

ABSTRACT

Writing Nothing: A Critical Guide to Asemic Poetry

Isaac M. Montgomery

Director: Jeannette K. Marsh, Ph.D.

Asemic writing is marks made on a medium which are intended to look like language. Since the start of the asemic movement in the 1990s, asemic writing has gained popularity with avant-garde poets and calligraphers, and has gained circulation online and physically. Despite the growth in this genre, academic research on this topic is lacking, especially relating to the interpretation and criticism of these works. This research aims to fill this gap by preparing critics to identify asemic writing and place it in historical context. It then gives perspectives on how asemic writers frame their work, and why this framing matters to the interpretation process. Finally, it proposes a model on how asemic writing impacts the brain, and how current cognitive science understandings of reading might inform the process of reading asemic writing. All of these lines of inquiry are layered into a single critical method, and readers see this method applied to several important works of asemic writing. In short, when looking at a piece of asemic writing the critic must ask 1) does this look good? 2) do the pieces of information surrounding a poem that are available to the reader work together? And 3) does the piece look like writing? When readers are able to understand the importance of these questions and effectively answer them about a given piece of asemic writing, they are prepared to begin the work of interpretation and criticism.

APPROVED BY DIRECTOR OF HONORS THESIS:

Dr. Jeannette Marsh, Department of English

APPROVED BY THE HONORS PROGRAM:

Dr. Elizabeth Corey, Director

DATE: _____

WRITING NOTHING
A CRITICAL GUIDE TO ASEMIC POETRY

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By
Isaac M. Montgomery

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For Hannah, who always hated asemic poetry, and for Dr. Marsh, who always loved it.

INTRODUCTION

What is Going On and Why it Matters

Asemic Writing

Behind Lines by Federico Federici (Figure 0.1) *may* be a poem. It is hard to tell. It is written in lines like poetry normally is, but the writing is messy and scrawling, as if the author was not looking at his paper while he penned the piece. To add to the difficulty in reading it, the whole thing is struck through. In fact, the piece nearly falls apart upon closer inspection: the letters, rather than resolving into words that the reader can understand, stubbornly refuse to blend. The reader recognizes with a second pass that the letters, which felt familiar at a quick glance, are much more complicated than they seemed. In fact, there may not be any letters at all!

Federici is not alone in his creation of such pieces. In fact, hundreds of poets, calligraphers, and multimedia artists are experimenting with this art form that looks like writing. For example, look to *The Flight Into Egypt* by Timothy Ely (1995) or *The Codex Seraphinianus* by Luigi Seraphini (1981). Both books use scripts which, although they may appear to be a fancy font or obscure code, don't actually code for anything (Melka, 2014; Davies, 2015).

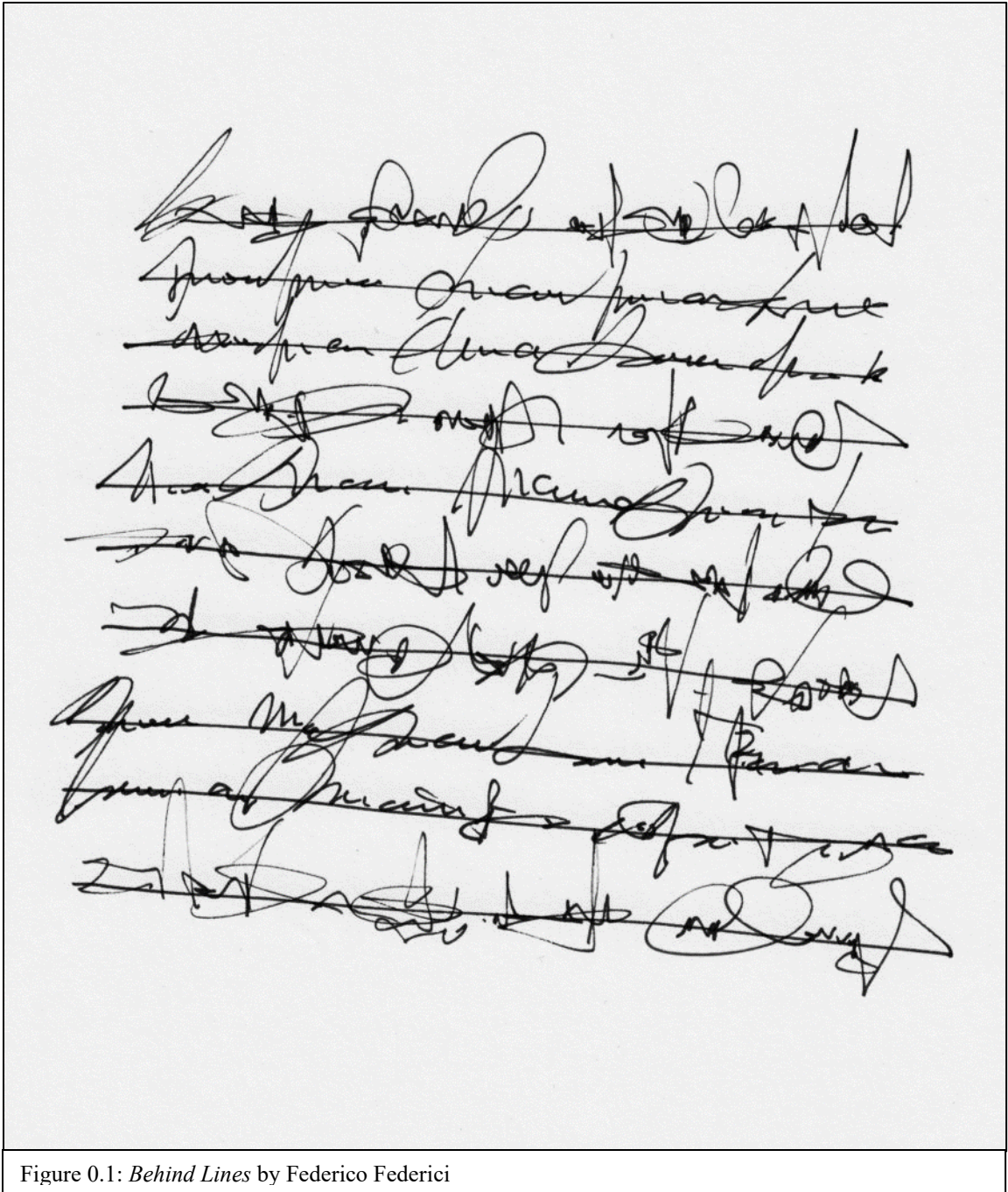


Figure 0.1: *Behind Lines* by Federico Federici

Similar pieces have also been published in other formats. While the two above examples are art books, meaning that they are filled with colorful illustrations, some similarly unreadable pieces have been published as short chapbooks or paperbacks, just like standard poetry books. *The Selected Scribblings and Scrawlings of S.J. Fowler* (Fowler, 2018), *Listening with the Eye, Vols. 1-5* (Touchon, 2019), and *Echolalia in Script* (Roxas-Chua, 2017) are just three examples of books published using unreadable but nearly readable marks. Rosaire Appel's (2012) *An Authorized Account* is a graphic novella with similar marks. Additionally, at least two magazines have popped up which exclusively circulate this particular art form (e.g. *Asemic Movement* and *Asemics Magazine*). Take too the hundreds of online practitioners of this writing: See Gloria Gelo (2021), Stephen Nelson (n.d.), and Richard Zabel (n.d.), who represent just a tiny handful of the large community of artists and writers who have been producing and posting these pieces at a rapid pace.

This art form has been called many things: post-literate, post-semantic, drawing, writing, stories, poems. Consistently, one word pops up to describe the whole group of nearly, but not quite legible pieces of writing. These pieces are *asemic*. Etymologically, this word comes from *a-* (not) + *seme*, which is used to denote the smallest unit of linguistic meaning.

Asemic creations are confusing for a great number of reasons. Why do they exist, and why has there been such an explosion of asemic output in the last twenty years? Why do these pieces bear such resemblance to the written word? Are they art? Are they any good? And, perhaps most confusing, why do the creators of these pieces insist on calling it writing, or even *poetry*?

An interested reader who wants to answer these questions would have little help from academic writing. “Asemic” is only used a handful of times across all peer-reviewed journals, and these few pieces span journals dedicated to art, literature, and mental health. Clearly, the growing popularity of these pieces is not matched by the treatment they have received from academic writing. Resources guiding readers through criticism of these pieces are near-nonexistent, and what little work exists is plagued by a problem: they fail to take into account the *language* aspect, the *writing* aspect, and the *poetry* aspect of these pieces.

But the linguistic and poetic proximity and framing of these pieces are perhaps what sets them apart most as a genre. Scribbles and signs exist in many forms, but have rarely been elevated or published, and never, until recently, called “poetry.” These writers are not simply scribbling randomly; they are painstakingly replicating the look and feel of written language without writing any language. This is an idiosyncrasy of asemic writing which demands an explanation, and deserves to be fit into the framework for understanding these tough pieces.

This framework must also take into account how people are talking about these pieces. If every creator called the pieces “art” or “drawing,” that would send a clear message about their goals. However, *most* creators call their pieces “writing” or “poetry,” which send an equally clear, but totally different message. In fact, throughout the rest of this piece, we will collectively call this art form “asemic writing” or “asemic poetry,” consistent with the terms most commonly used by authors, readers, and academic literature. Thorough readers, when learning about this genre, will take into account the literary framing that the authors create.

Questions to Answer

This research takes on many of the lines of questioning laid out above. The purpose of this research is to inquire, rather than to settle; to explore, rather than to define; to guide, rather than to force an understanding. It is written for readers and critics, or potential readers and critics. Here are some of the most pressing questions which we will look at in the following chapters:

- What is asemic writing?
- How can critics tell if a piece they are seeing is asemic?
- What asemic writings exist?
- What literature about asemic writing exists?
- What do asemic writers say about their own work?
- How do we factor an authors' perspectives on their own asemic writing into our understanding of their pieces?
- How do we interface with asemic writing? Do we *read* it? And if so, how?

All of the questions above must necessarily be answered to get at the two biggest questions this research addresses:

- *How can we understand or interpret asemic writing?*
- *How can we tell if a piece of asemic writing is good?*

Importantly, this research neither proves, nor seeks to prove that asemic writing is definitively poetry, or definitively linguistic. It just provides a framework for understanding asemic writing while taking into account the context that authors provide and the striking visual similarity that these pieces have to the written word. Readers need

not affirm asemic creations are poetry to gain from this research—they need only to approach the topic with curiosity.

We will start with the simpler questions and work our way to the more complex ones. In chapter 1, we will tackle questions relating to what asemic writing *is* by contrasting asemic writing with similar art forms. We will first examine how it fits under a broad umbrella of visual poetry, and more specifically, under the smaller umbrella of post-verbal avant-garde poetry. We will then place asemic writing in its historical context, and compare the asemic poetry movement with other avant-garde poetry movements, including dada, de Stijl, fluxus, and Language poetry. Clearly defining the characteristics and context of asemic poetry allows critics to understand when they are viewing asemic writing, and what asemic writing stands for as a movement.

In chapter 2, we begin more clearly to define the critic's job when viewing asemic writing. We will see that, because decoding is not an available option, the critic is able to use information outside of the text itself, including the author's own statements about his or her work. These statements often explicitly invite comparison between their work and traditional poetry, which is an important factor in guiding readers toward an interpretation of a piece. We will also see that asemic authors use other means to invite comparison between their work and traditional poetry, including the methods of publication or circulation.

Chapter 3 is a dive into the cognitive basis of reading, and it explores how asemic authors can claim that to interface with their work is to read it. Several cognitive models synthesized to create a new model, which attempts to explain what asemic writing does to a reader's brain when viewed. This model suggests that readers are initially drawn into

“reading mode” when they view the piece due to the piece’s proximity to familiar written language. Then, as the reader searches the piece for something intelligible, he or she realizes that the piece cannot be decoded normally, and switches to viewing the whole piece as a global unit of meaning. Importantly, this model also suggests that readers collaboratively create meaning with the author as they view and interpret a piece. Asemic writing is special because it gives readers extra leeway in creating meaning, due to its lack of coded meaning.

Finally, chapter 4 synthesizes the information in the previous chapters to lay out what parts of an asemic poem are important for a critic to pay attention to, and how readers might approach interpretation of asemic works. As part of this breakdown, we look at two case studies. In each case study, readers are presented with an asemic poem and the process by which they interpret it guided by the principles laid out in previous chapters. We also consider how readers can approach asemic writing with intuition, and how intuition supplements or guides readings of asemic writing.

Before we move to what asemic writing is, a quick note: asemic writing is an art form, and as such, it is meant to be enjoyed. Interpreting and critiquing asemic writing is a big task that is worth the effort. However, if critics do not spend time with the poems throughout this work, they are not giving the chance to let the art do what it was intended for. Spend time with the pieces and let them work on you. Only through exposure can a reader begin to appreciate what asemic poetry has to offer.

CHAPTER ONE

Defining Asemic Writing and Placing It in Context

Introduction

To understand and critique asemic writing, a reader must be able to separate it from similar art forms. However, because scholarship on asemic writing is lacking, asemic writing and other forms of avant-garde visual poetry often spill into each other. The inherent difficulty of distinguishing these art forms is compounded by the experimentality with which many asemic writers and other avant-garde poets approach their craft. The works produced by these poets and artists often defy labeling, so any attempt to introduce artificial distinctions cannot be totally comprehensive and will have exceptions.

Nevertheless, artificial distinctions, even imperfect ones, still allow critics to break down the large umbrella of avant-garde poetry into more manageable pieces and help establish the critical processes most closely aligned with the work examined. The distinctions outlined below draw on previous academic work, but many of the distinctions are semi-arbitrary, and draw on features of the poem itself, rather than careful placement in a historical movement. Further work into classifying various avant-garde styles of poetry must be done by other researchers, for that classification is not within the scope of this work.

Additionally, a critic should understand both how asemic poetry fits in historically with movements in avant-garde poetry in the 20th century, and how the asemic poetry movement is historically distinct from other avant-garde poetic movements. Thus, there

may be poems which visually match descriptors of asemic poetry, but were created as part of an earlier poetic movement.

The target of these visual and historical distinctions is to arrive at a concept of asemic poetry which is narrow enough to make helpful generalizations. Additionally, as later chapters will show, the particular artistic works created by authors in this historical moment and according to the distinctions which will be laid out below have special characteristics which the critic must take into account when assessing the work. This chapter seeks to introduce guidelines for readers to determine whether a work can be judged according to this new asemic criticism, as well as to clear up some of the messy terminology which surrounds asemic writing and similar forms of visual poetry.

The First Distinction: Shape

“Visual poetry” is a class of poem for which the visual layout of the poem matters to some degree in the interpretation of the poem itself. According to Elleström (2016), the term “visual poem” may elide the fact that all poetry is visual, and “iconicity in poetry” may be a better descriptor, but acknowledges that “visual poem” is standard, so we will use that phrasing. This is an incredibly broad distinction which can take many forms, and so critics should think of “visual poem” as encompassing the entire spectrum of poems which will be considered below. Visual poems can vary in how important the visual aspect is to interpretation; in some, the visual layout of the poem on the page is simply an extra treat which adds interest or reaffirms the meaning of the words in the poem. In other forms of visual poetry, the words take a secondary role in creating meaning to the overall shape of the poem.

Visual poetry has risen as a genre relatively recently. An early modern English example of visual poetry is George Herbert's "Easter Wings" (Figure 1.1). The lines of this poem are laid out on the page such that the two stanzas each take the general shape of a

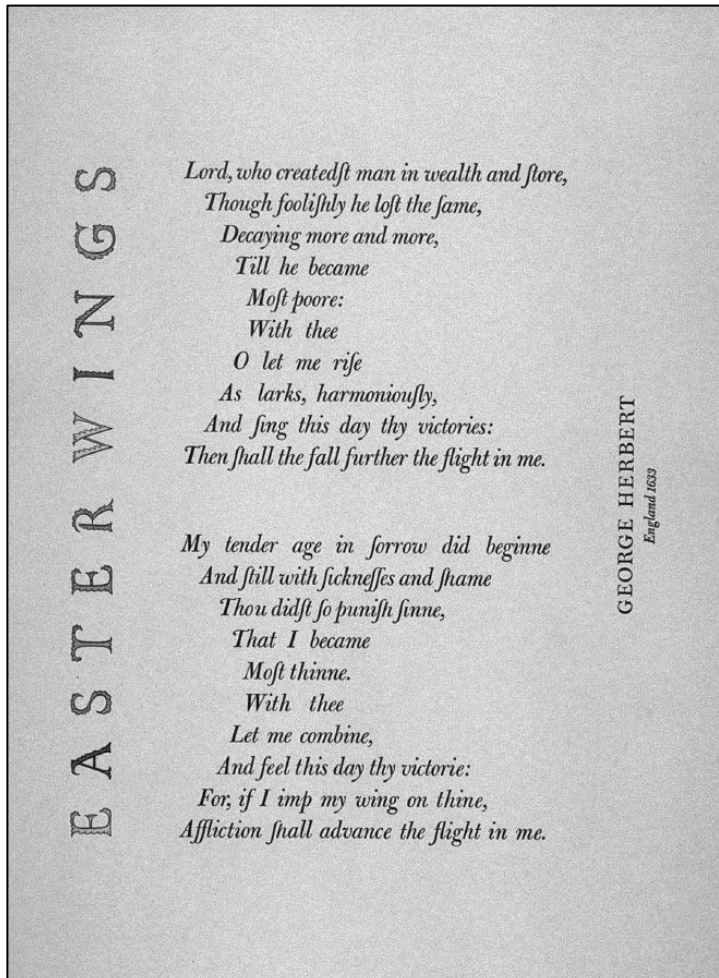


Figure 1.1: "Easter Wings" by George Herbert is considered to be an early published example of a visual poem in English.

pair of angelic wings. The poem includes the lines "O let me rise / as larks, harmoniously," and later, "For, if I imp my wing on thine, / affliction shall advance the flight in me." (Herbert, 1633). In this case, the poem is totally readable and understandable if not formed in the shape of wings. However, the visual shape of the wings on the page, the title, and the content of the poem, which is a prayer in which the speaker asks to

"rise" with the Lord, all work together to portray the message. The shape of the poem matters in the interpretation of the poem by adding another layer of depth to the meaning (Brown & Ingoldsby, 1972; Poch, 2019). This is the goal of all visual poetry.

In some forms of visual poetry, the words themselves become secondary to the shape of the poem. This is the case for many calligrams (Bohn, 1981), which are visual poems where the letters of the words are visually exaggerated or distorted into the shape of the subject of the poem. Often, the words of a calligram are difficult to read because of their distortions. Although calligrams are made in English, such as the ones seen in Figure 1.2, they are also created in languages which do not use the Phonician alphabet, such as Hebrew and Arabic (Figure 1.3). In fact, Arabic calligraphy expert Sheila Blair “seems to espouse the traditional notion of Arabic writing as a ‘signifier [...] of Islam’, arguing that most Arabic inscriptions did (and do) not need to be read, or even be readable, to perform

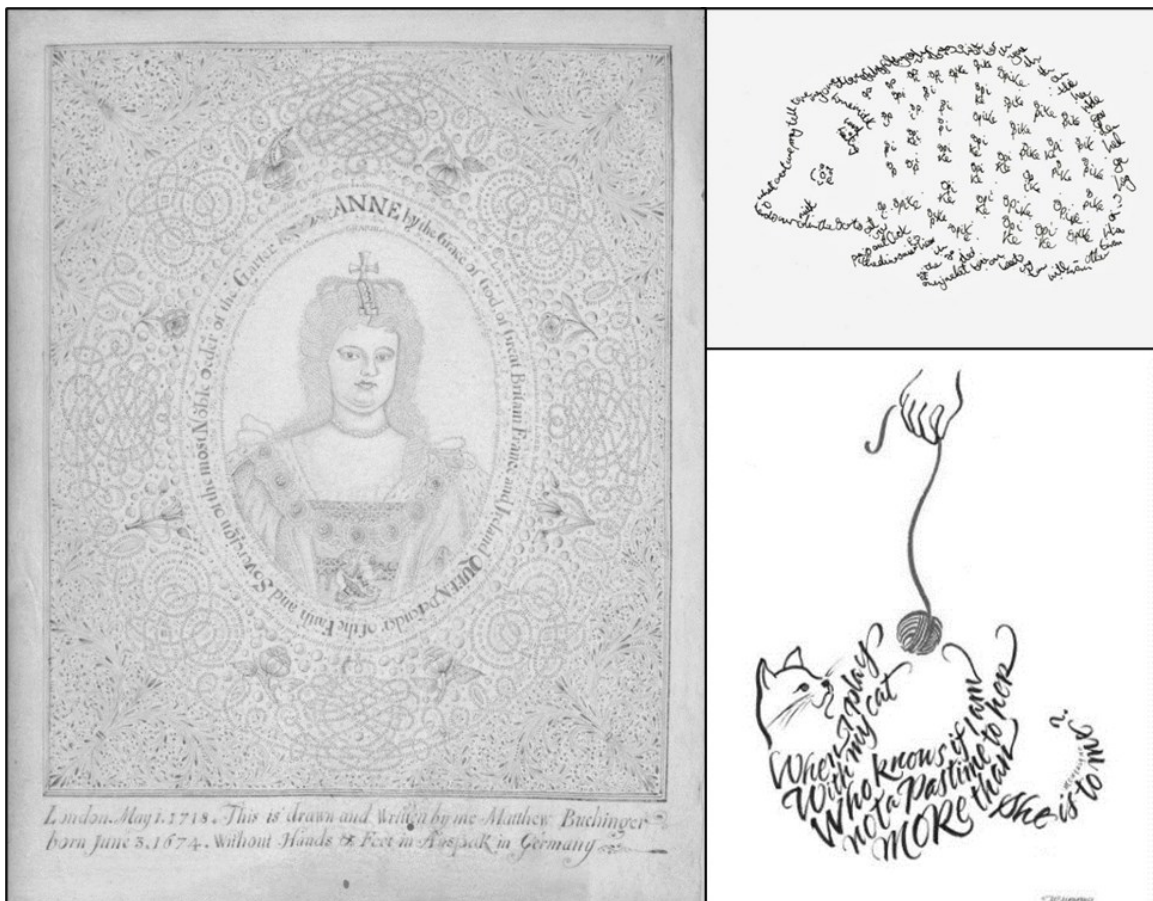
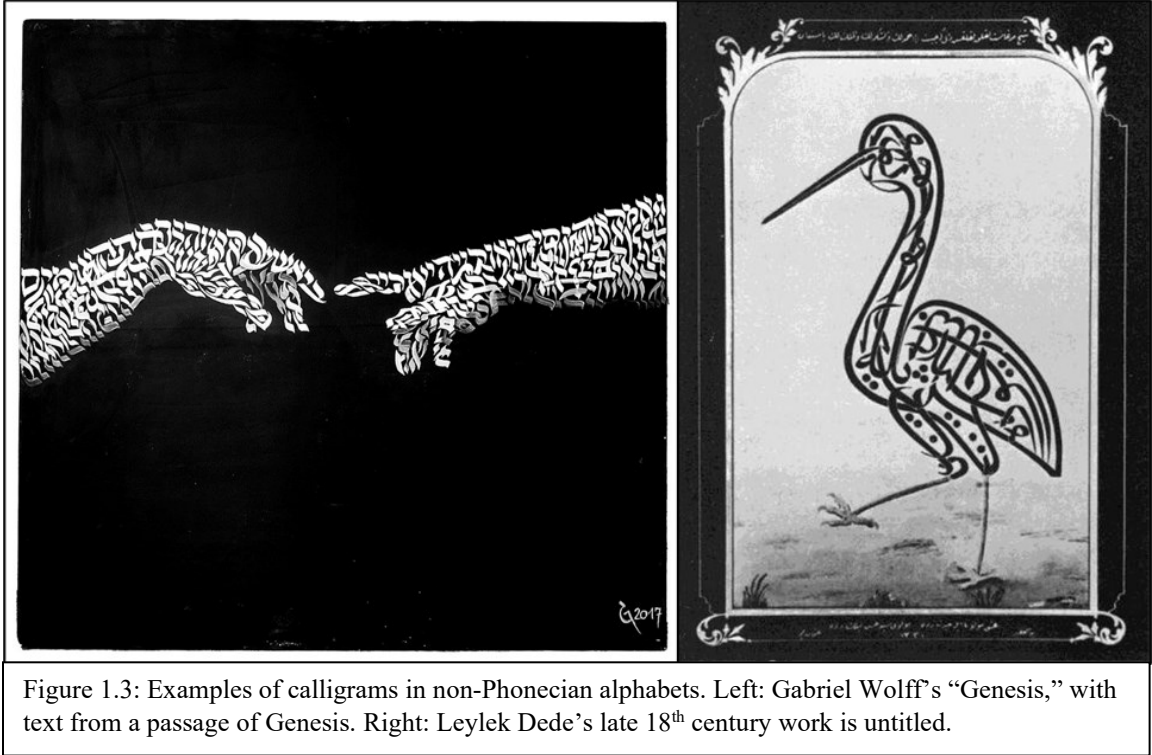


Figure 1.2: Several examples of calligrams in English. Left: Matthias Buchinger’s “Portrait of Queen Anne,” which draws a picture using biblical text. Top right: Steven J. Fowler’s “Animal Calligrams” is an original poem. Bottom right: Jeanne McMenemy’s “Cat Playing,” based on a quote by Michel de Montaigne.

their symbolic function; this she sees as predominantly iconic, and only secondarily textual” (Blair & Bloom, 2017, qtd. in Bongianino, 2017)



The rest of the distinctions presented below focus increasingly on the “visual” side of the visual poem spectrum, rather than the “writing” side. As readers face increasingly visual forms of poetry, they may be uncomfortable calling particular works “poetry,” believing them to be purely visual art because of their comparative unreadability. The topic of reading and readability will be addressed in a later chapter; however, a quick aside before moving on to the finer distinctions in avant-garde poetry may help readers who find that visual poetry transgresses their standards of what poetry is.

Writing-Art Spectrum

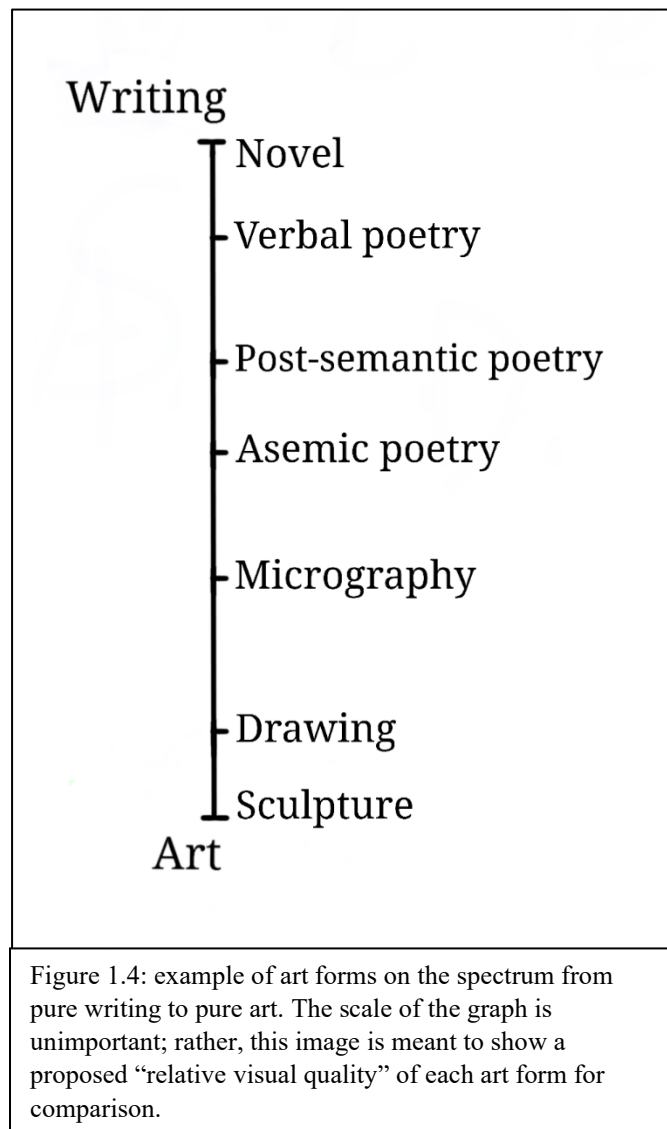
Writing is an inherently visual medium. Except for highly specialized forms of writing such as Braille, writing must be seen to be understood. Likewise, many forms of art (perhaps a large majority) must be seen to be understood. There are forms of writing which require little to no visual consideration to aid interpretation; for example, a vast majority of novels can be printed on any paper, in any font, or even in different languages, and still be the same fundamental work. A reader need not take into account choices like font size, color, or line breaks when interpreting the meaning of a work, because those factors are variable and did not play into the creation of the work. This is a *prototypical* example of writing. There are also works of visual art which include no writing, and no resemblance to writing. This is a prototypical example of visual art.

Prototypes are members of a class of objects which exemplify every characteristic important in distinguishing that class of object from other classes. They are important in helping to shape the definition of the class as a whole. However, a prototype of a class of objects is not the only kind of member in the class. Linguists George Lakoff and Mark Johnson (1980) talk of prototypes in studies of metaphor in human languages and the shaping of perception. They give the example of prototypical and nonprototypical birds, saying

small flying singing birds, like sparrows, robins, etc., are *prototypical birds*. Chickens, ostriches, and penguins are birds that are not central members of the category—they are nonprototypical birds. But they are birds nonetheless, because they bear sufficient family resemblances to the prototype; that is, they share enough of the relevant properties of the prototype to be classified by people as birds. (p. 71, original emphasis).

In the same way as nonprototypical birds bear enough resemblances to prototypical birds to be classified as such by observers, some forms of poetry may be nonprototypical—for example, lacking rhyme and meter, relying increasingly on visuality, lacking syntactic cohesion, or even lacking words altogether—but may be considered poetry because they bear enough resemblance to the poetry family.

The careful reader should then ask, How much resemblance to the prototype is enough to be considered part of the family? This is a complex question requiring a much deeper look than the current research can provide. However, according to many, there is



no set answer; rather, readers must draw their own divisions between “poetry” and “not poetry.” Additionally, it seems as though a reader’s past exposure to nonprototypical poetry is predictive of their willingness to accept new pieces as poetry. This is illustrated by multimedia artist and poet Lawrence Upton (2012), who describes showing a work of asemic poetry to the avant-garde violist Benedict Taylor. He says, “I recall showing [Taylor] a visual work and saying ‘This is my poem’. He said

‘OK’. Plenty of poets would have said: ‘That’s not poetry’, though many fewer than once [would have]” (p. 444).

The goal of this research is not to demand that readers cast their nets wider when defining poetry, or to definitively prove that asemic poetry, or any other nonprototypical form of poetry, is “definitely poetry.” Readers will need to make that decision for themselves. Rather, it is to argue that interpretation and criticism of this middle-ground poetry from a literary perspective can add to a reader’s understanding of the text. To aid the reader in understanding where on the writing-art spectrum different art forms fall I have provided Figure 1.4.

The Second Distinction: Standard Syntax

While many visual poems use standard syntax, as we saw in Herbert’s “Easter Wings,” many others do not. In fact, nonstandard syntax is perhaps one of the most distinctive features of many 20th century avant-garde poetry movements. Dada poetry, for example, frequently pairs words together in a nonsensical way not intended to describe anything. The words are simply words in themselves, not being used to represent any greater idea. Hugo Ball, one of the founding members of the dada movement, says,

Dada is a new tendency in art... Dada comes from the dictionary. It is terribly simple. In French, it means hobby horse. In German: Good-bye, get off my back, see you some other time! In Romanian: Yes, indeed, you are right, that’s it. Yes, of course. Let’s do it. And so forth. An international word. Just a word, and the word as movement (Ball, 1996, p. 221).

Here, we see the lack of fixity between words and meanings. The word becomes its own unit of meaning, and Ball proclaims dada “a new kind of poetry that would operate outside the limits of conventional language” (Wilke, 2013, p. 642).

Famously, Tristan Tzara (1920), another of the foremost pioneers of the dada poetry movement, described how to write a dada poem, saying,

To make a dadaist poem

Take a newspaper.

Take some scissors [...]

Cut out [an] article.

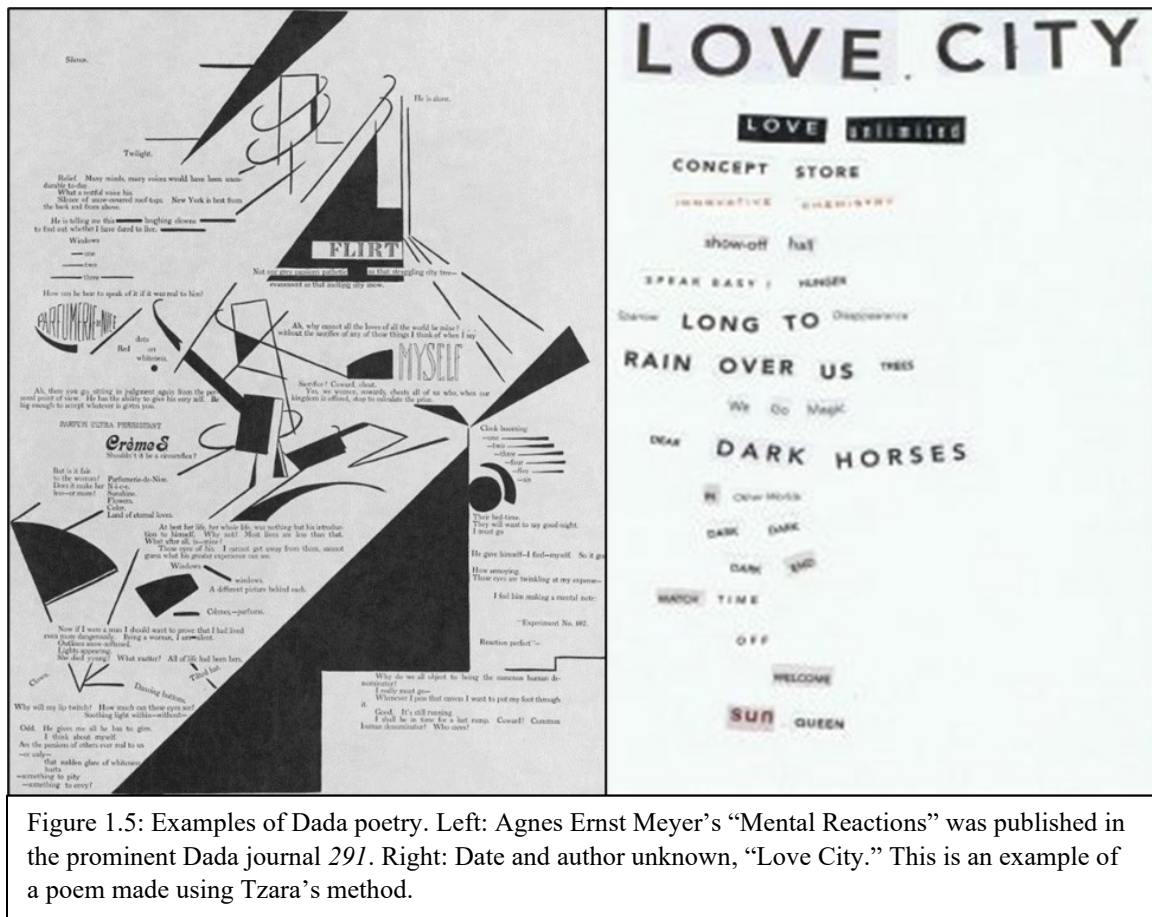
Next carefully cut out each of the words that makes up this article and put them all in a bag.

Shake gently.

Next take out each cutting one after the other.

Copy conscientiously in the order in which they left the bag.

The poem will resemble you.



Several examples of dada visual poetry, shown in Figure 1.5, illustrate how important the visual aspect is in cementing the cobbled-together nonsense of the text: the

words have different colors, fonts, and shapes. Lines may be arranged in different directions or jump haphazardly around. The visuality and nonsense syntax clearly put this form of poetry in a category apart from other visual poems which are meant to “say something” intelligible.

Nonstandard syntax also plays through other poetry movements including Fluxus poetry, De Stijl poetry, Language poetry, and Futurist poetry. This is not to say that every poem written in association with these movements features nonstandard or nonsense syntax, but that visual poems in these movements prototypically featured nonstandard or nonsense syntax, and interpretation relies heavily on the visual aspect of the poems (Figure 1.6). We will call this subset of visual poems which include words, but use nonstandard syntax, “art poems.”

The Third Distinction: Use of Letters

Finally, we will carve our final categories of visual poetry based on the use of letters. All the examples shown above, from Easter Wings to the avant-garde poetry of the Futurists, use words in one way or another. There are poets who opt to use letters creatively, but do not assemble the letters into words. derek beaulieu is an author noted for his use of whole and divided letters without any words, where the letters swirl into each other, creating an explosive



Figure 1.7: “Winnipeg 6” by derek beaulieu. beaulieu is a central figure of post-linguistic poetry.

effect on the page (Figure 1.7). We will call poetry which uses no words, but does include letters, “post-linguistic poetry.” This terminology is taken from Mike Borkent’s 2014 work, “Visual improvisation: Cognition, materiality, and postlinguistic visual poetry.”

Some poetry uses neither words nor letters. *This* is asemic poetry. Speaking of the differences between post-linguistic and asemic poetry, Borkent says,

While beaulieu describes poems like [the one above] as ‘non-semantic,’ this elides the meaningful qualities of the poems prompted by but not denoted by the letters. Similarly... their employment of the Roman alphabet constrains them beyond the more pluralistic and gestural qualities typically ascribed to asemic writings. To some degree we could call them asemic typings instead, but the term postlinguistic is purposeful (p. 7).

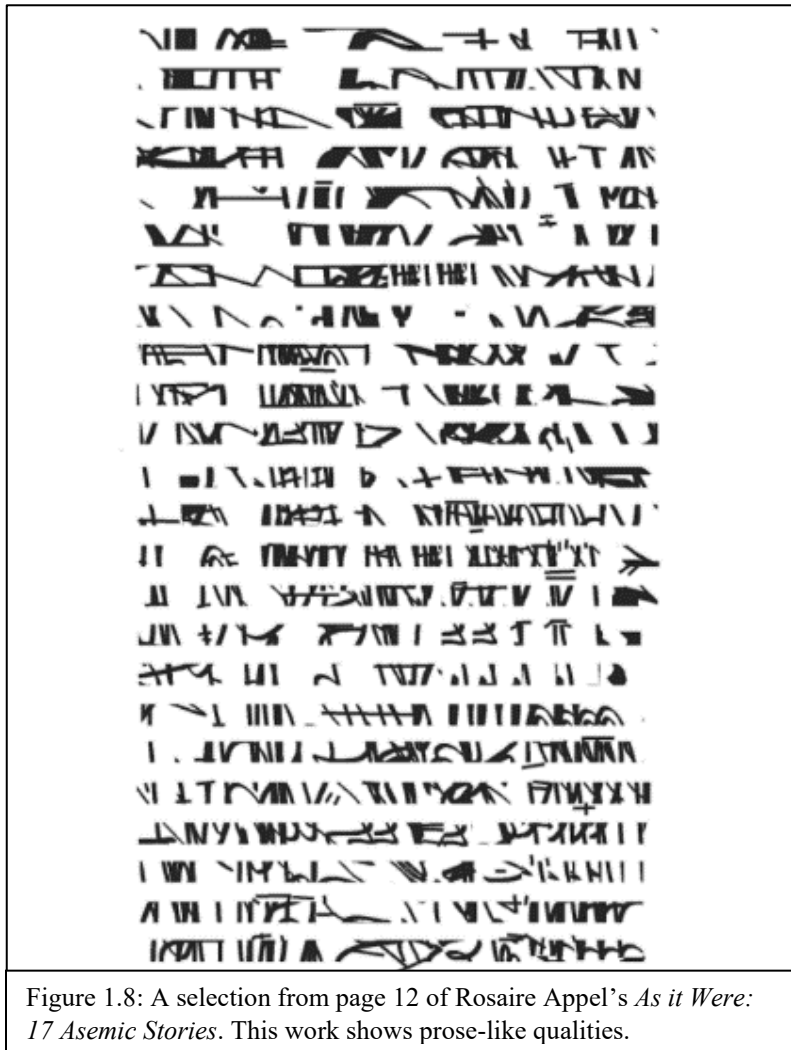
A letter, while not technically being the “seme” from which asemic writing gets its name, still imparts a “meaningful quality” on the reader. Many of beaulieu’s poems are theoretically pronounceable because each letter used has a prescribed pronunciation; in fact, many letters can stand alone as words or represent whole words by themselves, such as “C” for “see”. In this way, letters carry linguistic meaning and associations, which causes the reader’s experience of reading post-linguistic poems to be quite different from asemic poems. Additionally, as later chapters will show, the unrecognizability of the glyphs in asemic writing is an important factor in how readers engage with and create meaning in the text, and this unrecognizability is not present in poetry like beaulieu’s which uses identifiable letters.

Asemic Writing vs. Asemic Poetry

Another question which can help readers refine their understanding of asemic poetry is: are asemic writing and asemic poetry the same thing? Or a corollary question which gets at the same idea: is there asemic prose? This is a topic on which there is almost no scholarship, and a full treatment of this question is not within the scope of this text. Future researchers can give this interesting question the investigation it deserves. However, the problem is worth mentioning here.

We divide prototypical writing into two basic categories, “poetry” and “prose,” based on characteristics of the work itself. These characteristics are often in flux as poets and prose authors play with their media, leading to the introduction of “prose poems,”

which are poems which have no fixed line breaks, and “verse novels,” which are like traditional novels but told in verse. However much the line between poetry and prose is blurred, a good general rule is that poetry is broken into lines and stanzas, often makes intentional use of blank space on a page, and is frequently concerned with concise and figurative or



musical language. Prose is broken into sentences and paragraphs, rarely uses blank space with intentionality, and features language which is normally not concerned with musicality or concision (Tsur, 2012). Since asemic writing does not use language at all, we cannot judge its poetic or prosaic nature based on the third criteria, but we can look for line breaks and blank space being used intentionally.

Some asemic writers, such as Rosaire Appel, often create asemic writings which visually resemble prose. Her book “As it Were: 17 Asemic Stories” (Appel, 2010) features asemic writing which lies on the page similarly to a prototypical novel (Figure 1.8). The

lines of writing stretch from one margin of the page to the opposite margin, and follow orderly lines like standard text. Is this less poetic because it more closely resembles prose? Or is it poetry because asemic writing is an extension of a poetic movement, rather than a prosaic one?

To avoid any confusion, the rest of this work will exclusively use as examples asemic works which the authors have expressly referred to as “poetry,” or by authors who explicitly refer to themselves as “poets.” For example, rather than use Appel’s “As it Were,” the reader may be pointed to her book “wordless (poems)” (Appel, 2009) because the works in the collection are explicitly labeled as poetry. In addition to avoiding confusion, using works which the authors refer to as “poetry” is an important part of framing the works themselves, a topic which a later chapter will cover.

Asemic Movement in History

We have compared asemic poetry to several other avant-garde poetry movements by looking at the characteristics of the poems themselves—whether they have words, letters, or neither, how important the visual aspect of the poem is to its interpretation, and how they use syntax. These movements can also be compared ideologically and historically to help critics understand *why* asemic poetry is being created, and how the motives for creating asemic poetry differ from the motives for creating a dada, futurist, or other type of poem.

Of the movements we examined—dada, fluxus, de Stijl, futurism, and Language poetry—nearly all are nearing a century old or older. Tristan Tzara penned the Dada Manifesto in 1918 (Tzara, 2018), Theo van Doesberg wrote the de Stijl Manifesto in 1918

and it was published in 1922 (van Doesberg, 1922), and Filippo Tommaso Marinetti wrote the Manifesto of Futurism in 1909 (Marinetti, 1909). Fluxus and Language poetry emerged later, in the 1960s and '70s; George Maciunas wrote the Fluxus Manifesto in 1960 (Maciunas, 1960), and magazines now recognized as important to the Language poetry movement started publishing in the early 1970s (Hofer & Golston, 2019, p. xiii).

This is by no means an exhaustive list of 20th-century poetry movements which emphasized visual elements. However, I have picked these few out because they provide a range of times and locations of origin, and because they have important figures associated with them, broad scholarship available on them, or clear representative works. Many have all three.

Reading through the above manifestos gives readers a clear sense of reaction. These movements were all reactions against something else, whether that was another movement or society at large. The futurist manifesto says, “The essential elements of our poetry will be courage, audacity and revolt... Literature has up to now magnified pensive immobility, ecstasy and slumber.” (Marinetti, 1909, p. 3). Futurism is a revolt against the literature of the time, which Marinetti saw as a “gangrene of professors, archaeologists, tourist guides and antiquaries” (1918, p. 4). Maciunas’s fluxus manifesto defines “flux,” before saying, “Purge the world of bourgeois sickness, ‘intellectual’, professional & commercialized culture, PURGE the world of dead art, imitation, artificial art, abstract art, illusionistic art, mathematical art, — PURGE THE WORLD OF ‘EUROPANISM’” (1960, sic.). Fluxus is clearly a reaction to many different things, all of which are the wrongs Maciunas perceived in art and art culture at the time. Likewise, the de Stijl manifesto is reacting against “Traditions, dogmas, and the domination of the individual” (van Doesberg, 1918). Even

more broadly, many critics see dada as a reaction to the state of the world, rather than the state of art at the time of its conception. Tzara says, “Every product of disgust capable of becoming a negation of the family is Dada; a protest with the fists of its whole being engaged in destructive action” (1918, p. 4).

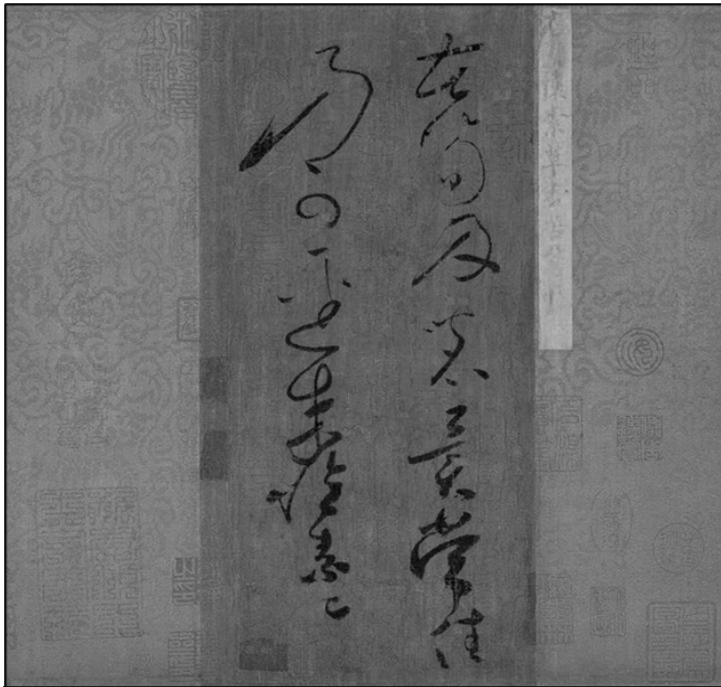


Figure 1.9: An ancient example of proto-asemic writing. This 6th century Chinese poem, “Bitter bamboo shoots,” by Zhang Xu is an example of a calligraphic style he pioneered. It was known for its illegibility.

Contrastingly, the asemic poetry movement was only formally founded in the 1990s by Tim Gaze and Jim Leftwich (Jacobson & Gaze), making it far newer than any of the avant-garde poetry movements mentioned above. There are works which were created before the asemic poetry movement began which are visually asemic. In fact,

examples of asemic or pseudo-asemic writing have existed across cultures throughout history, from the scrawled poetry of Zhang Xu (Figure 1.9) to the mid 20th century writings of Henri Michaux (1951), Roland Barthes (Dachy, 1976), and Cy Twombly (Barthes, 1991). However, before Gaze and Leftwich popularized asemic writing and applied the term “asemic” to writing with no semantic content, there was little or no unity of purpose between these various examples of asemic writing. Therefore, any works which were

created before 1990 will not be included in our discussion, although principles of criticism likely still apply to asemic writings which were created before the movement was started.

The asemic writing movement has this in common with the other movements of poetry mentioned above: it is, as its basis, a reaction to something. However, it is not reacting against the state of art or against society broadly. Rather, it is a reaction against the constraints of language itself. Gaze says,

We humans don't think in words. There's a deeper level, which only condenses out into words as the final stage. This is my belief. If this is true, then we need something other than words, to illustrate our true thoughts.... Language is a tribal influence on humans. If we can find ways to surpass individual languages, humans will feel more included in a unified whole, (2008).

Further, the introduction to prominent asemic poet Cecil Touchon's compiled works says, "[Touchon] possibly is saying nothing about Something; perhaps a something so transcendent that common words cannot speak of it" (intro to Cecil Touchon Asemic reader, 2019). Several statements by poets about their asemic works imply that asemic poetry allows artists greater creative freedom and a broader spectrum of expression compared to traditional poetry. This is because there is a direct connection between the writer's feelings and experiences and the marks which the writer makes (e.g. Roxas-Chua, 2017; Fowler, 2018).

There is a study which shows that in some cases, asemic writing can be used as a therapeutic technique to help patients, such as alexithymic-schizophrenic patients, who have trouble verbalizing their emotions, to engage with emotional events in their life. The research suggests that "asemic writing facilitates self-expression and temporarily improves mood" (Winston, 2016, p. 1). This research tactic is quite different from most linguistics or poetics work, but shows that by circumventing verbal expression, asemic writing can

help people communicate thoughts, ideas, and expressions that exist before they translate them into language.

These pre-linguistic expressions have been greatly explored in cognitive and psychological sciences. We will look more closely at how the mind processes visual linguistic stimuli in a later chapter. For now, we will quickly cover the Language of Thought Hypothesis (LoTH), proposed first by philosopher Jerry Fodor. “According to Fodor, thinking occurs in an inner sub-personal code which he calls ‘Mentalese’” (Tillas, 2015, p. 2). Mentalese, a purely conceptual phenomenon, then needs to be translated or coded into concrete words to be understood by others. Mentalese is not language, but it is hypothesized to be pseudolinguistic because it is compositional and has structure.

If the statements of the asemic poets above hold true, it seems they are attempting to directly “give voice” to mentalese without having to fit it into linguistic constraints. Whether or not asemic poetry is based in mentalese, it is certainly an attempt at expression of concept without code. This is a defining feature of asemic poetry. As a movement, it is a reaction against the strictures of language. If critics have access to information about the conception of a piece of nonverbal writing, they can use this information to help determine its fit in or out of the asemic movement.

Synthesizing Definitions

Using the several modes of reasoning outlined above, readers can begin to formulate their own understanding of what asemic poetry is and isn't. These understandings may differ from definitions that have been put forth in the past. We will

quickly examine these definitions and then arrive at a final definition which will be used for the rest of this work.

The first official definition of asemic writing was put forth by poet Tim Gaze, after corresponding with avant-garde poetry publisher Jim Leftwich. The definition has since changed wording slightly over the years, but the basic idea remains the same. Gaze points readers to his 2011 definition as worded best (Jacobson & Gaze, 2017). It says, “anything which looks like writing, but in which the person viewing can’t read any words, can be described as ‘asemic writing’” (Gaze, 2012, p. 2, asemic movement #1). This is an incredibly broad definition. In addition to including what we have above distinguished as asemic writing, it arguably includes any language or letter system foreign to the reader, any handwriting in the reader’s language which technically codes a message but is inscrutable to the reader, and perhaps unintentional marks or non-marks, such as “linguistic-looking” paint spills or shadows cast on the wall. This definition is too broad to be used here, but it does illustrate an important point: to Gaze, the experience of reading a language to which the reader has no exposure is a closely aligned or wholly similar experience to reading asemic writing. This “linguistic impression” given by asemic writing will become important in a later chapter.

Another definition is provided by researcher and Chinese calligraphy expert Roland Buckingham-Hsiao (2017). He says that asemic writing is “the writing of ‘abstract’ words which lack semantic content (symbolic meaning), a phonetic element (a sound), and recognisable syntax, and which can be viewed therefore simply as compositions of (written) marks” (p. 2). This definition is much more pared-back, making no room for

unintentional marks or writing which is in fact language, but which is in a language unknown to the reader.

We will add one small stipulation to Buckingham-Hsiao's definition: asemic writing is making marks on a medium (writing), which is *intended* to remind the viewer of written language, but which lacks semantic content, a phonetic element, and recognizable syntax—e.g. has no coded meaning. The intent behind the work will be revisited and examined in a later chapter.

Summary

This chapter gives to readers the basic tools and definitions necessary to define and recognize asemic poetry. We looked at the visual features of asemic poetry compared with traditional poetry, visual poetry, 20th century avant-garde poetry, and poet-linguistic poetry. Asemic poetry is a form of visual poetry which has no standard syntax and makes no use of words or letters, contrasting it with the other forms of poetry mentioned above.

We also examined how asemic writing is non-prototypical, both as writing and as visual art, and introduced the concept of a spectrum which provides a basis for relating the fields of writing and visual art. The writing-art spectrum is bounded by “pure writing,” such as a novel, in which the visual component does not factor into the creation of meaning in a text, and “pure visual art,” which is visual expression with neither linguistic appearance nor intent. In the middle of this spectrum are art forms which are neither prototypical writing nor prototypical art: things such as calligrams, avant-garde poetry, and asemic writing. Readers must determine their own ordering of non-prototypical art forms on the spectrum, and must also decide for themselves what “is” and “isn't” poetry based on

proximity to the prototype. However, it seems as though readers with more experience reading non-prototypical poetry are more willing to accept asemic poetry as a legitimate form of poetry.

Finally, we compared the asemic poetry movement to 20th century avant-garde movements to help critics understand how asemic poetry fits into the broader context of non-prototypical poetry. We found that while most of the movements we examined, including dada, futurism, de Stijl, fluxus, and language poetry, were reacting against society or the art of their days, asemic poetry is a reaction against language itself, and an attempt to express concepts and feelings without having to code them into language. In the eyes of many asemic writers, this allows for a much freer expression.

This chapter was largely scaffolding upon which new readers and critics of asemic writing can stand when considering new sets of questions, such as: can something with no coded meaning be linguistic? On what grounds do we identify asemic poetry as poetry? How should readers understand an asemic poem? How can critics begin to separate successful asemic poems from unsuccessful ones? Or is asemic poetry entirely subjective? We will begin to answer these questions in the following chapters. However, because the content in this chapter serves as a foundation, we will return to many of the concepts presented here and continue to examine them as new information is added for our consideration.

CHAPTER TWO

Asemic Poetry, Criticism, and Paratextual Information

Introduction

Chapter 1 presented readers and critics of asemic poetry with guidelines for recognizing it and fitting it into the historical context of avant-garde poetry movements of the 20th century. Several of the claims made in the last chapter were predicated on the reader's awareness of the asemic poet's *intent* in creating the work. For example, we will only examine asemic poems which the author explicitly refers to as poems, and we said that true asemic poetry must be intended to look like language but lack coded content, barring the inclusion of illegible handwriting or purely random marks.

There have been prominent literary critics and criticism movements, however, which insist that the realm of criticism must not take an author's intent when creating a work into account when interpreting and criticizing a work. W. K. Wimsatt, for example, is a critic in the New Criticism movement who is most famous for his two "fallacies"; the Intentional Fallacy, he says, is when critics incorrectly use their knowledge of an author's intention to judge a work of literature, and the Affective Fallacy is when critics judge a work by the way it impacts its audience (Wimsatt, 1954). Wimsatt, and many other critics within and outside of the New Criticism movement, hold that the only acceptable source of information on a text is the text itself. This idea has held sway in areas of criticism for many years, and has shaped the landscape of criticism as we see it today (Roma, 1966).

This raises an obvious problem for readers of asemic poetry. While most written works can be separated more or less from the authorial intent and the reader's reception to be read "in a vacuum," asemic poetry, which contains no coded information, cannot be read in the same way. In fact, one might claim that readers *only* have the author's intent and their own reception to guide their interpretation.

Because of this, we will first need to establish why it is not a critical fallacy to rely on what we know of the author's intention in creating a piece, and the reader's reception of the piece itself. To do this, we will examine how an author's commentary on a piece can be viewed, not as totally distinct from the piece itself, but as a paratext which interacts with the piece. We will also examine how an author's intentions can be inferred, not only from direct statements about the piece itself, but also from the general *framing* of the work.

With framing in mind, we will return to criticism and ask how the decisions an author has made in a piece of asemic poetry have shaped the way that we read it. We will save the argument of the affective fallacy, or the reader's response, for the following chapter.

Presentation is Relevant to Understanding

Artists make many decisions when creating a work of art, whether that work is visual, literary, musical, or another category. However, many artistic decisions are not directly part of the piece itself, but decisions of how to frame, or present, the piece. For example, an identical piece of art could be graffitied on the side of a building, or painted on the wall of an art museum. Compositionally, the decisions that the artist made about the

painting are the same. But the presentation is situationally different, and this relevant to a viewer's understanding of the piece.

Another, literature-specific, example involves the many framing devices present in books. In addition to the text, a book often has cover art, a blurb telling you about the book, a dedication, information on the author, and perhaps a table of contents or index. The inclusion of these extra pieces of information can help the reader to interpret or critique the book, even though they are distinct from the creative work itself.

In scholarship on literary interpretation, this “extra information” which surrounds an artistic work is called paratext (Genette, 1991). Even very small additions to a work can be paratextual in nature. For example, when an author's name appears on a work, that is paratext that can give readers extra help in interpreting or criticizing the work. If a reader has enjoyed the work of a specific author before, that reader may be more inclined to view another work by that same author favorably. Likewise, the index, table of contents, and summary give readers extra information that they may use, consciously or not, when assessing a work.

Although some critics are not comfortable with including paratextual information in their criticisms, increasingly, critics and scholars are recognizing the role that this information has in interpretation and understanding of a work (Ruokkeinen & Liira, 2017). This movement in criticism is incredibly important for asemic writing; in fact, based on paratextual information alone, readers can reach an understanding that *authors of asemic poetry are inviting readers to interpret their work as poetry*.

What Asemic Authors Say About Their Work

In chapter 1 we highlighted that some asemic writers refer to their work explicitly as poetry, and some refer to their work as simply “writing,” or dually as writing and drawing. This designation is, itself, paratext. We will look quickly at examples of each authorial designation.

Cecil Touchon, who we heard from in the first chapter, firmly places his work in the context of poetry. He says of asemic-style art prior to Gaze and Leftwich’s definition of asemic writing:

“Works of this type were called lyrical abstraction or gestural mark making but [were] primarily practiced by visual artists rather than poets. While gestural mark making among artists has been concerned with the traditions of painting, *asemic writing primarily has arisen around the concerns of poetry* and as a response to the traditions and poetic forms of literature or perhaps post-literature (Touchon, 2022, emphasis added).

Here, Touchon clearly draws a parallel between the historical moment of asemic poetry (which he here calls asemic writing), and the artistic context of poetry and literature. He defines it as a literary movement, not a visual art movement. Interestingly, Touchon has a

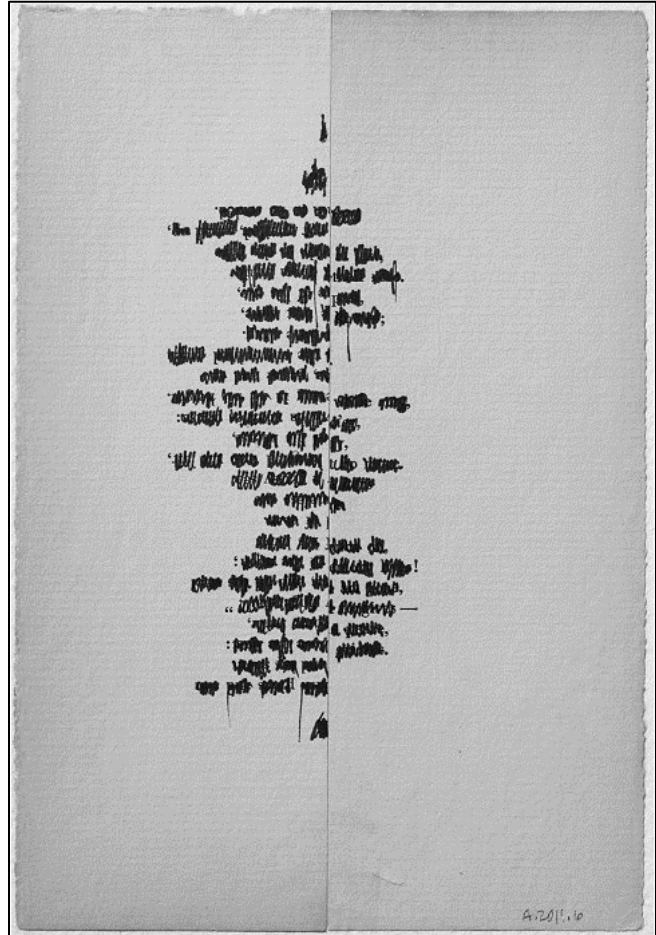


Figure 2.1: *Palimpsest Poem 6*, by Cecil Touchon.

series of asemic works which use printed materials such as book pages, poems, and receipts as a starting point for his poems. An example, shown in Figure 2.1, is called simply Palimpsest Asemic Poem 6, again clearly labeling the work as a piece of poetry. We will hear more about this collection in a later chapter.

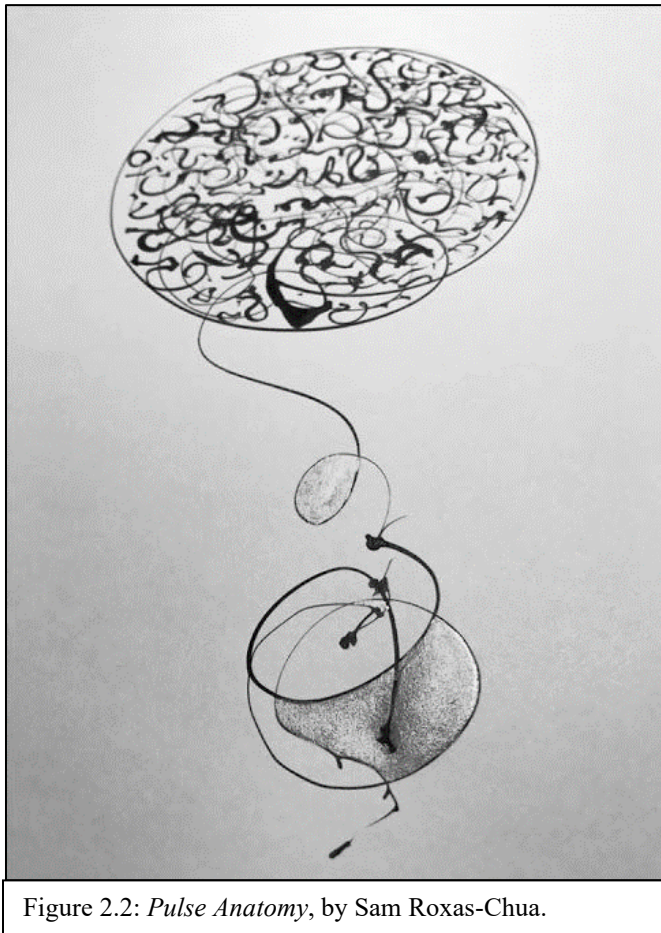


Figure 2.2: *Pulse Anatomy*, by Sam Roxas-Chua.

Other asemic poets who explicitly label their work as poetry include Rosaire Appel, whose book *Wordless (poems)* we have already seen. Steven J. Fowler is another; he says, in a lecture on how to write asemic poetry, “take a solid, concrete idea that you think you would turn into a normal poetry collection... and then express it with abstract writing” (Fowler, Video, 2020). Donato Mancini is a third poet who explicitly refers to his work as poetry. He writes both

traditional and asemic poetry.

Some asemic authors simply call their work writing, without directly correlating it to poetry. Sam Roxas-Chua is a prominent asemic writer and poet, who says, “In between stanzas of a poem, or when I can’t quite get to an image or a phrase, I pull out a piece of paper and start writing this nonsensical script. When I do this script and feel the texture of

my wrist on the page, it brings me to that image that I want from time to time” (Roxas-Chua, 2017). Roxas-Chua sees his asemic work as an aid to writing poetry, but does not claim that his work *is* poetry (Figure 2.2)

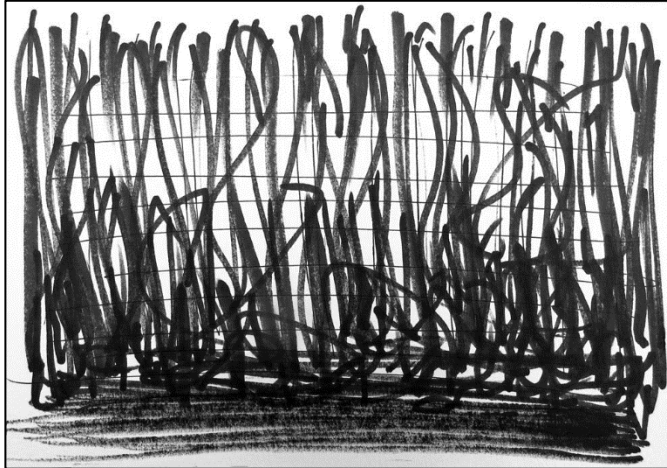


Figure 2.3: The Last Letter by Ram Samocha. This is the first in a series of 25 drawings.

Finally, some asemic writers refer to their work as a bridge between writing and visual art, or some combination of the two, or both simultaneously. Ram Samocha is a visual artist whose main body of work is paintings, but who has one collection which he

refers to as “asemic writing” once in his artist statement, but mostly refers to as “drawings” (Samocha, 2018). This is, however, not as common as the other two designations asemic authors give their work. (Figure 2.3).

Samocha says of his asemic series, “Last Letter is a series of 25 drawings/asemic writing that I created over one night in May 2017. This quick and intensive drawing session happened in respond to a personal family tragedy... I wanted to record this intense feeling of wanting, or needing to write a last letter; to ultimately express myself or explain. [sic]” (Samocha, 2018). Last Letter is the product of a different creative drive. Samocha is neither strictly drawing, nor is he strictly writing, in the traditional sense. However, since his background is in visual art, he approaches the task of asemic writing using the vocabulary of a visual artist. “Even when I write my name,” he says, “I’m drawing” (ibid.).

Regardless of how the authors talk about their own works, one thing is clear: asemic writers place their works in a category distinct from purely visual art. This is even true for people who are primarily visual artists that occasionally make asemic writings, such as Samocha.

Readers can use this fact to interpret the asemic work they encounter. They ask, what am I supposed to do with this? And the authors, by repeatedly placing their work in a different category from visual art, and for many, by categorizing their work *as* poetry, invite the reader to interpret their work as poetry.

Literary Situation and Asemic Presentation

Another important consideration of authorial intent in asemic poetry is the situations in which readers encounter it. Not every reader has access to statements from the author about their own work. However, every reader has the ability to step back from a work of asemic writing and ask, “by what means am I seeing this work? What does that say about the work itself?”

In just the same way as an author’s statement about a work counts as paratext that guides a reader’s interpretation, the places that the work is found can do the same. Take, for example, how many decry modern art by saying, “I could do that.” Maybe it is true that the average viewer could replicate a certain work of art in a modern art gallery or a prestigious art museum. Think of Jo Baer’s 1972 *Untitled (White Square Lavender)*,

(Figure 2.4) a painting which is totally white, save for a black band and a lavender band which frame the canvas. Perhaps anyone could paint an all-white painting. A huge difference between Baer's painting and anyone else's is that Baer's has been displayed at art galleries in London and New York (Christie's, 2015).

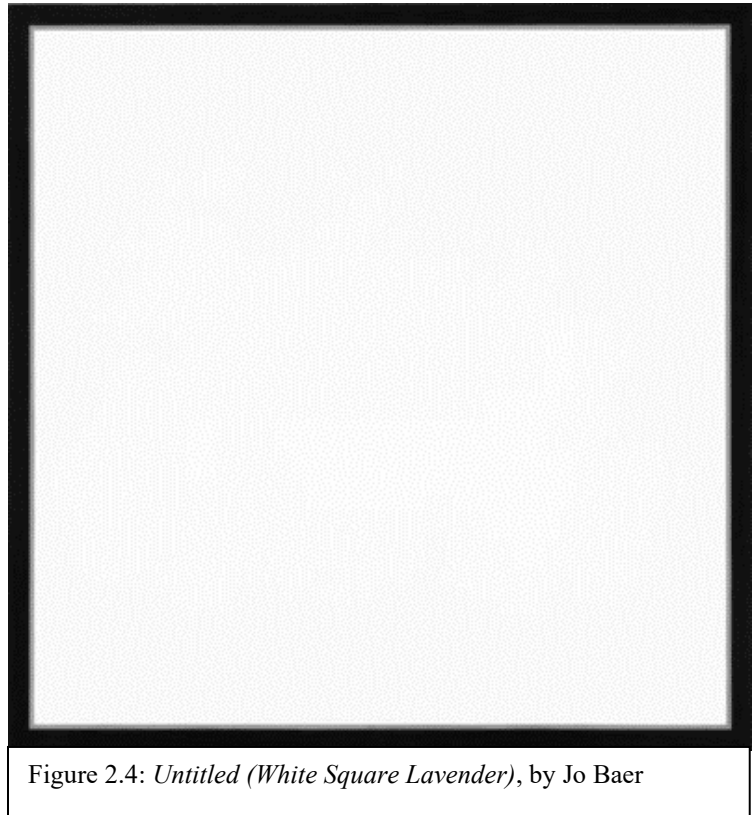


Figure 2.4: *Untitled (White Square Lavender)*, by Jo Baer

The art environment is

paratext which tells viewers that what they are viewing is, in fact, art. Were the piece not by an established artist, and not displayed in a prestigious art gallery, viewers may reach different conclusions about the piece.

Similarly, readers encounter *literary situations* at a rapid-fire pace. Here, literary situation means a context in which readers encounter the written word. Many literary situations are obvious: readers engage with books, magazines, newspapers, and journals regularly. But many encounters with the written word are not so neat. Readers are surrounded by advertisements, shopping lists, social media posts, the written word in art, receipts, letters and memos. The human mind is incredibly good at sorting information into categories (Tsur, 2012), which includes sorting the written word into literary situations. Each literary situation comes with a set of expectations for the reader. A receipt or a memo

may be in list form; a poem may be broken into lines; a social media post may use informal language. Before the mind can even digest the words on a page, it has made calculations about what it may be seeing, as we will see in chapter 3. Once again, this is paratext—extra information that readers use to understand and interpret writing.

Roland Barthes, the famed philosopher, critic, poet, and proto-asemic writer, wrote on the importance of literary situations, although he never referred to them as such. He says in his book *All Except You*, “writing is not an object like others: its substance is, if not transparent, purely instrumental, or at least always significant: writing cannot exist without carrying a meaning: either it directly refers to a message, or it refers indirectly to a *psychological disposition*: it is an object that imperatively signifies” (Barthes & Steinberg, 1983, p. 22, emphasis added). Writing, according to Barthes, has meaning beyond its coded meaning, such that even when its coded meaning is unknowable, it leaves an impression on the mind of the reader, a *psychological disposition*, which is meaningful. This is what literary situation means.

Common literary situations in which readers encounter poetry are: published books, both physical and online, published journals, both physical and online, and, through social media posts, exclusively online. Poetry journals and books set up specific expectations in the reader’s mind. This phenomenon is not new to criticism: W.K. Wimsatt says of bad poetry which has been published, “if [the poet] had not professed to write a poem, if he had not called it a poem and printed it on fine paper, the offense might be far less,” (Wimsatt, 1954). Clearly, then, even to Wimsatt, the literary situation is important in creating an interpretation of a work, so much so that what makes a bad poem truly bad is its insistence on appropriating the paratext surrounding good poetry.

In each of the literary situations mentioned above, readers can encounter *both* traditional poetry and asemic poetry. Take, for example, Poetry Magazine, which is the oldest monthly poetry magazine in the English-speaking world (Poetry Foundation, 2019). It receives over 150,000 submissions per year (Poetry Foundation, 2022). The magazine very intentionally features works of visual poetry, including asemic poetry. In her call for submissions for the January 2022 issue, Poetry Magazine Guest Editor Suzi Garcia said, “I



Figure 2.5: *mi'kmaq book of the dead*, by mIEKAL aND

and video poems, as well as print”

(Garcia & Poetry Magazine, 2022).

In November, 2008, Poetry Magazine published a poem by poet mIEKAL aND, titled *mi'kmaq book of the dead* (Figure 2.5). It is an asemic poem, which “combines seemingly recognizable characters with apparently pictographic ones” (Huth, 2008). This is a prime example of asemic and traditional writing coexisting in the same spaces.

And again, many asemic poets we have already examined, including Appel, Touchon, and Roxas-Chua, have published books of asemic poems. Roxas-Chua’s collection of asemic poems, *Echolalia*, is published by a publishing house which also

publishes traditional poetry. Asemic poetry fits into the same literary situations as traditional poetry. Authors and editors present the two side-by-side. This is paratextual information: the authors, the editors, and the asemic poems themselves are imploring readers to interpret asemic poetry as poetry.

A Quick Note: Functions of Language

Before we move on from linguistic situation, it is worth mentioning the work that Roman Jakobson has done in breaking down language into its individual functions, and how it relates to asemic writing.

Jakobson, a premier scholar in the field of cognitive poetics, describes language in this way:

The ADDRESSER sends a MESSAGE to the ADDRESSEE. To be operative the message requires a CONTEXT referred to... a CODE fully, or at least partially, common to the addresser and addressee... and, finally, a CONTACT, a physical channel and psychological connection between the addresser and the addressee, enabling both of them to enter and stay in communication (Jakobson, 1960, p. 3).

Language can function in one or more ways. Jakobson outlines six functions of language, but we will focus only on one. The *phatic* function, Jakobson says, are messages “primarily serving to establish, to prolong, or to discontinue communication, to check whether the channel works (‘Hello, do you hear me?’), to attract the attention of the

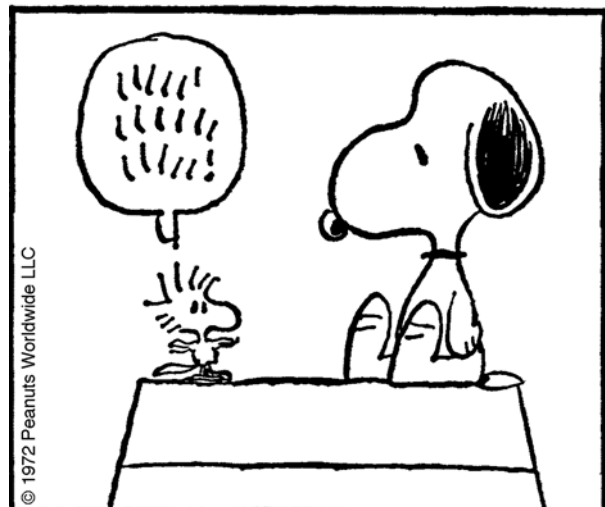


Figure 2.6: An example of Woodstock, from Charles Schultz's comic strip *Peanuts*, speaking in asemic marks in this panel from September 18, 1972.

interlocutor or to confirm his continued attention” (ibid.). In other words, the meaning of the message is not connected with the actual definition of the words in the message.

Rather, the message functions as a point of contact between the addresser and the addressee which is referential to the code itself. The *fact* that an addresser is sending a message to an addressee is more important than the message itself. The context is the most important factor in understanding.

Researchers Humphrey & Carvajal (2015) propose that asemic writing serves a phatic function. They say, “even vocalizations we can’t understand perform the phatic function...The world of sound is essentially a unified field of instant relationships. Although Jakobson’s other functions survive the translation from [speech] to [vision] more or less intact, the phatic mode is completely transformed” (p. 22). They use as an example the markings of the *Peanuts* character Woodstock (Figure 2.6): the marks are visually similar to language (in fact, Humphrey and Carvajal argue, they are asemic), but they stand in place of language with no definite or important meaning. What is important, when Woodstock’s speech bubble appears, is that he is communicating, and the situation in which he is communicating.

Interpretations of Jakobson’s work validate that asemic writing, a message, sent through the writing medium, from a poet to a reader, in an unreadable code, may function similar to the way the rest of language functions. The language function is not normal, but it could be isolating one single modality of language: the phatic form of expression is more concerned with referring to the code itself and helping the addressee understand that a message is being sent than it is concerned with the actual meaning of the message. These ideas combine with what we have seen above about artist presentation to affirm

that the situation in which asemic poetry is presented is a very important part of the message.

Summary

Asemic poets want readers to recognize their work as poetry, and to engage with their work in the same way, or a similar way, to how they engage with traditional poetry. They use three important techniques to invite readers to compare their work to traditional poetry. The first is the way that asemic poets talk about their work. Although not all creators of asemic works explicitly refer to their works as poetry, many do, including some of the most influential. Those who do not explicitly refer to their work as poetry tend to use language that is linguistically derived, rather than artistically. Think of Roxas-Chua calling his work “writing.”

Secondly, asemic poets present their works in literary situations which are analogous to traditional poetry. Traditional poetry is published in poetry magazines, chapbooks, and poetry books (both online and physically), and asemic poetry is also published in these places. In some cases, poetry publishing houses and magazines will print traditional and asemic poetry side-by-side. This further invites comparison between the two.

The third technique asemic poets use is formatting asemic poems very similarly to traditional poems. We will look more at this in chapter 3.

Some may argue that these techniques represent non-textual information which cannot be used to guess the intent of the author, or that, even if the intent of the author is known, it cannot be used to interpret a piece of writing. This is silly. It is correct that these

techniques are non-textual; they are paratextual. Modern criticism scholarship frequently allows for, and even relies on, paratextual information to accurately understand and critique a work of literature. Asemic poetry is unique among poetry in that paratextual information may be the only verbal information given. Because of this, the critic of asemic poetry may need to rely heavily on paratextual information. However, as we will see in the next chapter, the poems themselves are ripe with literary information, even without coded linguistic meaning.

CHAPTER THREE

Reading Asemic Poetry

Introduction

The previous two chapters presented readers with what asemic poetry is, and how the authors of asemic poetry encourage readers to engage with their work as poetry. With this knowledge, readers can begin to parse *how* to read asemic writing. That we must approach reading asemic poetry in a different manner than we approach reading traditional poetry is a given—traditional poetry has coded meaning, and asemic poetry does not. If we look at the cognitive background for reading, though, we may find interesting and useful parallels between how readers take in traditional poetry and how they take in asemic poetry.

Conclusive information on how the brain engages with asemic writing is unfortunately lacking, and future research could easily fill in the gaps by testing what brain centers are affected when test subjects read traditional poetry and asemic poetry. Because such research does not currently exist, we have to use other methods to get at how asemic poetry cognitively affects the reader.

In this chapter, we will examine neurological and cognitive models of reading, focusing on the acquisition of reading skills in early childhood and second-language reading in languages with non-native alphabet systems. Research points to a model of reading in which readers visually process, identify, and connect writing to create meaning from a text (Kendeou, van den Broek, Helder, & Karlsson, 2014, p. 1).

We will then examine how these processes can be “hijacked” by asemic writing, such that a reader enters a mental “reading mode” in response to similarities between the text and the reader’s written native language. This concept is a continuation of chapter 2,

where we saw how the way asemic authors talk about and present their writings work together to encourage the reader to interpret the writing as poetry. There is also a third way that asemic poems steer readers toward a poetic interpretation: the poems themselves look like language sufficiently to be distinguished from random scribbles. As we will see below, this is a very important feature of asemic poetry; perhaps the most important.

Although reading asemic poetry does not give the same conclusive impressions as traditional writing, the brain still goes through the same fundamental steps to read asemic poetry as it does traditional writing. We will explore the differences between the two, and how the lack of conclusiveness in reading asemic writing is a desirable trait of the medium because it allows for the reader to have greater freedom of interpretation.

Current Cognitive Models of Reading Comprehension

Reading and reading comprehension is an incredibly complex process at a cognitive level, and there are several models which attempt to simplify and explain it using cognitive, neurological, and computational studies. A 2014 review (Kendeou, van den Broek, Helder, & Karlsson, 2014) of literature in the cognitive science of reading mentions several models, including: the Construction–Integration model (Kintsch & Van Dijk, 1978), the Causal Network Model (Trabasso, van den Broek, & Suh, 1989), the Resonance Model (Albrecht & O’Brien, 1993), the Event-Indexing Model (Zwaan, Langston, & Graesser, 1995), and the Landscape Model (Tzeng, van den Broek, Kendeou, & Lee, 2005; Yeari & van den Broek, 2016). Additionally, another important cognitive model of reading is the Simplified View of Reading (SVR) model (Gough & Tunmer, 1986; Hoover & Tunmer, 2018). A breakdown of the differences between the models, as well as the merits and drawbacks of

each, is not within the scope of this research. Interested readers can turn to Verhoeven, Rietsma, & Siegel, (2011) for a more careful analysis of the state of research.

All of the models mentioned in the 2014 review focus on the comprehension of passages *after* the reader understands the individual words. In other words, these models do not cover the decoding of letters and words. By contrast, the SVR model explains reading comprehension as equally supported by two processes: “decoding, the ability to recognize words in print, and language comprehension, the ability to understand spoken language” (Hoover & Tunmer, 2018, p. 304). In other words, the SVR focuses on creating understanding individual words *and* combining words into longer phrases. Because of this, we will draw primarily from the SVR model in this discussion. However, we will supplement with the other models to reach a more global view of reading comprehension.

Different processes of reading comprehension cross several of the models discussed. Reading comprehension includes: visual processing and identification; connection between individual units of information—words, sentences, and passages in a text; connection between the content of the text to one’s own mental database of background knowledge; and construction of a mental concept of the text.

The ways that these aspects are combined differs slightly by model. For example, according to Kintsch & Van Dijk (1978), the Construction-Integration model relies on three sets of processes.:

First, the meaning elements of a text become organized into a coherent whole, a process that results in multiple processing of some elements and, hence, in differential retention. A second set of operations condenses the full meaning of the text into its gist. These processes are complemented by a third set of operations that generate new texts from the memorial consequences of the comprehension processes (p. 363).

This model is, by admission of the authors, somewhat incomplete. It does not count for decoding, nor does it explain how a reader draws on background knowledge when understanding a text. (p. 364). One strength of this scheme, for our purposes, is the idea that an integral mental process of reading and comprehending a text is “generat[ing] new texts,” i.e. new ideas, based on the text a reader is reading.

Kendeou et al’s review adds a decoding step prior to Kintsch & Van Dijk’s model: “To understand a sentence, one must visually process the individual words, identify and access their phonological, orthographic, and semantic representations, and connect these representations to form an understanding of the underlying meaning of the sentence,” (Kendeou et al., 2014, p. 10). It then echoes the step that condenses the text into a “gist,” saying “to comprehend a text as a whole, the reader needs to process and connect individual idea units, resulting (if all goes well) in the construction of a coherent mental representation of the text” (Ibid.). The “coherent mental representation” is analogous to the “gist.” In fact, forming a mental image is the central principle which unifies cognitive models of reading. “Although the various theoretical models emphasize different aspects of reading comprehension, they share the central notion that, at its core, reading comprehension involves the construction of a coherent mental representation of the text in the readers’ memory,” (Ibid.).

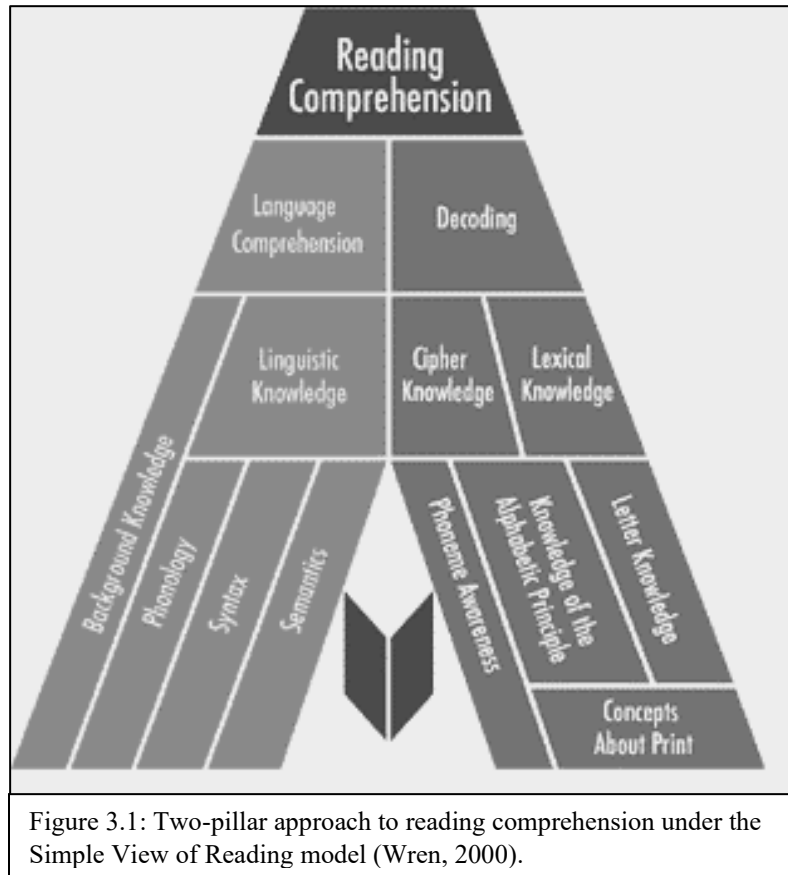
Another aspect which the Construction-Integration model does not cover is how readers access relevant memories and experiences to interpret and help validate the truth of a text. Kendeou et al call this *inferencing*. “Inferences allow the reader to construct meaningful connections between text elements and relevant background knowledge and therefore are crucial to comprehension” (Kendeou, et al., 2014, p. 11), so inferencing

creates interconnected webs of ideas and memories which are activated by the text. Tzeng et al. include this inferencing in their Landscape model. The architecture of this model “assumes that when a concept is activated during reading, all other concepts concurrently activated become associated with it. Thus, each concept connects with other concepts to form a cohort,” (Tzeng et al., 2005, p. 278). So, a reader holds pieces of information in a text simultaneously, as well as the information called to mind in association with the words and phrases in the text. This idea is a central tenet of gestalt psychology

In summary, our compiled sources on reading cognition allow for at least four discrete functions the brain performs during the act of reading: 1) the reader recognizes and decodes writing, 2) blends the meanings of the individual units into a global meaning of the whole text, 3) cross-references the text with relevant background knowledge, and 4) creates new ideas related to the text. These steps are semi-ordered; for example, readers cannot combine individual units of meaning until they have decoded the units. However, most models assume that all of these processes are happening nearly simultaneously in a cyclical manner (Tzeng et al., 2005). Note that this numbering system is purely pedagogical for the purposes of this research, as not necessarily every step is represented, and not every model covers every one of these steps. This is just a representation of common themes that come up in the models we have looked at.

The SVR model places equal emphasis on the decoding aspect of reading and the comprehension aspect (Figure 3.1).

Additionally, the SVR has been validated repeatedly and recently (Hoover & Tunmer, 2018; Cervetti et al., 2020). Because of these factors, we will use the SVR as a



starting point from which to understand the cognitive science of reading asemic writing.

What Goes Wrong with Reading

Readers can encounter difficulties at each of the steps above. For example, dyslexia is a reading disorder in which a reader cannot correctly decode a text, and hyperlexia is a reading disorder in which a reader can decode a text fine, but cannot comprehend the meaning of the text (Gough & Tunmer, 1986). Gough and Tunmer sort reading disorders into three groups: decoding disorders, comprehension disorders, and mixed disorders, in which a reader has trouble both with reading and decoding (ibid.).

Likewise, sentences can be ambiguous, lending themselves to more than one reading and thus complexifying the comprehension process, even for readers without disability. Hoeks, Redeker, and Hendriks (2009) give as an example the sentence *John greeted Paul yesterday and Ben today*. This sentence can be read in two ways: either John greeted Paul yesterday and Ben greeted Paul today, or John greeted Paul yesterday and John greeted Ben today (p. 222).

Poets can use intentionally crafted ambiguity to mess up the reading process in readers. Recall the several types of avant-garde poetry discussed in chapter 1. Some of these poems were carefully crafted to be nonsensical: John Cage's "Mesostic no. 1" is "I Ching-determined syllables and word mixes from 'Changes: Notes on Choreography' by Merce Cunningham along with fragments taken from thirty-two other books chosen by him from his library. They have been instant-letterset using a gamut of about seven hundred and thirty different type faces or sizes" (Cage, 1971. From notes on "Sixty two mesostics re Merce Cunningham"). Of course, it cannot be read in a traditional way; the words do not mix to form a comprehensible whole, and so step 2 of the reading process cannot be successfully completed. The poem lacks semantic coherence.

Likewise, Ron Silliman's "The Intent" has words organized into phrases and can actually be read as a coherent whole. But it does not follow standard syntax, like spacing, punctuation, and spelling (for example: "fo an owah" instead of "for an hour"). Other

ygUDuh
 ygUDuh

 ydoan
 yunnuhstan

 ydoan o
 yunnuhstand dem
 yguduh ged

 yunnuhstan dem
 doidee
 yguduh ged riduh
 ydoan o nudn

 LISN bud LISN

 idem
 gud
 general

 lidl yelluh bas
 tuds weer goin

 duhSIVILEYEzum

Figure 3.2: Text of “ygUDuh” by e.e. cummings (cummings, 1944).

poems, such as e.e. cumming’s “ygUDuh” manipulate the standard relationship between written and spoken English to create the effect of an accent (Figure 3.2). These poems upset phonology, syntax, and semantics, and figure 3.1 shows the how these categories are instrumental to supporting language comprehension, and therefore reading comprehension.

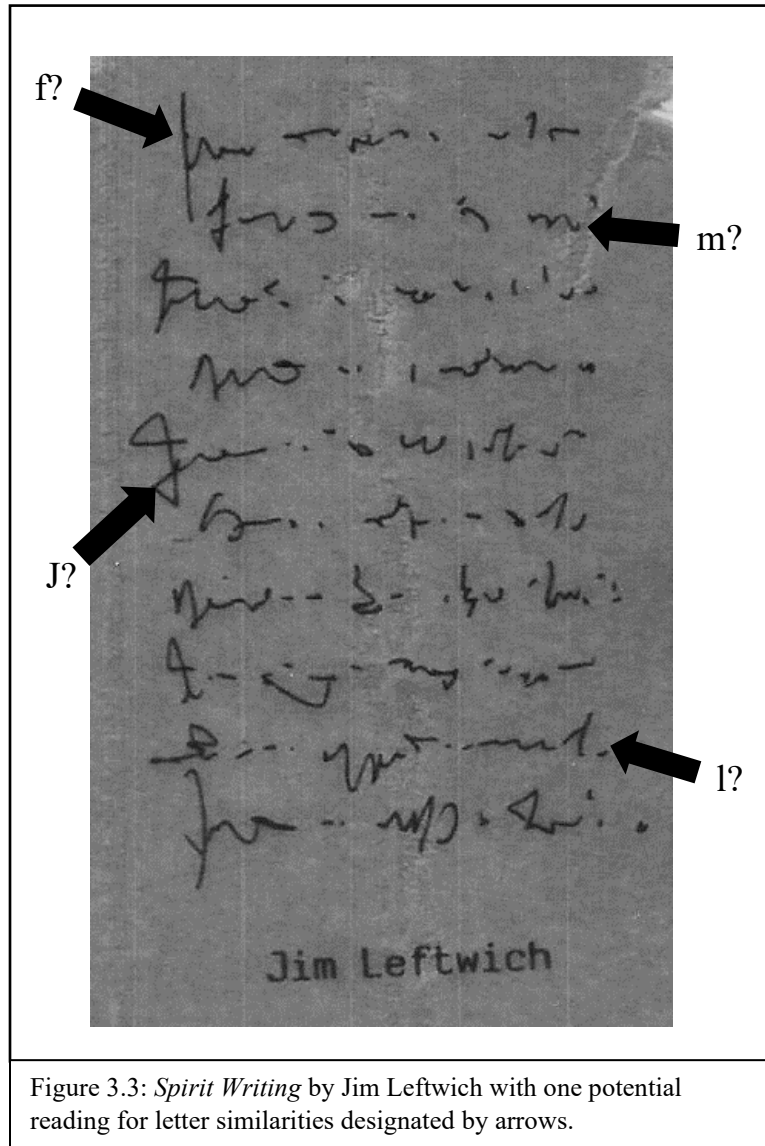
Nevertheless, reading these poems is still reading. To return to Lakoff and Johnson’s (2003) terminology, just in the same way that these avant-garde poems are nonprototypical examples of poems, the cognitive process of reading them is itself nonprototypical: it shares enough cognitive features with reading a

comprehensible text that it is considered reading, but it is different from the prototype in noticeable ways. Importantly, it shares the initial features of reading—that is, recognizing and decoding (or attempting to decode) text.

Poetry, then, sometimes requires readers to engage in modified reading practices by using abnormal phonology, syntax, and semantics. This is especially true of more modern poetry movements, like the examples we saw in chapter one.

Asemic Poetry has Features of Written Language

Asemic authors tend to create a distinction between their work and random scribbles. To return to a quote from Tim Gaze, “anything which *looks like writing*, but in which the person viewing can’t read any words, can be described as ‘asemic writing’”



(Gaze, 2012, p. 2, emphasis added). The visual similarity of asemic writing to the reader’s own language is what sets asemic writing apart from scribbles, and what elevates it from cheap, random marks to an art form that is difficult to do well.

Figure 3.3 shows an example of an asemic poem by Jim Leftwich, with whom Gaze started the asemic poetry movement.

Arrows point to several

ambiguous marks, denoting one potential reading of what letters each mark might represent. Of course, the marks do not represent any letter, and a closer inspection reveals

this. What looks like an “f” to one reader might look like a “t” to another, or even to the same reader on a different viewing.

This is the biggest feature of asemic poetry: it looks readable. The apparent readability is a large part of what helps critics to define it. Asemic poetry is about more than the intent of the author, or the historical context of the work, or whether it uses letters. It is an art form that looks readable without having coded meaning.

The apparent readability is also a strong argument for why it ought to be understood as a form of literature. What the authors say about their work and how readers encounter the work are both relevant to interpretation. But even without considering these things, asemic poetry still looks like writing. This is also very relevant to understanding asemic writing, and visual art criticism does not take this into account.

Because of this, a critic’s examination of an asemic poem is reading. Some might prefer to call it pseudoreading—this is a fine term which is precedented in psychology and neurology (Henderson & Luke, 2014). Regardless, it is a kind of nonprototypical reading which follows a similar basic pattern to the models we discussed above. Just like avant-garde poetry impedes normal reading processes by using syntax, semantics, and phonology which defy logic, asemic poetry impedes normal reading by defying normal *decoding* processes.

Cognitive Model for Reading Asemic Poetry

Critics may find use in a new model of reading which supports reading asemic poetry. In this new model, readers follow a cognitive process which echoes the four steps outlined above. 1) Readers first visually assess a piece of asemic writing and recognize

features common to their own written language—this could be letters, words, or characters. 2) The readers then attempt to decode the asemic poetry normally, but are unable to do so, so they must instead view the poem as a whole unit of meaning, rather than a collection of individual units of meaning. 3) They draw on previous experiences with written language, searching for something which matches what they are seeing. 4) Finally, using the information they have gathered from the poem and their memory, readers collaboratively create meaning in the text. We will examine each one of these steps in order.

Readers visually assess a piece of asemic writing similarly to how they assess any writing they see. According to Smith et al. (2018), “During scene viewing, both perceptual and cognitive processes guide eye movements based on the low-level visual information, such as color, texture, and luminance, and/or higher-level semantic and contextual information” (p. 3). The basic visual information gathered from a scene helps the brain decide how to treat the incoming information at a higher level. Because asemic authors are careful about creating works of poetry which bear visual similarity to the written word (i.e. similar textures and shapes), and because asemic poetry is intentionally circulated in similar or identical ways to traditional poetry (i.e. similar contextual information), the reader’s brain is primed to decode text.

Importantly, this step sets asemic poetry apart from visual art. Neuroscience research regularly uses eye movements to understand how the brain processes visual information, because “the pattern of eye movements during reading is substantially correlated with linguistic factors, implying that readers’ eye movements during reading reflect online cognitive processes” (Choi et al, 2014). Specifically, the eye cycles through

distinct groupings of quick movement, called saccades, followed by stillness, called a fixation. On average, most viewers go through 4 saccades per second.

In one study, Henderson and Luke (2014) compared saccade and fixation time among viewers assigned to different tasks, including reading passages, viewing photographed scenes, and performing pseudoreading, which “involved scanning through pseudotext in which each letter was replaced by a geometric shape while maintaining general spatial layout of text at the letter, word, sentence, and passage levels” (Henderson & Luke, 2014, p. 1397). They found that eye movements differed between tasks for several variables tested. For example, “individual differences in standard deviation of fixation duration in reading were only correlated with those in pseudoreading, but not with either of the scene viewing tasks” (p. 1398). Additionally, “consistent individual differences were only observed across the two tasks that involved scene viewing: scene memorization and scene search” (ibid.). Now, this study is more interested in whether fixation and saccade durations are stable by reader for lengths of time longer than a day, so it does not draw greater conclusions about differences in pseudoreading and scene viewing, but the differences mentioned highlight an interesting point: neurologically, there are some differences between viewing a scene (which is what happens during the examination of visual art), and reading or pseudoreading, such as what happens during examination of asemic poetry. We will return briefly to research in eye movements and pseudoreading later.

After finding similarities to comprehensible text, readers of asemic poetry attempt to decode it as if it were comprehensible. However, they are unable to do so, because the poetry is *not* comprehensible by design. In traditional reading, the reader would combine

the individual units of meaning to create a comprehensible whole: letters combine into words, words into sentences, sentences into paragraphs, and so on. In asemic poetry, the smallest units of meaning are unavailable to be decoded: there are no true letters or words, only marks with strong resemblances to letters and words. Nevertheless, similarly to how in traditional reading, the reader “zooms out” to view larger and larger segments of a text as units of meaning, the asemic reader also “zooms out” and begins to look to the entire poem as a unit of meaning.

I propose that this step is where an artistic analysis has its place, similar to what little critical scholarship on asemic poetry claims. As the reader focuses on the poem as a whole, the reader observes concrete visual details about the whole without attempting to decode. Qualities such as color, shape, roundness or sharpness, how the lines are structured or the size of characters become important. It is here that the poems could be analyzed on standard visual art axes: rhythm, repetition, color, value, tone, depth, dimension, and texture are considered. In a way, the poem becomes an image, but there is still tension between the information the reader received from step one, that the work has linguistic qualities, and the information from step two, which are visual qualities of the work. In fact, well-known psychology research has found connections between shapes and sounds: pointy shapes are more related to “sharp phonetic inflections” (Ramachandran & Hubbard, 2001, p. 19) like /k/, in the minds of readers, whereas rounder shapes are more related to “the rounded auditory inflection of [b/]

 (Ramachandran & Hubbard, 2001, p. 19). In this way, even the visual crosses over to the linguistic: sound patterns are consistently mapped onto predictable shapes, even when tested in participants with different linguistic and social backgrounds. For more information, see Cuskley, Simner & Kirby (2017).

To help resolve these tensions, the reader must then draw on previous experiences with written language to see what structural similarities the asemic poem bears to other examples of writing. This echoes the traditional reading step in which readers refer to background knowledge stored in the memory when understanding or interpreting a text. In the case of asemic writing, though, readers attempt to answer the fundamental question: what kind of writing does this poem look like? In many cases, it will bear resemblance to a traditional poem, but that is not always the case. Cecil Touchon has poems which appropriate the format of legal documentation or receipts in addition to ones which are laid out like traditional poems. Asemic poems could look like lists or memos, letters or other correspondence, or like writing from different cultures. Some asemic poems even visually mimic musical score notation, which is itself a kind of written code. And, to return to a point from chapter one, asemic writing laid out on a page like prose *may* be asemic poetry. Or it may be asemic prose. Currently, there is not a standard for whether asemic prose exists. Regardless, consciously recognizing these resemblances is a very important part of reading and understanding asemic writing. Once again, it is the literary resemblances which set asemic poetry apart from visual art, and any criticism which does not explicitly focus on the linguistic resemblance fails to account for the authors' intentions, the framing of the works, and the visual aspects of the works themselves.

This leads us to the last step. Readers have assessed the poem and picked up information, including its linguistic nature, its visual characteristics, and its resemblances to concrete literary situations. Using this information, the reader must then collaboratively create meaning in the poem. In other words, readers must create for themselves an interpretation: what is the poem "about"? Think of the importance of each factor: identical

shapes presented on a page of a poetry journal and on a canvas in an art gallery would have different interpretations. Identical characters written in different colors or different sizes would have different interpretations. Identical asemic pseudowords arranged into the shape of a grocery list and a love letter would have different interpretations. The reader must decide what the author wanted to say. In doing so, the reader is actually creating meaning in collaboration with the author.

Studies in art and literature show that a key factor in distinguishing complex and successful art from simple or unsuccessful art is ambiguity (Kaplan & Kris, 1948). Ambiguity is not the quality of having no correct interpretations; rather, it is the quality of having multiple valid interpretations, where the work itself supports more than one distinct reading. Avant-garde poetry is frequently ambiguous. In fact, all poetry forms, from the earliest forms of epic poetry, have aspects of ambiguity (Richardson, 2006) and one may argue that the most successful examples from each poetry movement are the ones which support ambiguous readings. According to psychiatrist Eric Kandel (2016), works of art that are ambiguous invite the reader to work with the artist to create meaning in the piece. Art that is not viewed does not have meaning; it is only when a viewer interfaces with the art that it means something to someone. This phenomenon is known as “the beholder’s share” (Kandel, 2016, p. 17) and it holds true with asemic poetry reading. Asemic poetry is inherently ambiguous, and the author and reader must work together to create the meaning of a piece.

The ambiguity inherent in asemic poetry is one of its greatest strengths as a poetic form. As ambiguity increases in art, the importance of the role of the viewer in interpretation increases. At its best, asemic poetry’s ambiguity allows for readers to create

a meaning which is individual to them and personally meaningful. We will discuss this further in chapter 4.

Neuroscience and Asemic Poetry

Several studies have been conducted involving pseudoreading conditions. In order to quell objections that pseudoreading and asemic reading are the same, which, if it were true, would invalidate the previous claim that information on how the brain engages with asemic writing is lacking, we will examine more closely what the pseudoreading in these studies is like, and how it is different from asemic reading. Additionally, we will look at how this research demonstrates the *differences* between pseudoreading and traditional reading. Finally, we will see how these differences do not invalidate the model, proposed above, of asemic writing. This is because the research we will examine uses idealized text passages for the reading, when actually reading is a much cloudier process in real life than it is in research.

The pseudoreading of these articles is superficially similar to the asemic reading discussed above, but the two have convergent factors which make them significantly different. Perhaps the biggest difference, which encompasses the other differences, is that asemic poetry is a form of artistic expression, while the pseudotext used in neuroscience research is created for the purpose of convenience and replicability.

The quidditch, named Whoggy and Huffle, have become the most hated and
 loathed creatures of the descending Hufflepuff mountains in
 Hufflepuffland, the Hufflepuff. The Hufflepuff Hufflepuff Hufflepuff Hufflepuff
 Hufflepuff Hufflepuff Hufflepuff Hufflepuff Hufflepuff Hufflepuff Hufflepuff Hufflepuff
 Hufflepuff Hufflepuff Hufflepuff Hufflepuff Hufflepuff Hufflepuff Hufflepuff Hufflepuff
 Hufflepuff Hufflepuff Hufflepuff Hufflepuff Hufflepuff Hufflepuff Hufflepuff Hufflepuff

Figure 3.4: Pseudotext used to measure eye movements during pseudoreading tasks. From **Henderson and Luke (2014, p. 1393)**

Figure 3.4 shows the pseudotext used by Henderson and Luke (2014), in which “participants were instructed to move their eyes through pseudotexts ‘as if they were reading.’ These instructions have previously been used for pseudoreading conditions (sometimes called ‘mindless reading’) and produce eye movement behavior that approximates many of the eye movement characteristics observed in reading” (p. 1393). The pseudotext was created to replicate the size of text, and each letter in an actual passage was replaced by an analogous pseudotext letter, which preserved the length of words and sentences.

The most obvious objection is, if pseudotext was created to look like writing, and asemic poetry is defined by its similarity to writing, why doesn’t the pseudotext count as

asemic writing? When we defined asemantic poetry, we took time to distinguish it both based on its visual characteristics *and* its position in contemporary poetry movements. We observed that asemantic poetry is a response to the constraints of language which developed as a movement in the 1990s. In the same way that a memo or a piece of email does not contribute to a literary movement, a piece of writing that looks like language does not contribute to or participate in the asemantic poetry movement unless it was created as a piece of art. Additionally, because the pseudotext is really just a font into which actual words were input, it technically is an unreadable code, *not* a form of writing with no semantic meaning.

Aside from the pseudotext not qualifying as asemantic poetry, the reading methods are different. In the research above, the participants are explicitly told how to scan the writing. The researchers' goal in this is to have a control against which to measure eye movements during reading. The pseudoreading needs to have the same physical motions as reading, without having the mental engagement inherent to reading. This is why, as noted above, pseudoreading is sometimes called "mindless reading." Asemantic writing, on the other hand, stimulates the brain to attempt decoding, and the goal is to guide the readers toward artistic interpretation. The processes, then, are as different as the end goals.

Nevertheless, pseudoreading may be an acceptable stand-in for asemantic poetry; until more data which is specific to asemantic poetry is gathered, we can only speculate how the brain responds to reading asemantic poetry, or how similar asemantic poetry and pseudotext readings appear on MRI or eye-tracking machines. The research above shows that

pseudoreading is different from reading in the saccade amplitude and fixation length. Lest detractors claim that this invalidates the reading model proposed above, we will quickly look at these differences.

Choi et al. (2014) tracked eye movements and MRI data of subjects as they performed several tasks: reading “normal sentences, scrambled sentences, nonword sentences, pseudo-text made up of Landolt rings (circle-like shapes)” (p. 1). The pseudoreading mechanics are different from the pseudoreading of Henderson and Luke, discussed above. Landolt Rings are c-like shapes, where the opening to the circle can be oriented in any of eight directions (see figure 3.5). The Landolt rings were occasionally embedded into the scrambled and nonword reading tasks, and participants were asked to scan through the sentences to find the rings.

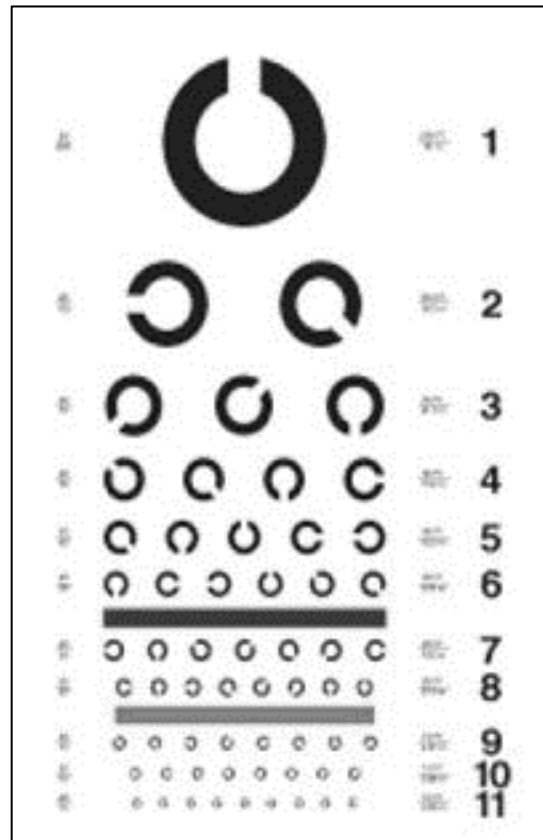


Figure 3.5: A vision test made of Landolt rings. From Cascadilla Press.

Despite the differences, the goal is the same: to create marks which hold similar visual weight to the written word.

In both normal text and pseudoword reading, subjects showed activation in “cortical and subcortical areas associated with the eye-movement control network: bilateral FEF, SEF, [and] bilateral IPS” (Choi et al., 2014, p. 4). Interestingly, both normal and pseudoword reading activated linguistic processing centers in the brain, including the left

superior temporal sulcus, corresponding to Wernicke's area (which is responsible for speech comprehension), and bilateral inferior frontal gyrus, corresponding to Broca's area. From these data, we can see that some level of linguistic processing was happening when the subjects read pseudotext! However, the normal text activated several additional linguistic processing centers, including the bilateral middle temporal gyrus (MTG), right STS, bilateral superior temporal gyrus (STG), and the anterior gyrus (AG) (ibid.). So, normal reading and pseudoword reading differ in their neural activation sites.

Henderson and Luke (2014) found differences in eye movement between pseudoword reading and normal reading, including "that individual differences in mean saccade amplitude in reading were not related to any other task including pseudoreading [which] suggests that the control of saccade amplitude in reading draws on a domain-specific system" (p. 1398). In other words, the mechanism which determines saccade amplitude is likely different for reading and pseudoreading.

These differences are important, but not for critics of asemic poetry. Neuroscience research uses idealized texts which are designed to be easy to standardize and replicate. The pseudoreading conditions are typed, so each time a character is used, it is identical to very other use of the same character. Even the fonts of readable text are carefully chosen and recorded. Contrast this with the reading individuals encounter in everyday situations: handwriting is messy and variable, and each appearance of a letter may be different from the others in a handwritten text. Readers are not carefully presented with simple sentences, but encounter snatches of phrases and words all over. Plus, many artistic forms of writing, such as poetry and calligraphy, intentionally blur the lines of readability, either by using nonstandard grammar, as we saw above, or by manipulating the visual aspect of the

characters, like we saw in the calligrams of chapter 1. If neuroscientists researched reader response to avant-garde poetry or complex calligraphy, they would likely get different results from the idealized reading we have seen above. But reading avant-garde poetry or calligraphy is still reading.

The fact that the pseudoreading from Henderson and Luke (2014) and Choi et al (2014) is different from standard reading just points to its place outside of the reading prototype. So, even if pseudoreading is a perfect neurological stand-in for asemic reading, it only demonstrates that asemic reading is nonprototypical, which was stated above.

Summary

In this chapter, we covered psychological and neurological considerations of asemic writing. We saw staples of current cognitive models of reading, which include reader recognition and decoding of writing, reader assembly of global (i.e. paragraph) from local (i.e. sentence) meaning, reader referral of relevant background knowledge, and reader spontaneous generation of text, or ideas about the passage. We focused on the SVR model because it focuses heavily on the decoding aspect of reading, while other models are more interested in the comprehension aspect.

Once we had established our use of the SVR, we examined what can go wrong in reading, both on a decoding level and on a comprehension level. Sometimes, these issues originate in the reader due to reading disabilities like dyslexia and hyperlexia. Sometimes, however, authors intentionally create texts which disrupt the normal reading process. This is especially common among avant-garde poetry of the 20th century. Some poems use techniques such as nonstandard semantics, syntax, or phonology to disrupt comprehension

without delaying decoding. Asemic poetry, on the other hand, disrupts decoding by using no letters or words.

Despite this, asemic poetry is marked by its linguistic resemblances, which are important in interpreting these poems. We saw a model for reading asemic poetry which takes these linguistic resemblances into account. In this model, readers recognize features common to their own language in an asemic poem they are viewing. Then the readers attempt and fail to decode the asemic poetry normally. Instead, they “zoom out” to view the poem globally, rather than locally. During this step the reader makes observations which are relevant to artistic interpretation. Next, readers refer to previous experiences with written language, and search for something similar to the poem they are viewing. Finally, readers collaboratively create meaning in the text, using the information they have gathered in the previous steps.

This model strongly emphasizes the role of ambiguity in reading asemic poetry, where the strength of asemic poetry is the formative role of the viewer in deciding the meaning of the piece. In the next chapter, we will spend time viewing and analyzing specific asemic poems, and the ambiguity of the pieces will be a very important consideration which sets the poems apart from visual art.

Finally, we looked at the neuroscience behind reading and pseudoreading, which is a cognitive task in which research participants are asked to scan through lines of pseudotext which hold similar visual qualities to normal text, including size, spacing, and weight. This pseudotext is *not* asemic writing, but it shares several traits. The research shows that pseudoreading bears some similarities to traditional reading, including neural activation sites and standard deviation of fixation duration by individual participant. However, there

were important differences, too. Normal reading has extra linguistic processing centers activated that are not activated in pseudoreading, and individual amplitudes in saccade amplitude did not correlate between traditional and pseudotext reading. This does not invalidate our understanding of asemic poetry reading, but it may support that asemic reading is a nonprototypical form of reading, similar to what we see in reading other avant-garde forms of poetry.

Reading is an incredibly complex process, and data is lacking on how the human brain engages with asemic poetry. This chapter presents one model for how asemic writing may affect the human brain, based on neurology and psychology research on traditional reading. The proposed model also takes into account the importance of asemic poetry's intentional resemblance to traditional writing.

CHAPTER FOUR

Putting Principles into Practice

Introduction

So far, we have considered many aspects of asemic poetry reading and writing. All of the topics we have examined so far were expressly included to prepare readers for the work of understanding and critiquing asemic poetry, a task which has been neglected by academic literature. In chapter four, readers will finally be able to start that work using the information and principles laid out in the previous chapters.

We will also spend time considering the subjectivity of poetry, especially asemic poetry, and how readers can approach critical methods with precision while still embracing the ambiguity in these works. Additionally, we will look at an article by Mike Borkent which provides analyses of several asemic and post-linguistic visual poems, and compare or contrast this work of criticism with the one presented here. We will examine several works of asemic poetry, and walk through the process of mining the poems for meaning.

Subjectivity, Ambiguity, and Art

William Wordsworth, premier poet of the Romantic movement, famously said “Poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings: it takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquillity” (Wordsworth, 1801, “Preface to Lyrical Ballads”). More recently, celebrated Irish poet and translator Seamus Heaney claimed that “If poetry and the arts do anything, they can fortify your inner life, your inwardness” (Heaney, qtd. in

Poetry Foundation, 2013). Poetry, like any art form, is meant to be felt more than it is meant to be analyzed. A reader brings experiences, background knowledge, and preferences to a poem when reading, and these factors can deeply impact how the reader understands or connects with a poem.

Because of this, the job of any critic is difficult. This is especially so for asemic poetry, where the text itself cannot be decoded normally. The reader, then, must be willing and able to read asemic writing with *intuition*. The tools presented here are meant to help critics recognize and articulate the merits of asemic poems. However, without an intuitive understanding of one's own reading process and preferences, these tools cannot be used well.

Writing about intuition in academic settings is tricky because intuition is antithetical to the principles of research. Rigorous research shies from unsupported claims, while intuition floats to conclusions without need for support. To use the words of Tom Haworth, who was a celebrated avant-garde poet of postwar Britain (Reed, 2006), "Intuition skips language it doesn't 'know' and reappears where the words fit again" (Raworth, 2003, p.95). Despite the clash between intuition and objectivity, some poetry analysts have written on the subject. Merle Brown, writing for a 1979 edition of the *Journal of Aesthetics & Art Criticism*, claims to be the first to begin defining poetic intuition (Brown, 1979, p. 277). He says,

Poetic intuition is a mode of perception more primitive than, yet also inclusive of, the distinctions that make up the presupposed basis of a poetry of perception...[Poetic intuitions] break down and fold into themselves whatever code, language system, and framework of perception one might for a moment have thought them to be part of...As [the reader] meditates within this intuitive environment, however, it will come to enfold and absorb and revitalize the conventional world... Poetic intuitions swarm with questions. They seem to be the

fount of questioning itself...In a poetry of perception, in contrast, even questions themselves are basically answers (p. 277-278).

This long quote can be distilled into a simpler statement: poetic intuition is when a reader embraces complexity in a work and denies the need “poetry of perception” has for a “single conceptual framework into which the poem can be comfortably fitted” (p. 279).

Another framework from which we can understand poetic intuition comes from translators. Translators of poetry have an incredibly tricky job precisely because texts come with ambiguities which native readers read intuitively, but the translator must be careful to preserve as accurately as possible the feeling of reading a poem, from the sounds to the connotations of the words to the meanings. Translators must choose what to uphold and what to sacrifice. Some translators have come up with new ways to capture the energy of the poem. Alice Oswald wrote *Memorial*, which she describes as

a translation of the *Iliad*'s atmosphere, not its story. Matthew Arnold (and almost everyone ever since) has praised the *Iliad* for its ‘nobility’. But ancient critics praise its ‘*enargeia*’, which means something like ‘bright unbearable reality’... This version, trying to revive the poem’s *enargeia*, takes away its narrative... What’s left is a bipolar poem made of similes and short biographies of soldiers (Oswald, 2011, p. ix).

Oswald, by dismissing the narrative to let other translators fiddle with and focusing on the *enargeia* of the poem, tries to capture something that must be read intuitively in the original.

Similarly, Christian Bök (2001) translates Arthur Rimbaud’s *energeia*-filled poem *Voyelles* (“Vowels”). He translates it not once, but five times: once focusing on the strict alexandrine form, following rhyme and meter strictly, and then subsequent “translations” which capture only the sound of reading the original out loud in French, then that captures the vowel sounds but not the consonants, then a translation which is a perfect anagram of

the original, and finally a translation which is only the vowels in the poem in the original order. The opening line of this last translation is “AOIEAIOUEUEOEUEOEE” (Bök, 2001). Just how Oswald dismisses the plot of the *Iliad*, Bök dismisses the words he is translating in favor of the sounds, to give the English-speaking reader a sense of the *feel* of the poem. Or, in other words, it tries to capture some ambiguities by breaking down what a native speaker reads intuitively.

In some cases, this is by changing the source text altogether: Bök’s phonetic translation of Rimbaud does not stick to the source material in a normal way. But Bök found it important to give the readers the experience of feeling the poem on their own tongues, and so “translated” for sounds. Oswald found it important to let the readers face the bright, unbearable reality of the *Iliad* and so she cut whatever would get in the way so the modern reader could understand the quality that ancient critics saw in it quite naturally. Researchers have called this cross-cultural translation “transcreation.” Nearly every translator does this on some level; the examples of Oswald and Bök are illustrative because they are especially dramatic. Interested readers may turn to the resources in Díaz-Millón & Olvera-Lobo (2021) to learn more.

Transcreation, like that of Oswald and Bök, points to a simple fact: poetry is much more than the words that make it up. The sounds, the textures, the contexts flow into the reader’s reading process. *They prime the reader’s poetic intuition.* Translators have to sit carefully with a poem and ask questions about it: what would this have meant to the original context? What things am I intuiting about this poem, and do those ideas cross languages? The translator then works to present these intuitions to the reader.

The job of the critic is very similar. As a critic, to sit with ambiguity, to generate more questions about a text than answers, and to understand the complex *feelings* a poem brings about is to read intuitively. As we saw before, ambiguity is a key feature of asemic poetry, even more so than other forms of poetry. Therefore, for a critic to read with intuition is even more of a necessity when reading asemic poetry than traditional poetry.

Things to Recall

As stated in the introduction, the process of understanding and critiquing asemic poetry draws on many of the ideas that have been presented in previous chapters. Here is a quick reminder of concepts that will reappear:

Asemic poetry is a form of creative expression which is viewed by many as a kind of poetry. The purpose of this research is not to convince readers that asemic poetry is definitively poetry; in fact, it seems as though readers' comfort with calling it poetry depends largely on each individual reader's exposure to it. Readers should know, however, that many consider asemic writing to be a nonprototypical form of poetry—that is, despite lacking many features of traditional poetry, it bears enough resemblance or has enough traits of traditional poetry that it counts as poetry itself.

Importantly, a group which consistently refers to asemic poetry as poetry is the authors themselves. Regardless of whether a reader agrees that asemic poetry is poetry at all, every critic must understand that asemic authors calling their work “poetry” is *very significant* to the way we analyze the works they create. In fact, to ignore the resemblances to poetry is a disservice to the poem itself. Authors use several techniques to draw the reader toward interpreting their work as poetry (or with poetry): they intentionally refer to

their pieces as “poetry” or “writing,” they present their pieces in situations analogous to traditional poetry (such as literary journals and printed in books), and they craft their pieces to visually resemble poetry or the written word.

Some might argue that an artist or author’s own statements about their works are not relevant to criticism. Although this was a commonly held belief in the mid-20th century, this argument is not consistent with modern critical scholarship. Information surrounding a work being read, including the author’s own statements about the work, and even information such as the author’s name or the publisher, is collectively called “paratext.” Paratext is an important factor in understanding any written work because it allows the reader to more thoroughly understand the contexts which may have shaped the work. Paratext is especially important for reading asemic poetry, where the reader has no decoded meaning on which to rely when interpreting the poem.

Others may argue that asemic poetry must not be treated as poetry because it cannot be read in a normal way; that is—it cannot be decoded as language. It is correct to say that asemic poetry cannot be decoded as language. In fact, that is the point of asemic poetry. However, it is incorrect to say that because it cannot be decoded, it cannot be read. In fact, one well-validated cognitive model of reading, called the Simple View of Reading, proposes that decoding is only *half* of the reading process, and other models suggest that the decoding and the understanding are happening somewhat simultaneously.

With this in mind, we use a model of reading which is inclusive of asemic poetry. In this model, readers see asemic writing and attempt to decode it as normal because of its proximity to a code the reader understands. Failing this, the reader shifts to understanding the entire poem as a single unit of meaning, rather than individual marks. The reader leans

then on background knowledge and memory, comparing the poem to other literary situations previously encountered. Finally, the reader collaboratively creates meaning with the author, deciding what the message of the poem is. In reality, the poem is meaningless until it is viewed by a reader; it is simply a vessel onto which the author and readers project their own ideas.

This leads us to two important points about asemic poetry: 1) successful asemic poems are at once concrete enough for readers to recognize them as writing at first glance while also being ambiguous enough to allow the reader to find one or more meanings in them, and 2) successful asemic poems strike the reader as language over and over again. Just in the same way that a reader can return to a great poem and be able to read it afresh and come to new conclusions, a great asemic poem remains intriguing to a reader, even after many passes. The poem must not let the reader skip over it, but should cause the reader to go through all the steps of asemic reading each time. It takes a skilled asemic poet to create a poem that is striking in this way.

We will use these principles to analyze two poems by authors who have gained fame in the asemic movement: *Spirit Writing* by Jim Leftwich and *Palimpsest Asemic Correspondence* by Cecil Touchon. We have already seen and heard from these authors in previous chapters: Jim Leftwich is an asemic writer and avant-garde (or perhaps post-avant-garde) poet who, along with Tim Gaze, helped to give wings to the asemic movement in the 1990s. Cecil Touchon is an asemic poet who has published six books on asemic writing, as well as five books of traditional poetry and six books of collage art (Touchon, n.d., “Publications”). His work has been displayed worldwide, including twice in the

Venice Biennale art show (Nuart gallery, n.d.). Both of these asemic poets are well-qualified men who have done significant work in the field.

Case Study 1: Spirit Writing by Jim Leftwich

Figure 4.1 shows our first asemic case study: *Spirit Writing* by Jim Leftwich. It was published in the November, 1997 edition of the Lost and Found Times (LAFT), as part of a short collection of several asemic pieces. This one is the first of the collection. LAFT was a publication that arose as part of the Fluxus movement in 1975, and continued until 2005 “publishing exciting, outrageous, and unacceptable writing, art, and unclassifiable materials” (Bennett, n.d.).

One important piece of information is that although the poem is printed on a deep red paper, this may not have been a choice of the author. Because it was printed in a journal, such that every piece in the journal was printed on the same red paper, it was likely the publisher who made this artistic decision, rather than Leftwich himself. Nevertheless, the bright red paper is a striking aspect of the overall effect the poem has. One may argue that the color is significant to interpretation because the color has a striking and visceral impact on the reader, and the reader, according to our model of reading, has a role in creating meaning in the poem. Is information out of the author’s control, such as the color of the paper, also “on the table” for determining the meaning of the poem? Unfortunately, answering this question is beyond the scope of this analysis. For the sake of simplicity, we will ignore the color (which is normally *not* recommended—if we know that the color is an intentional choice by the author, this can also help us in interpretation), and look exclusively at the markings.

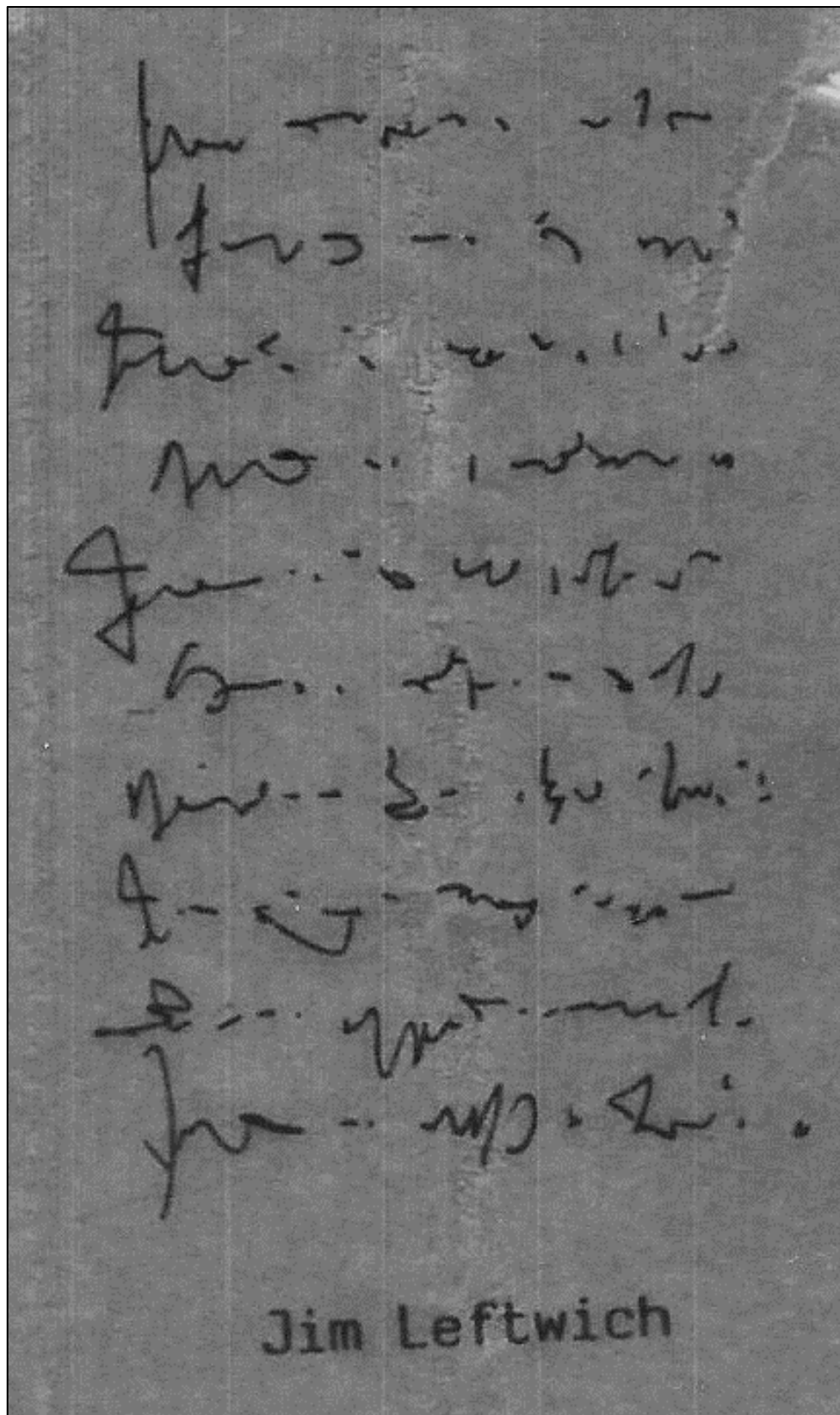


Figure 4.1: *Spirit Writing* by Jim Leftwich.

So, let us read this piece. Spend time with it. Look it over and try to feel what Leftwich was feeling when he wrote it. What emotions would cause him to write with the cadence that he did? Feel the motions in his pen. Ask questions. For readers to place themselves in the position of the author is to practice intuitive reading, and the perceived human connection it creates can help readers connect more deeply with a piece (Margulis, Levine, Simchy-Gross, & Kroger). The handwritten nature of much asemic poetry easily gives readers a starting point for placing themselves in the place of the author: the physical movements that led to the marks can be understood by the marks themselves.

After spending time significant time with the poem, the critic may begin analysis. Reading through the piece, there are many characters which bear striking resemblance to letters written in cursive English. So much so, in fact, that we have already seen this piece in chapter 3, in which it was marked up with potential interpretations of the letter forms. Readers may even automatically interpret these quasi-letters as words: “June” or “with” on line 5, perhaps; “from” on line 1; maybe line 4 reads “motion.” These resemblances are capturing, but under more careful scrutiny, each letter or word form, rather than resolving into certainty, diverges in the possibilities. “June” becomes “Time” or “Fire,” “with” becomes “wise,” “wire,” “words.” Each symbol explodes with possibilities that the reader must hold simultaneously.

The reader zooms out. What do the lines look like? One very distinctive trait of this poem is that the first symbol of each line is much more defined than the rest of the line. Each beginning symbol much more clearly resembles a recognizable letter, and the symbols that follow dissolve into quick lines or even just dots—in other words, the symbols start as intentional marks on which the author took more time, then turn to the quickest

marks that a writer can make. This gives an impression of franticness, as though the author needed to capture each line as it came to him, and cut corners at the end of each line to get the thought down quicker.

Visually, the entire poem sits on the page in ten equal-length lines. Traditional poems are also organized into lines, so at first glance, a reader may think that it is meant to appropriate the look of a traditional poem. However, closer inspection shows that it actually may be closer to the look of a list: the end of each line looks punctuated with period-like or dash-like marks. This effect breaks the poem into ten distinct statements, which could be directives, or prophecies, or maxims, perhaps drawing on the biblical ten commandments. The title is an important part of the poem as well. It is called *Spirit Writing*, which brings forth an aspect of spirituality even more explicitly.

All of these factors combine to guide the reader in creating meaning. This poem tells the story of an intense discovery, a deeply spiritual experience. It may be a “note to self” or it may try to capture something prophetic that needs to be disseminated to many. Either way, it gives a picture of an author frantically scribbling as revelations come to him. The poem is infused with urgency, and has an effect on the reader. It manages to capture this urgency in marks which are strikingly similar to English cursive; a tough balance to strike.

Now that we have arrived at an interpretation, there is another piece of information about the piece, although it was withheld initially from us because the information was not available to original readers. In 2021, over twenty years after the creation of this work, Leftwich tells the story of its origin. Interestingly, he identifies this as his first

experimentation with handwritten asemic writing. Previously, he had worked more with typography. He says,

My first explorations of quasi-calligraphic faux writing came the morning after a particularly intense experience of taking what [ethnobotanist] Terence McKenna has called a "heroic dose" of psilocybin mushrooms. I had experienced a complete annihilation of the self, and not one of merging harmoniously with the universe, rather one of being ripped apart, as if in a ritual sparagmos. The next morning I was sitting in my car and I started for the first time to write lines of illegible fake writing. It felt as if I were being guided to do this, as a kind of healing for the night before (Leftwich, 2021).

The drama of the circumstances under which this piece was created are significant to its interpretation. These phrases especially stand out: "a particularly intense experience," "it felt as if I were being guided to do this," and "a kind of healing." These phrases carry very strong emotional output, and emotions that are so strong would of course impact the writing process.

And in fact, this extra information fits perfectly with the interpretation outlined above: an intense emotional and spiritual experience is both clear on the page and apparent in the information Leftwich gives. Each individual piece of information about the poem, including the author's comments on it far past its original publication, work together to form a single interpretation.

Because of the complexity of this piece, its ambiguity, its close proximity to written language, and its emotional intensity, this is a successful asemic poem. In fact, it is a truly great example of what asemic poetry can be.

Case Study 2: Palimpsest Asemic Correspondence by Cecil Touchon

Palimpsest Asemic Correspondence (Figure 4.2) is one of several poems by Cecil Touchon with similar or identical names. Once again, take time to study it and read it with intuition. Notice the differences between this piece and the Leftwich piece we previously examined.

It was written in 2010, and was published in a 2019 book called *Asemic Writing - Poetic Structures*, which features several poems in the same style. According to the publisher's information on the book, "These poems are created using vernacular sources for materials such as restaurant receipts, poetic structures Touchon made with spam email, pages of lists from magazines as palimpsests to then overwrite the texts on the pages using the existing texts as prompts for his asemic writing" (Touchon, 2019).

Touchon gives further information in a statement about this piece in particular, calling it "Collage and ink on antique (1920's) bank statement" (Touchon, n.d., "Asemic Writing"). Each poem in the collection uses a unique literary basis, but the unifying factor between them is the distinctive handwriting with which he overwrites the original letters, making them mostly or totally unreadable.

Touchon's marks themselves are radically different from Leftwich's. Whereas the marks of the latter are quick and urgent, Touchon's scrawls dwell on the original writing, obscuring it totally, frequently delving into downward cuts with the pen to make trails which linger on the page. Rather than use dots, suggestive of i and j, he uses small circles which bring an airiness to the piece. Overall, the handwriting looks cartoonish: features such as letter-like ascenders and descenders are comically over-exaggerated and bouncy. In fact, these factors are at the expense of the linguistic similarity of the piece: only when

the writing is most restrained, such as in the very top and very bottom center lines, does it approach readability. The center of the poem is so busy that it appears to be a fancy signature, not a poem.

Nevertheless, this poem shines in comparison with Leftwich's in another point. While *Spirit Writing* sat flatly on the page, arranged rectangularly into ten lines, *Palimpsest Asemic Correspondence* is dynamic—the writing is grouped into several distinct categories. Anyone familiar with official documentation will quickly recognize a header, perhaps with a business name and address, some sort of message, perhaps a sign-off.

Visually, this piece is incredibly similar to a letter, which is a literary situation that English speakers encounter frequently. Of course, the stamp is a helpful clue; it sets the scene of the writing and tells us that this piece has already been sent. Whereas Leftwich's poem refused to let readers know whether they were the piece's intended audience, or whether he was writing purely for himself, Touchon is clear: this poem is addressed to one specific person. We, the audience, become an onlooker in this exchange.

One great thing about this poem, and the entire palimpsest series by Touchon, is the way it allows readers to confront familiar situations in which people normally encounter writing, but in an unfamiliar way. By writing over all the words, the situation itself is what the reader has to create meaning. By doing so, Touchon brings wonder and new light to writing that normally does not get a second thought: receipts, email, and bank statements become templates onto which readers can project meaning.

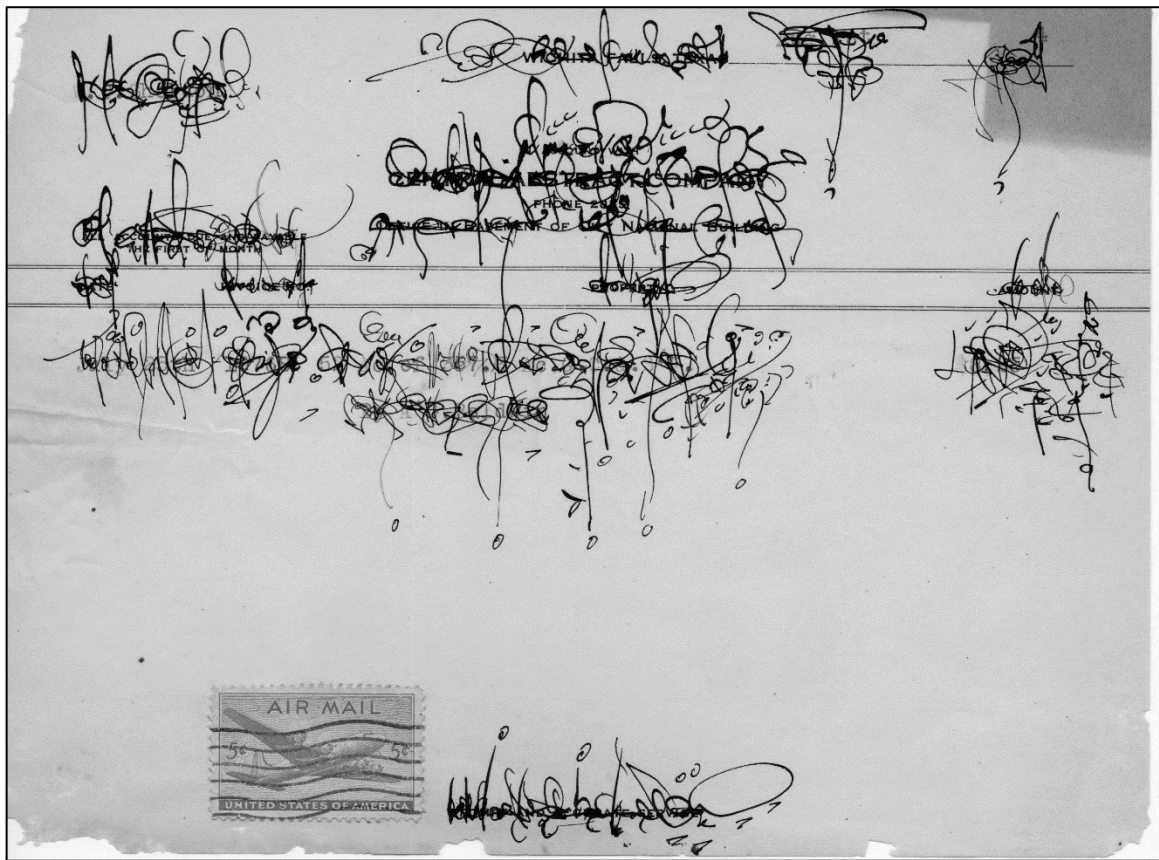


Figure 4.2: *Palimpsest Asemic Correspondence* by Cecil Touchon

Taken as a whole, this poem is certainly not as intense as Leftwich's. It feels humorous, almost like a parody of writing itself, with its loops and long trailing descenders—the handwriting is almost opposite of the sterile, businesslike serif font that one might expect to see on such a bank statement. There's an interplay between the expectation that the format sets up and the execution, which gives the reader a kind of irony. But it also causes the reader to see new potential in every piece of writing: readers may ask “if this ad or laundry list were unreadable, what would it mean? If someone who could not read my language saw this, what would that person think this meant?”

Some may say that this poem is unsuccessful, because the marks themselves are not as obviously inspired by a real written language. This is a fair critique; the proximity to a readable written language is important to asemic poetry. However, because of the way it clearly appropriates a linguistic or literary *situation*, in this case a bank statement, defamiliarizing the mundane, this poem is successful in accomplishing its goal.

Others may claim that this is not *real* asemic poetry, because under the scribbles made by Touchon are real words which are, at least in theory, readable. This is another fair criticism; we said in chapter 1 that asemic poetry is unreadable marks without coded meaning that intentionally look like language. If a piece has coded meaning, it cannot be asemic writing. Critics must consider this aspect. However, the piece is not a bank statement. It is marks made *on* a bank statement. The literary bones Touchon is using are not the poem itself. Every poem must be written on paper, and this paper happens to have a coded message that Touchon is destroying. This answer may not satisfy some critics; that is acceptable. The purpose of this analysis is to start a conversation, not finish it.

In studying these two pieces of asemic poetry written by authors who are known to be leaders in the field, we have put into practice the principles set up in previous chapters. With practice, any reader should be able to appreciate asemic writing and generate interpretations which are at once faithful to the information in and surrounding the text, while also acknowledging the lack of answers the text provides, and filling those gaps with intuition.

What Other Criticism Exists?

A work on asemic poetry criticism would not be complete without a quick consideration of the two most complete scholarly works on asemic writing and its interpretation. Readers are highly encouraged to read *Visual improvisation: Cognition, materiality, and postlinguistic visual poetry* by Mike Borkent (2014), and *Asemic: The Art of Writing* by Peter Schwenger (2019). We will quickly survey these pieces, looking especially at the differences between them and the research presented above.

Borkent's 2014 article provides a framework for analyzing "post-linguistic" visual poetry, structured around several pieces by Derek Beaulieu, whose work we have previously seen, and Donato Mancini. Borkent says "visual poems disrupt common understandings of language through its materiality, how the creators engage in improvisations around these understandings to develop the unexpected, and how the poetic artifacts prompt dynamic inferences and improvised understandings in readers" (Borkent, 2014, abstract). Borkent makes similar claims to those above: he says that "textual improvisation leaves a specter of itself for interpretation, one that reflects its means of production... Likewise, cultural expectations, linguistic and artistic scripts, and so forth,

influence conventions and readerly expectations, which the poet engages as part of the literary environment” (Borkent, 2014, p.11). In other words, 1) post-semantic visual poetry makes the reader aware of the process by which the author created the work, and 2) the information outside of the poem itself creates a literary environment which is relevant to interpretation. This is like what we have seen before.

However, one important contrast is that the poetry on which Borkent focuses has letters. beaulieu’s work uses full letters, and Mancini’s work, while avoiding full letters, is made of parts of letters manipulated into sculptural forms on the page. beaulieu’s poems are clearly not asemic, according to the dictates set up in the first chapter, but Mancini’s poetry less clearly divides along our lines. Borkent comments on beaulieu’s poetry, saying, “To some degree we could call them asemic typings instead, but the term postlinguistic [rather than asemic] is purposeful” (2014, p. 7. Note 2). Regardless, while some of the claims Borkent makes cross from post-semantic to asemic poetry, asemic poetry is not the focus of his analysis.

More importantly, the primary focus of Borkent’s analysis is the materiality of the poetry—specifically, the ways in which the visuals of the poem create “dynamic understandings of static representations, such as the cyclical and explosive inferences” (p. 14). He is referring to the way that in beaulieu’s work letters seem to explode outward from and revolve around a central source. This axis of analysis is artistic, rather than literary, because it does not primarily focus on the literary or linguistic aspect of these poems, but on the visual: letters are materials with which to construct. He gives an example of a letter N in a beaulieu poem which is fractured, saying the “N is likely simulated as having broken or become altered in the processes of representation” (p. 15). In Mancini, the letters are

sculptural representations, representative of physical objects. This is a strong break from the above analysis, which is focused on the literary associations, rather than the material, or artistic, associations.

Overall, Borkent's analytical methods focus on post-linguistic poetry, and specifically on the material representation of the letters and figures in the poems. Our analytical method focuses on how the poems resemble language and linguistic situations. Because of this, readers are again encouraged to read both. However, because the analysis laid out above focuses on the language rather than the artistic aspects, and because asemic authors explicitly encourage comparison to literature, our analysis adds an important aspect lacking in the writing of Borkent.

As for Schwenger, the breadth of his breakdown of asemic writing is unprecedented, and he focuses on quite different aspects of asemic writing than is the research above. Schwenger's book is five chapters, and he largely tackles the history (or perhaps prehistory) of asemic writing, starting with a functional definition, then examining the works of Henri Michaux, Roland Barthes, and Cy Twombly, then moving to similarities between asemic writing and the Chinese calligraphy tradition, as well as what he calls "eco-aseemics," or photographs of natural phenomena which seem similar to writing. After this, he examines the works of three modern asemic writers: Michael Jacobson, Rosaire Appel, and Christopher Skinner, the first two of which we have heard from already. Finally, Schwenger weighs in on how one can "read" asemic writing.

Several important distinctions between his work and the present work follow. Schwenger is writing largely from a historical-philosophical perspective, and his audience is quite general. Because of this, it does not attempt to prepare readers for the work of

critiquing asemic poetry, nor does it attempt to assess the merits of the asemic writing which he presents to his readers. Another important distinction is that Schwenger uses the definition of asemic writing from Tim Gaze which we saw in chapter 1, that is, “anything which looks like writing, but in which the person viewing can’t read any words, can be described as ‘asemic writing’” (Gaze, 2012, p. 2; Schwenger, 2019, p. 2). Because of this broad definition, it takes on several art forms which are not included above. Interestingly, after Schwenger’s book was published, Jim Leftwich, with whom Tim Gaze coined the term “asemic writing,” wrote clarifications of what is and is not asemic writing. This may or may not be in direct response to Schwenger’s book; nevertheless, it touches on Schwenger’s broad definition. Leftwich says,

we gain nothing and learn nothing by choosing to call things that are not written asemic writing. We look at the sand on a beach, or the bark on a tree, or the ripples in a stream, and we can if we wish say that we are reading what we are looking at, or that we are unable to read what we are looking at, even though in some ways it reminds us of writing, but it does not become writing if we take a photograph of it, it only becomes a photograph (2021).

This responds to Schwenger’s eco-asemics. In fact, Schwenger gives as examples both tree bark and sand on a beach (pp. 62; 71). We saw in chapter 1 that tightly defining asemic writing is a hard-fought battle due to its avant-garde nature and its firm hold in transmedia art circles. However, with a definition as broad as Gaze’s, Schwenger intends only to present the audience with the development of asemic writing through time, rather than make meaningful conclusions about how readers should understand asemic writing. This is a very important difference between the two works.

Despite these differences, Schwenger confirms many of the ideas presented above. For example, he recognizes that asemic writing was developed as a reaction against the

constraints of coded language (p. 15). He confirms that asemic writing, although lacking coded meaning, has a situational meaning which is important to a reader's understanding of it; he says "any such illegible writing carries with it the shadow of the legible," (p. 38). Finally, he claims that although asemic writing cannot be read in the same way that traditional writing can be read, it can still be interfaced with in a manner *meaningfully similar to reading*. He quotes Gertrude Stein as saying, "It is wonderful how a handwriting that is illegible can be read, oh yes it can" (p. 137). His analysis of asemic writing touches on many similar points, but nearly always comes at them from different angles. Because of this difference in perspective, it can be highly valuable to the reader interested in pursuing asemic writing further.

Summary

In this final chapter, we used the principles set up in the previous three chapters, including identification of asemic poetry, how to read asemic poetry, and using paratextual information surrounding the text, to analyze two asemic poems: *Spirit Writing* by Jim Leftwich and *Palimpsest Asemic Correspondence* by Cecil Touchon. Both Leftwich and Touchon are respected in asemic writing circles, and these pieces readily lent themselves to interpretation, because paratextual information is easily accessible, the poems themselves are stylized, and they very clearly either resemble written English or resemble a familiar language situation. One important new concept in this chapter is intuitive reading: readers of asemic poetry *must* be content to sit with complex and ambiguous potential meanings, must be able to generate questions about the text and place themselves into the world of the poem: what the author's marks communicate about his or her mood,

message, and emotions. Asemic poetry is meant to be an expression that bypasses the brain's decoding while still feeling like it is writing; it is meant to go from author emotion to the page to reader emotion. When readers read intuitively, they let the text work in them and let the author's message work its way into their souls.

CONCLUSION

Asemic Poetry is Relevant

We have thoroughly considered asemic writing. Critics should now feel prepared to *begin* the work of dissecting asemic poems they encounter. This research is meant to furnish readers with tools to use when encountering asemic writing. They should be able to answer three questions about a piece: 1) does it look good? This is purely aesthetic, and it depends highly on the reader's preferences. Successful asemic poems are beautiful and eye-catching; 2) do the pieces of information surrounding a poem that are available to the reader work together? In a successful asemic poem, the title should gel with the look of the poems on the page, the energy with which the handwriting is infused, the statements that the author has made about the piece, and any other information surrounding the piece; 3) does the piece look like writing? This is perhaps the most important distinction of asemic poetry. Viewers of art can judge a piece based on questions 1 and 2, but only asemic writing can be judged based on its proximity to written language. Successful asemic writing should switch the reader's brain into "reading mode," causing the reader to engage deeply with it in a way that is significantly different from other visual art; in a way that is distinctly poetic.

A quick note about question 3: the reader's own linguistic background is important in determining how the reader responds to asemic writing. The asemic writing that triggers a Chinese reader's brain into reading mode likely will look significantly different from the asemic writing that triggers an English or Spanish reader's brain into

reading mode, because English and Chinese look significantly different from each other. With that said, criticism on asemic writing and cognitive science about asemic reading would greatly benefit from a much deeper examination of the intersection between asemic writing and culture. For now, it is enough simply to acknowledge the gap in the literature and move on.

If readers do not go on to view and assess asemic writing, the tools outlined above are useless. Thankfully, any reader interested in pursuing asemic writing need not look far. The number of asemic poems and writings being produced is exploding as the internet allows authors to publish and circulate their works more easily. As circulation of asemic writing increases, awareness of asemic writing increases, and as more writers and calligraphers and artists find out about asemic writing, the base of people who will experiment with it increases. Asemic writing will likely never enjoy the popularity or widespread recognition of traditional poetry.

Nevertheless, its existence is very important and relevant. Asemic writing is inherently important because it contributes to the canon of avant-garde poetry, and because of it is an increasing popular art form. Arguably, a more pressing reason for its importance is that it makes a fascinating statement about poetry in general. Asemic writing says that poetry should be *felt*. It creates, or attempts to create, a direct line of communication between the author's emotions and the reader's emotions, by circumventing the cumbersome mental process of translating feelings into words. Asemic poetry reinvents what poetry can be. The most successful critic is the one who both carefully considers the context, aesthetic appeal, and the similarity to writing, while also

feeling the poem's energy and emotion. The critic who feels the emotions of the poem is the critic who will derive the most enjoyment from this beautiful form of expression.

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