THE DESIGNED ESSAY

(DESIGN AS ESSAY)

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"A letter is two shapes, one light, one dark."

—Gerrit Noordzij, *The Stroke: Theory of Writing*

One of my recurring interests is not in image exactly but in the spatial capabilities of designed text. That is, text on a page as two-dimensional object that contains or constitutes both words and visual information.

Poets are used to thinking about text's visual qualities because of line breaks: unless they occur in prose forms (and even in this case, it's a conscious decision made partly for visual reasons), poems are visual artifacts. They are both *read* and *seen*. As prose writers, perhaps we are still thinking of our text as without a visual component, inputted into Microsoft Word or whatever we use with the standard letter-sized manuscript page, the standard margins.

My interest in the *designed essay*, as I'd like to call it, stems, perhaps, from my background as a computer hacker. There are two forks of this. First is the phenomenon of ASCII art, which originated in the Bulletin Board Systems (BBS) of the 70s and 80s. Graphics weren't prevalent (they took too much bandwidth, and many didn't have graphic capabilities on their machines)

so enterprising artists used fixed-width characters to create representational images [overhead?], or to mimic large and intricate fonts [overhead]. My interests in BBS culture related to pirated software, perhaps pornography, and hacker culture. Of course as graphic cards became more prevalent and modems increased their speed this artform diminished. But still there's something fabulous about seeing these images—sometimes more like graffiti in their use as boast of criminal enterprise than anything else—made up of regular, everyday characters. This is constraint.

Of course there's Apollinaire, too, with his calligrams, concrete poetry, typewriter and TTY art to look at, illuminated manuscripts and so on, to tap as predecessora.

The second fork is that as a former hacker I have a predilection for screwing around with things, especially things created by or accessible via a computer keyboard. And though the potential complexity of the sentence, the story, the essay, asymptotically approaches infinity, I am drawn to the other buttons on the screen that surround the simulated page in almost all modern word processing programs. I want to write, but I also want to play, screw with the default setups, to get into protected, secure spaces like the margins, the header and footer, to break through walls if I must.

It will probably end in my death eventually as I cut into a cable or a power line and experience real electricity.

Designers are the writer's traditional intermediaries, parsing, passing our words from one world to another, easing the transition between *double-spaced unpublished manuscript* and *published, designed book or essay*. We provide the manuscript pages. Editors trim sentences, retitle things, tweak a clause or two, send it off to fact-checking, add a coat of Turtle Wax, and hand us off in files appended with .DOC or .RTF (encoded in ones and zeroes really if we look at the heart of it—the code underneath the alphabetic code that makes up words) to designers who place our files in the layout, apply styles, and make our words, these worlds, look good. Writing (the noun) in this model is product that we, writers, create.

But if we have the tools—and we do have the tools, even in lowly overdetermined Word or more powerful software like InDesign—why not wield them ourselves? The word *publication* no longer means exactly what it did fifty years ago. Production processes are shifting: agents become editors; editors no longer edit but acquire, thinking of promotion. Many have taken on some or all of these roles. We self-publish by the chapbook, saddle-stitched, or by the pamphlet, by broadside, by website, eBook, email, text message, by the magic of Print-on-Demand.

Some of us, of course, prefer not to get confused. But at the least we have smartened up. We know our choice of font when submitting to editors makes a difference how our texts are read, how seriously they are taken, how easily we can seize the authority correlated with the designed, printed page. We don't use Olde English or Comic Sans. We use something stately, something that looks bookish, unless we are those who have composed via typewriter for so long that we want Courier to reassure us, keep us in the simulation of our process that has worked for years.

We have internalized some elements of design. We feel more comfortable writing in something other than Times, dullest of fonts. My essays can't come in Times. They need Minion. They need Jenson. Garamond at the very least. I used to be able to get by in Palatino but

those days are gone. I prefer the immediate impression of finishedness with my poems that a professional font implies with its ligatures and in-line caps, its old style numbering, its flourishes, its true italics. The font connotes: it *means*. So by using it, by designing, we are at least sort of writing. We are adding meaning.

Reading books is a physical, and hence visual, experience. This is why good book design starts new pieces recto, on the right-hand page, to give a sense of reassurance, textual stability, to allow a text to breathe. It's also why good book design doesn't end a piece of prose at the very end of the page so we are forced to turn it with our fingers only to be disappointed, to have to reassess. Good book design doesn't break compound words at page breaks. It smooths, controls the reading process. It heightens comprehension, immersion in the text.

Why not call this a manifesto?

Let me talk a bit about my essay "I Have Been Thinking About Snow" as an example, which rips off its visual form (in a way) from Chelsey Minnis' poetry collection *Zirconia*. [overhead]

Partly the idea behind the form is obvious and representative: the essay is about snow. The essay visually resembles snow. Cool. But. It's more complicated. Are the periods meant to represent, to reproduce snow? Are black marks meant to stand in for whiteness? Or are they meant to be ground, and the text curls and contours of snow? In one sense the essay is purely representative. Not only does it tell, it literally shows us some snow, some black as white, some contrast, on every page. I like to think it activates that white space, makes the dimenstionality of the page more obviously in play.

It's readable either way, I'd wager: the whiter space is more easily read as snow, as background, but if you look at it visually, when we have text we have topography, outline, edge. We have shape emerging from (or left on top of) field. The text could be the remains of snow in the last moments of winter, or it could be a beginning of the whiter months.

Either way it produces fragmentation, isolation, visual contrast. One chunk of text is separated visually and spatially from another. The essay becomes about isolation, and its form, if working well, is inseparable from its content, right? The form is the content. The medium is the message. The essay is about and enacts apertures: opening and closing off. It is about silence. The whitewash of loss. And the reverse of that too.

This essay has a visual duration. All do, but this one's more apparent since it is more obviously a visual object. We know we must pay attention not just to prose but to its visual representation since it is so clearly designed.

The whitespace is controlled, of course, in books. There are technical limitations to publishing a designed piece as part of a book. Doing full bleeds throughout would add expense. If I had my way the essay would be printed on wall-size sheets of paper—one sheet, probably. But that's not practical for production or distribution. And the publisher has their designer to contend with too. The designer is responsible for the general look of the page. She keeps things clean, organized, coherent. Separated. She designs the page with its other information, page numbers,

running heads, margins, and in this frame she places the text. Anything that's not in any of the margins, then, is the *writer's space* to do with as she will.

This form limns that space: it fills up every inch of the writer's space. It makes the perimeter, the border between these two spaces—writer's and designer's, the available and forbidden—very obvious.

There are problems with writing a designed essay. One is purely practical: what page size do you design it for? The decision shapes the essay from the beginning, and presupposes a decision about the final physical form the writer sees it in. This particular essay ("I Have Been Thinking...") was designed on the default letter-size page. When *Quarterly West* accepted it for publication it had to be redesigned for their page size and font and leading. Copyediting and proofing was a bitch. When *Neck Deep* was accepted by Graywolf, it had to be redesigned for the 6 x 9" page. Repeat. Each redesign changes meaning, requires rewriting. The page like so [such / isolation: small] is not the same as the page like so [such / isolation: large].

The "such // isolation" bit is taken from my memory of Paul Hornshemeier's graphic novel *Mother Come Home*, I think, in retrospect [overhead]. The visual space amplifies meaning (that isolation), and also creates a sort of rest, to think in terms of another representative space, the musical score. I think of the design here as a visual and a temporal space, a pause, I hope.

Another tradeoff is that the more visually a text is working, the more difficult it is to read aloud. When texts go increasingly visual, they become visual performances. And they are less for the human voice because if *design means* then reading it aloud sans design strips it of meaning.

As such I have never read this piece aloud, though I've thought about it. I could conceive it as performance, with the sound of static or the hush of snowfall coming down, and something visual happening. Or film, elapsing over time. Its visual form might be thought of as a kind of score, which acknowledges time and might be read with pauses, with hush built in. I presume, in reading it like we are accustomed to pages being read, left to right, top to bottom, that what occurs in the reading act (that is, you physically read the thing on the upper left) on the upper left occurs temporally before what occurs on the lower right. This is what happens in prose, but prose creates its own sense of time. It can flash back. It can skip forward. What happens to us when we physically read page one still happens to us before we physically read page three, but we are not accustomed to thinking about the time spent reading straightforward prose as part of how it can mean. Time elapses in the narrative. Time elapses in our lives as we read page after page. Which is why a pressure builds when we are approaching the last few pages (we can see it, we can hold it in our hands and judge it) of a novel. Will it come together, we wonder, and that pressure begins to build, along with the tension we feel in wanting to stay part of a fictional (or nonfictional) world, trying to read more slowly, to stay immersed for longer, because we know the physical artifact of the book or the story or the essay—and our physical act of reading this particular artifact—is ending, which is a kind of death.

The essay simulates death, but more overtly. It abandons sections in the snow. It leaves them there to disappear.

I want all of this possibility too, but I also want the designed visual experience that graphic

novels and memoirs and essays can offer us in visually suggesting the passage of time, the space between two things represented separately. But I have no artistic skill with visual anything. I can't paint. My drawings are ass. I could try collage, I suppose, but I doubt I'd be any good at it (while there are elements here of textual collage). But what I can do is *design*. And hack around with software. So I have tried to use these tools, limited as they are compared to pastels or oil.

The essay seems perfectly suited to this sort of exploration, since "I Have…" came about as an exploratory project. The essay arrived—or emerged—only within the form, within the designed space of the page. If design isn't part of the writing process it's secondary, added, as in the traditional process of publication. It is a sort of algorithm the language is put through to become a book or page of a magazine.

The designed essay, though, must be composed and designed at once. Both are part of the writing, the process of discovery. This is important. For the form to mean successfully, it must come from the essay's composition, not added later with water and page numbers. If the design is discovered partway through, the process must be restarted to consider the arrival of the form and what it means to the text.

And what is more exploratory, finally, more about discovery, more potentially visual than essay?