

E-poetry: the Palpable Side of Signs.

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Originally, writing and drawing were similar activities. These actions sought to record, describe, explain, and arouse. The signs used were simultaneously lines, objects, positional markers, ideograms, pictograms, and phonograms in a two- or three-dimensional space. In their earlier forms, writing and drawing required severe abstraction from the phenomenal world; the forms demonstrated considerable achievements of visual thinking. Filling an empty surface with signs enabled people to capture time and space. Visual language has been shaped by the materials available to a given culture as well as by the communicative tasks. A wide variety of systems has come into being as visual languages changed and evolved. Egyptian hieroglyphics of 5,000 years ago used both abstract and iconic (representational) signs organized into vertical and horizontal groups of marks. Even spiral compositions, such as the Phaistos disk (a 3,700-year-old Cretan ritual document), have occurred occasionally in the evolution of writing systems. After millennia of rich diversity in signs and their organization, Graeco-Roman forms emerged from Phoenician predecessors and have remained relatively unchanged until the present: 2,000 years of efficient, repeatable symbols. As McLuhan and others have stated, these simple phonetic characters have enabled the development of technology and science as it is understood in the West. On the other hand, it is difficult to deny that certain expressive qualities have been simplified.

Poetry

During what MacLuhan called Gutenberg's era, it was obvious that poetry has been a practice related to specific forms and topics. Usually, our own education in poetry starts from poetry on the page, but of course this is an illusion anyway, because a lot of poetry is "bimedial", a lot of poetry is related to oral performance of different kinds or to visual practices of multiple varieties; so one can not really stick the printed page poem for very long: doing this means just to ignore the other dimensions of poetry.

The possibility to force the rigid imposition of printed page has freed the written verse line. Especially the computer opportunity gives back to poetry a new materiality of letters and through this a new expressive form, which are both palpable, for instance, in Arabic or oriental poetry.

We traditionally call poetry an artistic experience related to the word both in oral and written form, whose composition unity is the *verse line* (alexandrine verse, free verse, etc.). The oral medium should be normally richer. The written poetry, in fact, *translated* into the page only the segmental part of a text, but it is not able to show the over-segmental part as the tone, modulation, etc. However, we can say that this discrepancy has been cancelled: for instance, emphasis, oral procedure concerning duration, has its graphic form highlighted. The written poetry has always searched for visual figures that were comparable to prosodic variations of the oral poetry.

Oriental and Arabic Poetry

Oriental writing system is generally considered to be “logographic”. The graphemes of written language do not map onto individual phonemic units of the spoken, as it is done in alphabetic languages. Based on ideogram writing, this kind of poetry focuses on the visual aspect of words. An ideogram or ideograph (from Greek *idea* “idea” + *grapho* “to write”) is a graphic symbol that represents an idea or a strictly representational picture of a subject as may be done in illustration or photography: ideogram appeals to nonverbal communication.



Chinese pictogram for “mountain”



Chinese modern ideogram for “mountain”

The Arabic poetry creates abstract figures (such as decorations - fig. 1) or figurative (i.e. identifiable as world objects: things, animals - Fig. 2) by altering and stylizing the syllabic graphemes.



Figure 1



Figure 2

Western visual poetry

We date the first visual poems to around 1700 BC. The first known calligrams are the three, ‘The hatchet’, ‘The wings’ and ‘The egg’, created by the Greek poet Simmias of Rhodes at about 300BC. The word calligraphy comes from the Greek words *kallos*, meaning “beauty”, and *graphos*, meaning “writing”, so that calligram concerns the visual art that emphasizes the beauty of written sign.

1 Κωτίλας
 3 τῆ τόδ' ἄτριον νέον
 5 πρόφρων δὲ θυμῷ δέξο· δὴ γὰρ ἀγνᾶς
 7 τὸ μὲν θεῶν ἐριβόας Ἑρμῆς ἔκειξε κάρυξ
 9 ἄνωγε δ' ἐκ μέτρου μονοβάμιμος μέγαν πάροιθ' ἀέξειν
 11 θοῶς δ' ὑπερθεν ὠκυλέχριον φέρων νεῦμα ποδῶν σποράδων πίφαισκεν
 13 θοαῖς ἴσ' αἰόλαις νεβροῖς κῶλ' ἀλλάσσων, ὄρσιπόδων ἐλάφων τέκεσσι·
 15 πᾶσαι κραιπνοῖς ὑπὲρ ἄκρων ἰέμεναι ποσὶ λόφων κατ' ἀρθμίας ἴχνος τιθῆνας·
 17 καὶ τις ὠμόθυμος ἀμφίπαλτον αἴψ' αὐδάει θῆρ ἐν κόλπῳ δεξάμενος θαλαμῶν μυχοιτάτῳ
 19 κᾶτ' ὠκα βοᾶς ἀκοᾶν μεθέπων ὃ γ' ἄφαρ λάσιον νιφοβόλων ἄν' ὄρεων ἔσσυται ἄγκος·
 20 ταῖς δὴ δαίμων κλυτὸς ἴσα θοοῖσι ποσὶν δονέων ἅμα πολὺπλοκα μεθίει μέτρα μολπᾶς.
 18 ῥίμφα πετρόκοιτον ἐκλιπῶν δρουσ' εὐνᾶν ματρός πλαγκτὸν μαιόμενος βαλιάς ἐλεῖν τέκος·
 16 βλαχὰ δ' οἴων πολυβότων ἄν' ὄρεων νομὸν ἔβαν ταυνοσφύρων τ' ἐς ἄντρα Νυμφᾶν
 14 ταὶ δ' ἀμβρότῳ πόθῳ φίλας ματρός ῥῶοντ' αἴψα μεθ' ἡμερόεντα μαζόν,
 12 ἴχνει θενῶν ταν παναίολον Πιερίδων μονόδοιπον αὐδάει,
 10 ἀριθμὸν εἰς ἄκραν δεκάδ' ἰχνίων, κόσμον νέμοντα ρυθμῶν,
 8 φύλ' ἐς βροτῶν ὑπὸ φίλας ἐλῶν πτεροῖσι ματρός,
 6 λιγείᾳ μιν κάμ' ἴφι ματρός ὠδὶς·
 4 Δωρίας ἀηδόνος·
 2 ματέρος

Simmias of Rhodes, « The Egg »

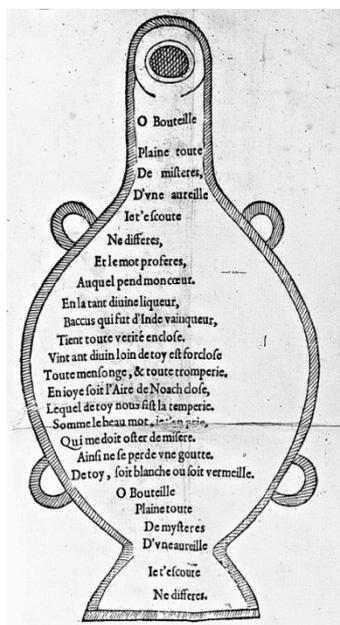
Theocrite of Syracuse, then the alexandrine poets, exploited this vein where the drawing and the text are not dissociated but they coincide. It is not just illustrating already written poems, or, conversely, legends added to drawings: it is to put together images and writing, or better simulating images by writing.

During the medieval era, decoration illustrated the codices. There is a physical nexus that connects writing and decoration, and there is also a relation of sense and significance between them. In the first case, the contribution of the illustrator is found as part of the written message, while in the second illustration accompanies the text. Therefore, images were a hermeneutic support for deciphering the written part of the text.



Collage of illuminated medieval manuscripts

However, calligrams have taken a negative connotation, during the Renaissance. Rabelais uses calligrams to create parody.



François Rabelais, *Le cinquieme et dernier livres des faicts et dictz heroïques du bon Pantagruel*, 1565.

During the 19th century, thanks to Victor Hugo and Charles Nodier, the text form rediscovers its sense in literary activity, though, in these compositions, poetry does not act to represent animals, objects, etc. but it is exploited to give a significant symbolic value to the typography (the use of different types or sizes of characters, the text's position in the page, etc.). In 1829, Hugo publishes in *Les Orientales* an astonishing text of one hundred twenty rhopalic¹ verses, entitled "les Djinns".

It is Stephan Mallarmé, with his famous *Un coup de dés jamais n'abolira le hasard* published in 1897, who traces a difference in poetics experimentations. The text becomes immediately image. As for the visual dimension, the text follows a new "syntax", using, for instance, capital or tiny letters.

Syntax and Entax

Paradoxically, the process of generating typographic meanings largely goes unnoticed in linguistics. Linguistics seems simply to deny the importance of graphic elements. Linguistics refuses to acknowledge typographic field as a semiotic mode.

In their view, writing is secondary to speech, merely an instrument for encoding spoken language. Consequently, linguists have concentrated on the phoneme-grapheme correlations in different languages and on the nature of various writing systems, but have ignored the individual variability of sign tokens. Saussurean-style linguists have also erroneously focused on the sentence or smaller linear units of language and thus failed to understand the spatial nature of text on the page and its organizing effects (Waller, 1991).

It is only the more recent semiotics trends in text linguistics and stylistics² which have recognized the capital function of typography. As it is known the meaning can be constructed with the help of several sign systems. Typography can be seen and studied as a code in its own right. It contributes and influences the textual meaning in various ways.

In electronic poetry both the materiality of the medium and the materiality of the text are crucial aspects to catch the meaning of the text. Consequently, it appears to be significant analysing the typographic aspect of the poems. It is immediately evident that kinetic poetry, for instance, is interested in technical mediation. This media-technical is not merely a stylistic form, but it shifts in the function of the poetry itself.

¹ A line in which each successive word has more syllables than the one preceding it.

² Fix: 2001; Kress and Van Leeuwen: 2001; Stöckl: 2004.

By using semiotics terminology, we will try to trace a sort of “syntax” of the typography in general, for then applying it for analysing some examples of digital poetry. In Barthes’s sense, writing can be called a connotative sign system as it uses content-form combination of a primary system (language) as signifiers in a second sign system (typography)³. So it is important that readers decode graphic signs in order to make linguistic meaning: graphemes into morphemes into lexemes, etc. By using typography, form can be illustrated or suggested. The three types of signs, following Peircean semiotics⁴, can correspond three levels of typography: reading is mainly a “symbolic” act (deciphering conventional signs) but it can acquire indexal and iconical qualities. In electronic poetry, often, type faces point out the nature of the text, carrying out emotional values.

Typography seems tied to various linguistic and pragmatic levels of an utterance. It can comment on or reinforce verbal messages of the text. Thanks to spatial arrangement of lines, text blocs on the page and thanks to additional typographic elements, readers access to different meaning levels of the text.

We will use the semiotic word *entax* to define this sort of “typographical syntax”. We can trace a semiotic difference between *syntax* and *entax*. Briefly, in semiotic terms, if syntax covers the assembly operations of both figures and signs along the external space of a sign system, *entax* indicates the system of the operations assembling the letters inside the figures. The *syntax* regulates the grammatical relationships among the linguistic signs; the *entax* regards the relationship of mutual disposition that is created among the characters in an inscribed space.

So the entax comprises of all arrangements and combination of typographic elements in the space of a page. According to Wehde⁵ (2000: 119-126) texts usually adhere to specific configuration of typographic elements which serve to identify single text as belonging to a specific text or genre. There is also a pragmatic level of typography and it is embodied in the use of certain type and text-graphic elements for particular envisaged effects.

Unlike language, typography has a weak grammar. According to Wehde, this is due to several reasons. First of all, single typographic elements are hard to distinguish from one another as they often co-occur and interrelate. Second typographic meaning is “heavily context-variable” and has established different conventions in

³ Roland Barthes, *Le Bruissement de la langue*, Paris, Seuil, 1984.

⁴ Charles S. Peirce, (1931-58) *Collected Papers*, 8 Voll., Cambridge/Mass, Harvard University Press, tr. it. partielle, Torino, Einaudi 1980-1984

⁵ Susanne Wehde, *Typographische Kultur : Eine Zeichentheoretische Und Kulturgeschichtliche Studie Zur Typographie Und Ihrer Entwicklung* Niemeyer, 200, pp. 119-126.

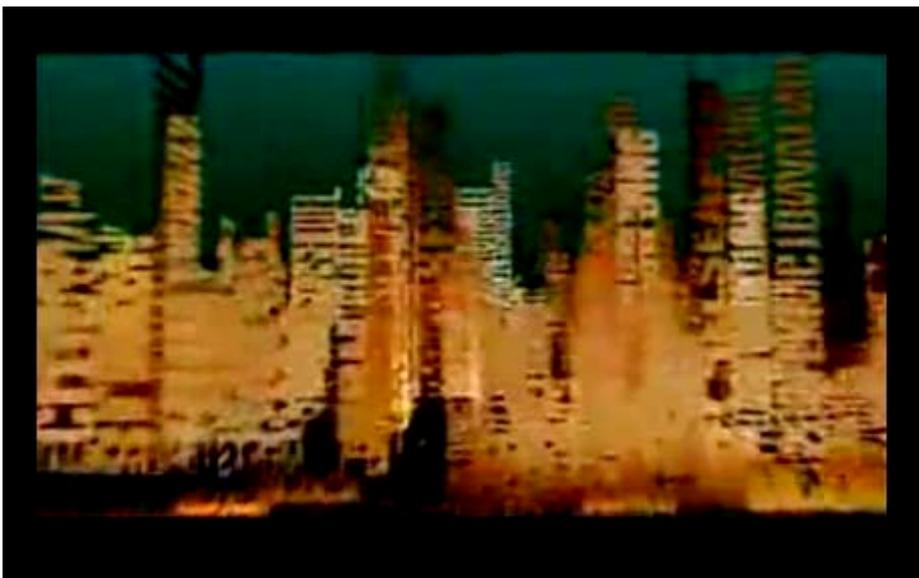
different cultural domains. Finally one typographic element can have many meanings and a single meaning can be realised by different typographic use.

In attempt to specify the entax we propose to classify it into three domains:

- Micro-entax (morphology) which refers to fonts, letters and to configuration of typographic signs in lines and text blocks, which deals with morpheme: words' forms and colors changing in "Faith";
- Meso-entax (semantic) which relates to the graphic structure of the all document, which refers to the lexeme: "VerylonglongCadillac" in "The Child" (it recreates the image of a long Cadillac);
- Macro-entax (pragmatic) which relates to the graphic and visual structure of the all document, which refers to the sentence in its context: "leap" in the poem "Faith" (it recreates the idea of the movement, like the other verbs of movement, but, moreover it suggests that it is necessary "to jump now" to advance in the reading).

E-poetry

The child (1999), by Alex Gopher, is a typical example of animated calligram. Words rebuild the image of Manhattan: the skyscrapers are drawn by words, the word "window", for example, forms the image of a window. As for entax, here we have an example of meso-entax: focusing on the lexeme.



Alex Gopher, « The Child »

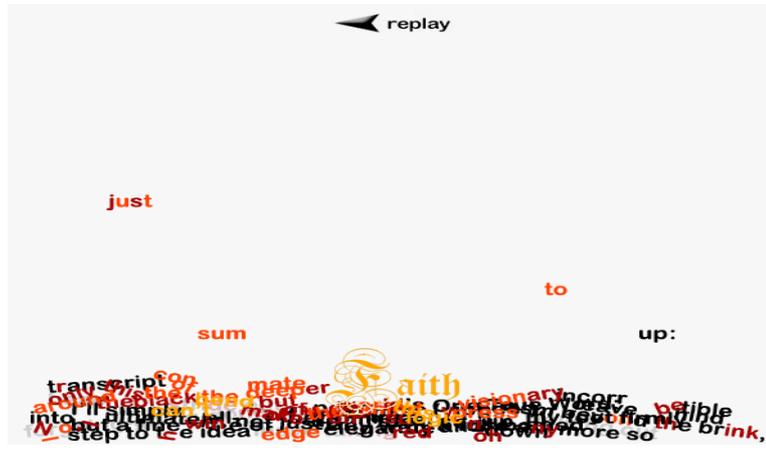
Through a meta-textual writing, where there is a perfect isomorphism between the form of the expression and the form of the contents, the text is held while showing us what is occurring. A man, whose figure is traced by words, put in verse lines, has to bring his wife to the hospital since his child will be born. His aspect is described once again by words “black hair/big glasses/anxious face/husband” the syntagm “anxious face” flicks, beating like an anxious heart. All the words describing the man are blue, as for the woman, they are evidently pink. The “poetical” construction suggests this anxiety, too: no verbs, no articles, and no conjunctions: only nouns and adjectives, following each other, recreating a sort of racing heart: “black hair/big glasses/anxious face/husband”. Because of the use of different shapes, sizes and placement of letters two syntagms characterize more than the others the man: anxious face, and husband. The woman is described, basically, by a pink “pregnant”. When they leave the apartment to reach the hospital, the verse lines move like a human being walking. A totally capital letter “lift” goes down to the ground floor, and even if it’s just on the left side of the screen it attracts more the reader’s attention than the bigger block of letters forming a skyscraper: there is a story to follow.

The streets are thus filled by nouns which indicate the objects: “taxi, car, very very long Cadillac,...”. “Very, very long Cadillac”, for example is written in capital letters, white: while playing on the entax, the text visually gives us the indication of a long, long white, elegant Cadillac. The word “Brooklyn” forms the mythical bridge of Brooklyn. The two “O” of “Brooklyn” become bigger and transform themselves in two kinds of short tunnels where the words/cars slip. The scene is held in speed, the “reader” follows the text by collecting moving words. There are many syntagms, like the cars on the streets; words/cars crash each other, simulating an accident. Letters become object. The “H” becomes the hospital, where, finally, a phrase, written in white color, highlighting in this way the difference from the other text, ends the story “Congratulation Mr. Gopher. It’s a boy”. Thanks to a spectacular use (which gives spectacle) of the entax the text re-builds one day syntax in New York.

*Faith*⁶ by Robert Kendall can be a perfect example of how words in electronic writing can easily assume a visual value; moreover, in this text, we can find all the three levels of entax:

⁶ Robert Kendall, *Faith*, (2002), http://www.studiocleo.com/cauldron/volume4/confluence/kendall_/title_page.htm or

- Micro-entax (morphology), which deals with morpheme;
- Meso-entax (semantic) which refers to the lexeme;
- Macro-entax (pragmatic) which refers to the sentence in its context.



Bob Kendall, « Faith »

The text is made of a sequence in which they have been introduced some pauses. The sequence, therefore, is divided into five other subsequences; inside these subsequences the process advances automatically. Between a subsequence and the other, instead, there is a link, which permits the reader to keep on reading the text. The subsequences, moreover, are made of segments of text that appeared and disappeared according to different time and movements.

Every subsequence differs from the others for the way in which the text in the window appears (and inside of each subsequence, some segments differ from the others for the various type of movement that they complete). The first subsequence, for instance, contains the word “Faith”, which is also the title, written in orange gothic types and nothing else. The typography of the title suggests the reader how to read this text. In Medieval Age, as we saw, images were a hermeneutic support for deciphering the written part of the text so maybe in this text the reader should look for the visual value of letters.

Then “Faith” begins to fall from the high, the word “logic”, which hits and bounces “Faith”, afterwards “logic” dissolve itself. As far as dimension, “logic” is smaller than “Faith” (obviously!), but both “Faith” and “logic” maintain constant

R.Kendall. *Faith*, Electronic Literature Collection, Volume One, (2006), <http://eliterature.org/2006/10/electronic-literature-collection-volume-one-released/> .

dimensions during the entire sequence. On the contrary, the others words “can' t”, “bend”, “this”, appear with greater dimensions and, by rotating, they diminish progressively until they placed in the right point of the page. The first sub-poetry is finally composed: “Faith. Logic can' t bend this. I know...”.

During the second subsequence new words appear that join the previous ones, modifying and developing the meaning of the text. In this subsequence the words slide horizontally until stopping themselves in a point of the window, their dimensions remain always the same.

The colours differ between a subsequence and the other, so that the segments of text that appear in each subsequence are distinguished from those of the previous and the successive ones.

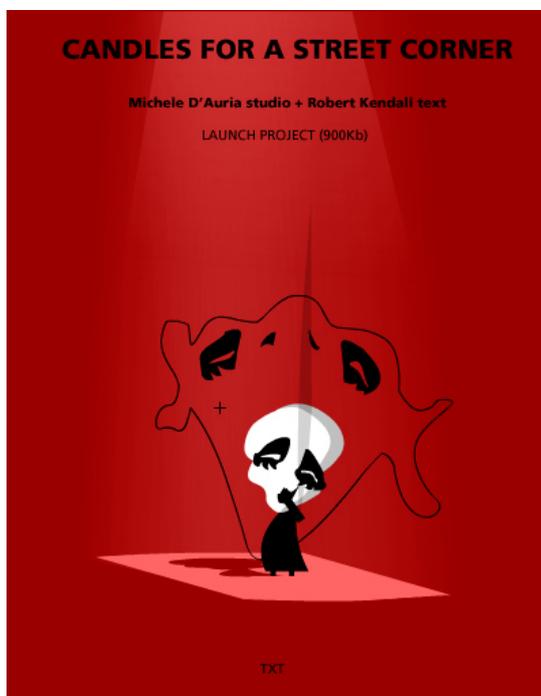
As far as the colours in the first subsequence all the words are orange, in second all red, a complementary colour of the orange one. The colours of the words in the successive subsequences are brown and black. So colours are every time more intense, they communicate, at the same time, continuity regarding the previous subsequence and growing of the emotions until arriving to black, the last one of colour scale.

During the development of every subsequence, associations among the segments and movements are created: for example, in the third subsequence, the syntagms “red”, “winking” and “neon” flash in the high part of the window just like a neon-light. The visual part, therefore, underlines the metaphor of the text (red, winking neon) emphasizing it, in order to indicate the logic inability to succeed in understanding all phenomena. In the fourth subsequence we have another example: the segments “off the rocker (yippee!)” after being appeared horizontally it slides, simulating a fall. Once again, therefore, the literal meaning of words is represented graphically (moreover, the syntagm, “off the rocker (yippee!)”, reminds of the slang expression "off one's rocker"). All the verbs that indicate movement, after being appeared, doubled themselves in two identical segments, then they assume a less defined colour, but one is raised and it slides away horizontally, while the other remains like pale simulacrum in the same position. Finally, from the left inferior corner appears a syntagm “Leap” (black colour), which, as it has happened to all verbs that indicate movement, doubles itself in two segments. One of these segments occupies the whole page. It is a visual invitation to the reader to “leap now”. In this case we can speak about a pragmatic level of typography. In this macro-text example, the verb “leap” recreates the idea of the movement, like the other

verbs of movement, but, moreover it suggests the reader that it is necessary “to jump now” to advance in his/her reading.

In the last subsequence the reader can finally understand the substantial ambiguity of the poetry: the graphical animation means exactly the contrary of what the text asserts. The text says: “just to sum up: Faith”, while the graphical animation, that we can define an iconic one, suggests another meaning: i.e. that everything ends, and faith, too.

*Candles for a street corner*⁷ is the result of a collaboration between Bob Kendall Michele D'Auria.



Candles joins a graphical text (in movement and static) to both iconic and sonorous images. The poem is recited, which helps the “readers”, especially if they are not English-speakers, to trace the word-order, to reconstruct the text, to catch the sense; for instance, a sequence would be almost incomprehensible in its whole because unreadable (black color sequence). However, there isn’t a perfect correspondence between what is declaimed by the voice and what the reader is invited to read from a careful use of micro-entax. Normally, closely spaced lines are harder to read and when the text is too uniform, our eyes classify it as a single block of grey, and thus ignore it. In the page, we appreciate above all the contrasts

⁷ <http://www.bornmagazine.org/projects/candles/video.htm>

between empty and full spaces. Consequently, if iconic images are stylized, the graphic part complicates the reading process, due to movement in some of its parts (even if the temporality of this text allows an easy reading) and some text segments are written in letters too small to be read. This text block represents the *mise en abyme* of the morphology of this text: it shows how to construct it. The micro-entax allows the reader to find a path to follow.

The poem opens with a declaiming voice, the image of some sort of sad ghost, rotating on itself and a number: 32, which will be declaimed by a voice, the only associating element between what the readers are listening and what they are seeing. Also, in the last sequence any graphic text is absent, with the exception of the word "trust", kept in hand by the ghost: «trust» redoubles and mirrors itself. The sixth sequence is an indicative example of how we normally read: our eyes look for the declaimed word on the top right side, while actually the declaimed verse is on the left side: we look for « when she reclines» (the position is deceiving) and we read: « I feel ». The syntagms in the sequences are repeated, even if with some little changes, modifying the text and so rewriting it. Besides, some parts turn out illegible, because of their size, but their structure reminds one of the structure of the poetic verse. Some verses are not declaimed in the sequence they are written in; in fact they are anticipations of the following sequence or references to the previous one. For example, in «she can't see/but I can see» (4th sequence), «I can see» is performed by the voice as the first verse of the successive sequence, (5th sequence). Finally both verses «she can't see/but the can see» remain in the 6th sequence too, although they are not declaimed by the voice, then they disappear. Finally, a consideration about the chromatic aspect shall be made: it changes in every sequence to emphasize the passage from one passage to another, passage that, on the contrary, the narrating voice does not mark so clearly. It is a narrating voice which repeats, mechanically, the same verses, returning several times in the same as well as in different sequences (poetry can continue forever once it is started), while the image of the ghost keeps turning on itself, in a continuous repetition: «so we can get through another day».

Conclusion

In these examples of e-poetry writing produces a visual image: the shapes, sizes and placement of letters on a page contribute to the message produced, creating statements which cannot always be rendered in spoken language.

Using the space of the page in a different way, abandoning the linearity of the verse line and with it the tabular modality of the reading, melting even the proportionality of the characters in the word, all the textual graphical elements can then assume a *new* expressive value. These kinds of digital poetry carry on what Roman Jakobson anticipated, i.e. that poetry would have been placed between the arts of the space.

Finally, these texts give literature a ludic face: they propose a “primitive” literary experiment (for instance the calligraphy in *Candles* reminds of the calligraphy of a kid). In the “primitive” adjective one should not seek any negative connotations, but simply “which refers to a previous/earlier time”, as the children who play with the language before learning how to speak. Through digital poetry one starts again to have a visual and ludic relationship with the language.