

Dick Higgins
A BOOK

A book. Consider a book.

Before one can consider a book, one must consider what it is to have a text.

A text is an array of words on paper. Or, if not words, other things that are to be read. One can have a text with no words at all -- music or visual entities or symbols.

But when we are talking about art -- an art book, the art of language and not just information that is to be used for something other than the experience of being oneself -- one must have a self or selves. One need not dwell upon it. But we are all complexes of past experiences and knowledges, each unique unto itself. One need not ask oneself, at the outset, "What is this self? Who is this me that I am being?" One needs no particular ego to experience art. But one does bring a certain horizon to the experience of a book which is its own past and complex of tastes and non-tastes, desires and non-desires, beings and non-beings. Like a ship moving towards a horizon, that horizon always recedes, no matter in what direction one moves. The complex of what one knows and what one does not know and what one knows without consciously considering it, that horizon is always in motion. And the text that is a work of art brings its horizon to us. The horizons intersect and interpenetrate.

Authors make texts when they offer us arrays of words which generate horizons that interpenetrate with ours, when they displace ours in the course of this interpenetration. The author is supremely unimportant while we are studying a text. If we want to know about apples, if we want to study why apples are as they are, *then* we must study about apple trees. But when we are hungry, we do not study about apples. We eat them. So it is with texts and authors. When we are hungry to experience our horizons in motion, the author is beside the point; here it is the text which the author has made that is important. For us it is our experience of the text which we are living with, not the text which the author thought he made. When Samuel Richardson wrote *Clarissa* he thought that he was making a series of morally exemplary letters -- prudish, perhaps. Instead he created what we experience as one of the most erotic novels in our language, erotic in its curious horizon of dwelling forever upon the sexual innuendo. Lately most criticism has dwelt upon the linguistics of the text, upon the structure and *langue* and *parole* and semiotics of the work. But judged as experience, that is relatively unimportant, since it is the effect of the style which is so crucial, the phenomenon of the generation of the horizons of Clarissa and her circle and how they fit and do not fit with ours. Same with Gertrude Stein, whose focus is upon the language of her horizon and ours: it is displacement. A structuralist and a semiotician would go mad trying to explain why Stein works when "it" (her work) works. For us, enjoying the displacements of our horizons of language by hers, there is no problem. We each have our own horizons, our own hermeneutic for this (our own methodology of interpretation). I can document mine, and each human being who reads a Stein can learn to document hers or his. But the gut feelings that the work generates, the emotional and connotative and phatic elements, these do not come from what she says but from the process of matching how she says it with our own horizons.

A text can be spread over space without becoming a book. We can write it on a scroll and experience it as never-ending, unbroken. Most texts seem to have been written for experience

upon scrolls -- perhaps their authors think of life as scrolls. In point of fact, of course, scrolls have their own interesting qualities, their physicality and their unique continuity.

But a book, in its purest form, is a phenomenon of space and time and dimensionality that is unique unto itself. Every time we turn the page, the previous page passes into our past and we are confronted by a new world. In my *"Of Celebration of Morning,"* my book qua book which uses these ideas most purely, I even called each page "world 1," "world 2," and so on through the eighty pages. The only time a text exists in a solid block of time is when we are no longer reading it, unlike, for example, a single painting which is all present before us when we consider its presence physically. In this way a book is like music, which is only experienced moment by moment until it, too, is past and remembered as a whole. But the space of the book, even when it is not self-consciously shaped and patterned (as in visual novels or concrete poetry or comic books), is part of the experience. *"Alice in Wonderland"* written out by hand is a different work from *"Alice in Wonderland"* set in type; set in Baskerville, even, it is a different entity from what it would become set in some barely-legible but beautiful Old English blackletter face. It is, as it were, translated when it is set from one face to another, just as surely as if it had been paraphrased into another language. All literature exists only in translation for this reason -- it is displaced from the author's intention, displaced by us conceptually every time we experience it by reading it, displaced according to our horizons at the moment. One time we read a text with passion, one time coolly, one time in a desultory way, one time with great attention to the characters and gestalts generated by the text, another time with our eye on the horizons of our language and that of the text.

The book is, then, the container of a provocation. We open it and are provoked to match our horizons with those implied by the text. We need not consider ourselves to do this; but the more vivid our horizons and the more vivid the gestalts and horizons in the text, the more vivid the displacements and coincidences of these horizons. And herein lies the true pleasure of the text, the true erotic of literature. Criticism which ignores this does so at its peril -- it may be fashionable for a moment, but it will die. Great criticism always keeps its eye on the horizons of work at hand and so, like Coleridge's lectures on Shakespeare, always exists upon three horizons of time -- its subject's, the critic's and ours. Perhaps that is the crucial difference between criticism and poetry, for example -- the first has three horizons, the latter has two to offer. Not that "the more the merrier," of course. Two horizons can be plenty.

But the book that is clear upon what horizons it can offer up for our experience (whatever nonsense its author may have intended it to be), that book is well upon its way to matching its horizons with ours and is, thus, on the track of potential greatness.

There is no need to bother with the rest.

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