

Lines, Breaths and Words - What Defines a Poem Visually?

Review by Komninos Zervos

The Written Poem: Semiotic Conventions from Old to Modern English

Rosemary Huisman

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For anyone interested in the many ways in which poetry can be written and read, this book provides a cultural and literary mapping by investigating the semiotic conventions of the genre 'poetry'. For me it was exceptionally timely. You get to a point in your PhD research when everything you read, see and hear, seems relevant to the study. That's the time for consolidation, focussing, for suring up the thesis: time to get down to saying exactly what you want to say, and time to say no to any further input.

But, as is the nature of academic research, once you have the knowledge you cannot ignore it, as each piece in the inevitably unsolvable jigsaw puzzle seems important but unable to be placed, at this stage, into place. Such is the case with this book, Rosemary Huisman's *The Written Poem*. Instead of introducing new aspects to my understanding of the various poetries, their production, practice, practitioners and audiences, this book actually helped me to consolidate my own observations of the many ways poetries can be written and read, or spoken and heard.

In my study I am grappling with what a poem is in its sounding, and what poetry looks like, and how it is being read in cyberspace. I thought the findings of a scholar of old English texts and on the topic of the written poem would be quite different to my own, but was pleasantly surprised when we seemed to arrive at similar conclusions but from seemingly opposite directions.

At the same time this book helped me to see the body of published poetry in a new way, from a different perspective, as cyberspace has made me look at poetry differently.

The book's period of study spans eight hundred years and is refreshingly concerned with the workings of poetry rather than the nationality of the literary genre. The book argues that poetry has to be recognised as poetry before it is read as poetry. So poetry is poetry by the standards developed to recognise it as poetry, by the way it looks to the human eye, it's visual form or seen form - it's graphology, as Huisman calls it.

Yet the visual poem is a complex signifier, and can be read in many ways. We read the way a poem looks long before we read a word as language. Huisman investigates the semiosis of the seen poem, the semiotic of poem as art object, the semiotic of the body and layers of meaning brought to a poem by the performance or presentation of it, and the semiotic of language and the readings of meaning in words and their spatial arrangement on a page.

It is a thorough examination of the many ways we write and read poetry.

Huisman argues that the written poem, that is, the poem written to be read silently, has only really developed over the past one hundred years - the writing-down or publishing of poetry, prior to the twentieth century, being a representation in written language of a phonological poetry - poetry that used rhyme and rhythm, and sounds of spoken language.

In Old English manuscripts, she finds greater correlation in the semiotic conventions with twentieth-century poetry than with any periods of poetry in between. This was a revelation for me, as I had never quite made the distinction before. As a performance poet I was aware that some poetry suited performance and some did not, but this book has allowed me to understand why.

Despite recent millennial predictions about the crisis in poetry, publishing, and the lack of good Australian literary criticism (by certain more traditional sections of academia) books like Huisman's are living proof of a healthy debate and the presence of worthy Australian theorists. Along with other theorists such as McKenzie Wark, Hazel Smith, Roger Dean, Kevin Brophy, Martin Johnston, Ilana Snyder, Susan Hawthorne, Patricia Wise, etc, Huisman's book helps us in our understanding of poetry as a social process, as a cultural entity and as a media element. Solid theory is here exemplified by practical sampling from an Australian cultural record.

This book is a must for any scholar of poetry, any reader of poetry, any writer of poetry, and any teacher of writing.

Komninos Zervos is an acclaimed international cyberartist. His poetry is influential in many publicly available forms - from read performance to print, cityscape projection, CD reproduction, and the internet. Komninos teaches in Cyberstudies at Griffith University, Gold Coast campus.

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Editors: Nigel Krauth & Tess Brady

Text@mailbox.gu.edu.au