual line is compositionally integral, the page is more often than not itself integral. Most short poems for instance involve a significant degree of iconicity: we see the poem as a visual whole before we read it. Perceived optically as a complete unit the page is qualified to such an extent that it ceases to function as an *arbitrary* receptacle, or surface, for the maximum number of words it can contain (functioning thereby as a random-sized unit in a larger construct), becoming instead the frame, landscape, atmosphere within which the poem's own unity is enacted and reacted upon. Page and type function as the two ingredients in a verbal sculpture.

By contrast, in the majority of prose the general rule holds that the paragraph—through effecting a visual separation of sense and event—performs a similar function

(optically) to the poetic line. A sentence is not visually integral until combined with other sentences to form the paragraph. However, in both prose and the visually continuous poem (Milton's *Paradise Lost* for instance) the page has no optical significance. Being to a large extent a working out of information through duration, prose structures tend to be temporal rather than visual. For instance the chapter can seldom be grasped iconically precisely because the chapter extends over the surface of several pages, occupying a part of the depth module which runs from the start of a book to its end. Even the paragraph's optical quality tends to be accidental. The effect of this surface extension is to pressure the reader into moving along as quickly as possible in the depth module. In extended prose or poetry the page becomes an obstacle to be overcome. There is a difference too of urgency in the poetic and prose line. In the former the left-hand margin is always a starting point, the right-hand margin a terminal, neither of which is determined by the randomness of page size but rather by the inner necessity of the compositional process. It becomes obvious how historically the emphasis on the visual element in writing would have a poetic emergence, for only in poetry occurs that bridging point which permits the steps from a significance through inner necessity (where each visual terminal point gains pertinence and value) to a new way of perceiving in which the visuality becomes, not the end product of an interior psychological process, but rather the beginning of a whole new method of perception.

There seems to exist at present a dichotomy in attitude between the book as a machine of reference and the book as a commodity to be acquired, consumed, and discarded. Traditional printed narrative is largely thought of as the transcription of a hypothetical oral activity: a speech line running from a point of commencement to an end. Such books transcribe language along horizontal axes running from top left to bottom right of each page. This accidentally conventional manner of reading along the length of the line and down the length of each page from first to last in actuality reconstitutes the duration of a "listening." In reference books such as dictionaries and directories, however, the oral hypothesis is minimized to the point, perhaps, of non-existence. Such books are not thought of as having authors or a supposed unitary voice behind them. They exist as physical storage units for information, to be consulted at various times, but not designed to be consumed in a single, linear duration. Popular fiction, marketed for mass audiences, performs a different function; there the page's nonsequential storage qualities are ignored. Nobody would consider the page of such a book as an area requesting the reader's free, nonlinear eye movements over a multi-activating, multi-acting surface, but rather as a unit necessarily endured as a means to the complete reception of the book's information. The current predicament of popular mass fiction is the competitive threat staged by the other great machines of consumption: television and film are indubitably the more

efficient media. The reason for this is clear. The book's power as an object to be dwelt on and referred back to is not a desirable feature. Not only the page but the book in its entirety is conceived as an obstacle to be overcome in order to achieve the desired goal of unproblematic, uninterrupted, unobstructed consumption. Television and the cinema on the other hand afford more rapid and totally sensorial means of satisfying such an appetite for story. In the light of this phenomenon two important implications of such pre-mediated reading as *Reader's Digest* become obvious. There is a "division of labor" on the reader's part in that he renounces a portion of the total reading role which is performed for him. And secondly the more serious implication of a hierarchical structuring imposed upon the reading experience, by means of which a superior "essence" is thought of as being abstracted from a "lesser" padding. To extend this consumer metaphor we may say that plot is product within linguistic wrapping. Dictionaries and directories work against this status by throwing emphasis onto the single page and the information stored thereon. In their function, dictionaries move much closer to the page-iconicity described above.

Narrative then can be developed freely along either of two directions: One rooted in oral traditions and the typographic "freezing" of speech; the other set in an awareness of the page as a visual, tactile unit with its own very separate potential.

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1. The front page of a newspaper is the paradigm of typographic cubism. Considered as a multi-page whole the newspaper is founded on a model of structural discontinuity and a principle of competitive attentions. Front-page stories seldom end on the front page, nor do they all end on the same interior page. The front page is an opening made up of many opening terminating on different pages, which themselves contain other openings—to read a newspaper as a consecutive experience leads to extreme discontinuity.

2. A page is literally one side of a two-sided sheet of paper—the surface of a three-dimensional object.

3. If we consider the printless page to be a static, neutral surface, then by applying continuous type to cover the entire surface (as in a page of a novel or this page of a TRG [Toronto Research Group] report) that neutrality is not altered. Where a rectangle of type is placed upon a rectangle of page there is no attempt made to work creatively with the possible tension existing between surface (page) and object on that surface (print). Moreover, in such a placement we invest the page with a secondary quality not inherent to it: viz., a top left to bottom right orientation (radically different languages such as Chinese and Hebrew impose, of course, a similar directional limitation).

4. When Rabelais (in book 5, chapter 45 of *Gargantua and Pantagruel*) has the Goddess Bottle speak, she speaks from within a pictorial representation of a bottle. This bottle is not verbally described but rather imaged on the page; it does not illustrate the story as an appendage, it is an integral part of it. Like the corporal's stick-flourish in Sterne's *Tristram Shandy* words are forsaken for a visual instantiation of an object/event.

5. When Simmias of Rhodes composed his *Egg*, George Herbert his *Easter Wings*, and Apollinaire his *Calligrammes*, all were trying to bring together the object signified with the words that signified them. A case of verbal description and the pictorial shape of the object described being joined iconically in a pictorial space.

6. In *Tender Buttons*, Gertrude Stein's carafe and umbrella are not visually fixed on the page. When all the words inside her at the moment of composition (of perception) came out they fused perceiver with perceived within the activity of perceiving. The language which described the object also became the object in a physical space.

7. In such poems as "now they found the wagon cat in human body," "no body speaking," and other pieces in *We Sleep Inside Each Other All*, Bill Bissett brings together perceiver and perceived in psychic space which becomes jointly manifest in a pictorial space. Both Stein and Bissett use syntactic rhythm to indicate subjective rhythm; both are dealing with the fundamental relationship between language and consciousness. By moving the poem back into the pictorial space Bissett furthers the visual technique employed by Simmias, Herbert, and Apollinaire, as well as Stein's sense of the autonomous existence of the thing composed.

8. The compositional technique employed by Simmias and Bissett makes a radically different demand upon the page than regular linear transcription. The page ceases to be a neutral surface of support and becomes instead a spatially interacting region; it is granted thereby a metaphorical extension. Conceived as a spatially significant unit, the page carries dimensional and gravitational implications. In Stein's writing it does not.

9. Pierre Garnier employs the term *spatialisme* to describe his own particular type of lettristic composition. Garnier developed a theory of the letter as self-sufficing entity existing and operating within an open space or field: the page. This application of a spatial metaphor alters radically the physics of his page. In his own texts autonomous letters (as objects) occupy a gravitational region, with syntactic emphasis falling on the interval between the letter objects. The page becomes not only container but definer of the lettristic configuration and becomes additionally a profoundly active space.

10. *Spatialisme* is a lettristic application of Eugen Gomringer's formal concept of poetic *constellation*: a word or word cluster balanced—the analog is "electro-magnetically"—within the force field of the page. Both *Spatialisme* and the *constellation* deploy the page as a metaphor for space in general. The page is not altered physically but its materiality receives a metaphoric supplement.

11. Page becomes an active space, a meaningful element in the compositional process and the size and shape of it becomes significant variables.

12. The typewriter fixes page size to carriage capacity.

13. In Steve McCaffery's *Carnival* the carriage capacity limitations are actively confronted. By rejecting its dimensional restriction of size and by forcing it to operate modularly as a smaller unit in a much larger surface, both the page (and its traditional function in the book) are destroyed. *Carnival* is an anti-book: perforated pages must be physically released, torn from sequence and viewed simultaneously in the larger composite whole. The work demands that language be engaged nonsequentially rather than read in sequence. Altering the physical space allows both book and page to utilize at a maximum their sculptural potential.

14. By replacing the pictorial representation of the thing with its verbal description, Greg Curnoe, in his painted series *View of Victoria Hospital 1*, exploits the tensions between the viewer/reader's traditional assumptions as to what constitutes both a painting and a page. Curnoe's canvas becomes his page and by implication his page becomes his canvas.

15. John Furnival abandons the page and the book entirely in his language constructs which treat syntax as both physical and environmental matter. Word order becomes panel/architectural layout in his elaborate verbal-architectural labyrinths that replace the complexities of paragraph and sentence. Furnival not only concretizes language but architecturalizes it as well.

16. In the environmental works of Ferdinand Kriwet the pressure to externalize language and alter the mechanics of its reading is achieved by a four-dimensional application that radically modifies the reading space. No longer turning through a book nor looking at a canvas or panel, the reader exists inside a total linguistic environment. As the book constitutes the traditional method for storing verbal information, so the four walls, ceiling, and floor of the gallery become the storage tool for Kriwet's plastic word surfaces. The activation of Kriwet's machine inherently transforms the reader's role and placement. In Dickens you bring the book into your life, with Kriwet you bring your life into the "book."

17. Hart Broudy is now (1973) effecting a different application of language to environment. Using the photographic principle of the *blow-up* and applying it to a hybridized work that is both poetry and painting he is arriving at a new kind of optical linguistic environment. The starting point for his compositions is a physical fragmentation of the single letter which then functions as a blueprint for a macro-composition. Text is blown-up to canvas size in which interlocking fragments are magnified to become giant connected panels. The reader emerges as an active object in a mental paradox: a giant in a miniature world that is larger than his or her self.

18. Fragment from Tom Mot's *Seventh Notebook*:

... i should try technique of microfiche ... could compress my random sequences onto entire card surface ... Swift's Gulliver ... microcard ... what is it ... microcard in fact to reinforce upon the large canvas sense its original quality of print as an isolated experience ... microviewer as one machine to activate another ... do this and then combine microcard with macroprojection say a huge screen in an auditorium if i can get one ... this way could get the combination of communal experience with traditional printed book's isolated experience ...

19. Ian Hamilton Finlay, at his home of Stonypath in Scotland, has returned to and revitalized the Renaissance concept of the Book of Nature. Stonypath is essentially a landscape brought into linguistic concerns as a living metaphor. The garden is Finlay's Book in which pages transform themselves to quasi-functional objects. Poems become sundials, gravestones, the page's traditional material opacity becomes the window's clear view into the objects signified. Any traveler through Finlay's garden has to be a reader too; it is a book involving participation of the feet as well as eyes.

20. In their *Bi-Point Poetry Manifesto*, the French poets Julien Blaine and J. F. Bory urged the abandonment of book and print each in its entirety (save for their minor use in reporting non-typographic language events). The urban landscape provides both alphabet and subject for their work; economic, social, and political factors become syntactic elements. Bory and Blaine's lives and actions become their writing.

21. William Shakespeare (somewhat earlier) spoke of sermons being in stones and books running in brooks. Finlay's Stonypath and the Blaine-Bory Manifesto are the physical, dynamic applications of a sixteenth-century analogy of Book and Nature.

Afterthoughts

Or what this has to do with anything at all

So far we have reviewed/described a specific set of books and writers from the viewpoint of our own concerns with the book as machine. Each of them has, for us, significant comments to make regarding the machine's capacity to alter function and affect the psychological content of the fictional reality presented. There are three questions that arise from our considerations: 1) What are the precise applications of the solutions arrived at? 2) Does the arrived solution present a hindrance to "understanding"? 3) Does the attendant challenge to habitual reading patterns result in breakthrough or deadlock?

These questions have relevance to an interesting text case: Bill Bissett's special attention to the spelling of words. Bissett's idiosyncratic orthography and the resultant effects on that minutest level of reading—the single word—has already enjoyed a large influence inside Canada. Yet the writers who have gone on to orthographic modifications in their own work have been judged mere copiers of Bissett, rather than valorized as individuals adapting to their own purposes Bissett's singular insight: that spelling should be an individual decision and not an imposed norm. Accordingly, the work of these writers is in danger of being ignored through the effects of attitude that sees formal innovation as a novelty and, by extension, as unrepeatable. In the background of such an attitude lurks the hulking form of traditional literature as a pre-established, easily subsumed and hence "safe" finite number of technical solutions.

To answer the above questions will require the deployment of each single isolated experiment in order that comparative assessments can be made among the experiments themselves. Consequently the answers to these questions lie outside the limits of this present article in the future writing/research to be done. What we will argue for here is an expanded awareness of both the effects on and the possibilities for narrative, by an active and thorough utilization of the book-as-machine.