

New Work about Reading Poetry: A Book Review Article on Stafford's and Bohn's Work

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Martyna MARKOWSKA

**New Work about Reading Poetry:
A Book Review Article on Stafford's and Bohn's Work**

In the review article at hand I discuss two studies on reading poetry: Fiona Stafford's *Reading Romantic Poetry* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012) and Willard Bohn's *Reading Visual Poetry* (Plymouth: Fairleigh Dickinson UP, 2011). The two books can be wrongly assumed as similar works, but they refer to different types of poetry and the reading of poetry. The studies are about the poetics of nineteenth-century Romanticism (Stafford) and experimental, visual poetry in the twentieth century (Bohn). Both present close readings of single poems and they do not discuss theoretical perspectives. Stafford and Bohn make the claim that their studies are not elaborate theses on literary periods or encyclopedias; however, I posit that a careful reader is able to learn perhaps even more about Romanticism and visual poetry from these two studies than from any other theoretical work.

Faithful to the titles of their books, Stafford and Bohn read poems; nevertheless, it is not only poems they read, but also phrases and even single words of particular poems. Only then do they find similarities between different poems, writers, or worldviews never beyond the point at which they could lose track of investigating the literary text. Stafford, while noticing less known Romantic women authors and emphasizing such issues as motherhood and intimacy, argues that reading Romantic poems requires an intimate approach and often refers to writers' private correspondence, letters written by and exchanged between great minds of the époque. In the chapter titled "Solitude and Sensibility," Stafford claims that "the body of correspondence has had such a strong influence on critical understanding of Keats that it also helps to make sense of the secondary literature almost as much as the primary" (41). Furthermore, Stafford's analysis is far from traditional views and approaches we associate with Romanticism and the scholarship of Romantic literature. Stafford focuses on existential, social and cultural issues and disregards questions of politics. Instead, intimacy of interpersonal relations and self-orientation is what Stafford stresses most. One of the advantages of Stafford's work is her emphasis on the contribution of women poets of Romanticism and she highlights their importance in the development of Romantic poetry as of those who introduced new topics, such as the ones related to intimacy and motherhood. Unfortunately, following Bohn, one might think that women authors produced little visual poetry and in Bohn's book (see below), Giselle Beiguelman is the only woman author mentioned briefly and none of her projects are analyzed.

Bohn's strategy is slightly different from that of Stafford's: he argues that visual poetry offers effective design and, at the same time, invites us to a sophisticated game on the border between image and text. Being aware of the rules of this approach, Bohn's attitude is not an intimate one (although still close), but deconstructive in a sense of "breaking the code" of the approach. The intellectually demanding task of deciphering words one-by-one can be aesthetically appealing and joyful. A good example of Bohn's deconstructing poetic puzzles can be the section dedicated to Francisco Vighi's 1920 poem "Celestiales fuegos artificiales" in which the poet creates his vision of the end of the world (44). Bohn analyzes the poem verse by verse simultaneously with the process of the destruction of the world present in the poem: "Surrounded by various saints and a flock of angels, God begins methodically blowing up the universe, star by star and planet by planet" (46). The first step of the analysis is to draw the reader's attention to the visual structure of the poem including the length of the lines, rhymes, and irregularities, which remind the reader of "celestial fireworks." Bohn leads the reader through the analysis, but at the same pace as the pace of destructing the world in the poem, eventually, finds a connection (or rather, a contradiction) to T.S. Eliot's vision of the end of the world.

Visual poetry of the Romantics seems to be two radically different periods with a different role of poetry and the figure of the poet in society. However, if we agree with the division of literature into literary periods, periodical categorization would be perhaps more relevant to Romantic literature and, hence such a complex and varied phenomenon as visual poetry cannot be limited to any specific period. As we can see in Bohn's work, the tradition of visual poetry originates in ancient times and even the Golden Era Bohn discusses covers almost a century. Visual poetry is definitely an ideology, a method of writing that cannot be placed within decades or any concrete time frame. Bohn names years when visual literature gained an extraordinary importance and was adopted by avant-garde

artists as the most adequate way of artistic expression. Such were, for instance, the 1920s when Dadaists wrote visual poetry and created their own style through word games. Nonetheless, it was not only the Dada movement that developed visual poetry. Bohn presents only the most meaningful aspects of visual poetry in the whole history of world literature and focuses on Western literature.

Bohn creates an extraordinary compendium of analysis and interpretation of visual poetry and not many scholars can present results of their literary research in such an unpretentious way as Bohn and *Reading Visual Poetry* is written in an accessible language. The text's lack of complexity, nevertheless, does not impute the book's value and what Bohn is presenting. On the contrary, it is an example for other scholars how to attract both academic and general readers. One needs to be a humble and understanding reader as well to start writing, even research papers, which evoke interest, devotion and readers' pleasure. In some parts of the book Bohn leads the reader by the hand, as if we were curious children who want to learn not necessarily about visual poetry, but about reading icons, interpreting them, and understanding the historical process of the literary world. However, although in the foreword Bohn emphasizes that "the following study is not meant to be a literary history" (17), it still provides a meaningful insight into a fragment of literary history told from the perspective of visual poetry and avant-garde movements of the twentieth century.

Bohn's book on the phenomenon of visual poetry is obviously not his first one. After *Modern Visual Poetry* (2001) and *The Aesthetics of Visual Poetry, 1914-1928* (1993), Bohn can be viewed as one of the most recognizable English-speaking scholars of visual poetry. The texts of Apollinaire or Guillermo de Torre cannot be read without consulting *Reading Visual Poetry*. The first sentence of the book is already meaningful and allows us to assume the way in which the whole work is going to be written: "Visual poetry can be defined basically as poetry that is meant to be seen" (13). As simple as any definition can be: a concrete, reasonable and undisputable explanation of the title of the book. Following the classical path, Bohn mentions the roots of the phenomenon of visual poetry in ancient Greece (*technopaigneia*) and Rome (*carmina figurata*). The first chapter is devoted to Spanish Ultraist poetry (1919-1923) and each following chapter concerns a specific artistic movement that developed visual poetry and elevated it to different dimensions. The first two chapters describe the activity of visual poets who created (it would be hard to limit creation of visual poetry to the verb "write") it in Spanish: among others Chilean, Spanish, Mexican, and Argentinean poets. The following chapters concern the development of the phenomenon in French and among Italian Futurists (especially Aeropoetry in late 1930s) and Brazilian concrete poetry in the 1950s.

Bohn concludes with the description of digital experiments with visual poetry at the end of the twentieth century. "Visuality" of poetry means, nonetheless, exactly what Bohn emphasized. If a poem is related to any image, it is understood in a peculiar way, like Apollinaire's *calligrammes*, for instance. As Bohn claims in the Introduction: "What makes visual poetry so unique, after all, is the way in which the text and the design interact with each other" (17). This is why Bohn points out the necessity of following rules of such visual-textual texts, which means taking three cognitive steps in the process of reading visual poetry. The first step is the recognition of the poem's form and its design. The following step only regards the text and the activity of reading: "he or she needs to devise a consistent reading strategy" (16). The third step may be then an interpretative symbiosis of both text and design. The majority of texts Bohn analyzes are first of all by writers and not painters or cartoonists. For instance, Bohn does not pay attention to the poetic or quasi-poetic attempts of René Magritte's works which consist of words and images as depiction/description of reality. For Bohn, visual poetry means most of all literature.

Several similarities between the two books appear to be the most obvious. Although Bohn's and Stafford's studies do not eliminate notions of literary history, it is not their aim to provide its explanation. Rather, they ask how to read poetry and how to understand and find intellectual pleasure in reading poetry. The first chapter of Stafford's book concerns just this one issue, namely the experience of pleasure while reading poetry. Bohn does not write explicitly about the pleasure of reading, but he indicates how one can "play" with these peculiar puzzles consisting of images and words and, definitely, how to enjoy visual poetry. Further, both authors argue that Romantic poetry and visual poetry have ties to other arts. In the case of visual poetry it is more obvious that other arts would have a strong impact on the written word. Consequently, the act of seeing (seeing an image formed by a sequence of words, letters or phrases) would be as important as deciphering words of a poem

and reading the poem in the context in which it was written. Visual arts would add this special artistic value and special context to poetry. As Bohn claims, in the case of Romantic poetry, musical connotations are often present and thus not only can we read Romantic poetry, but also sometimes we can even hear it/listen to it. Not only can we read visual poetry, but also we can see/watch it. And, as Bohn argues in his last chapter on digital poetry, even poems which belong to visual poetry, can have musical associations.

Reading Romantic Poetry and *Reading Visual Poetry* are similar as far as their topics are considered; however, the structure of the books is slightly different. Bohn's approach is chronological and as I mention above, each chapter is a discussion and analysis of a particular poetry group that created visual poetry starting with the second decade of the twentieth century and the Spanish Ultraists. His brief analyses introduce readers to the topic and invites them to pursue further studies. However, at times I had the impression that the interpretations are lacking more elaborate explanations. At the same time, Bohn provides us with excellent paths and traces to follow and this suggests that it is the readers' responsibility to continue. Bohn's approach in taxonomy to designate visual poetry as a "game" is, in my view, important because most of the poems are indeed a sort of a linguistic game. Some are visually constructed in a way that reminds us of an optical illusion. On the other hand, however, Bohn balances between concentrating on the form and on the content of the poems. Owing to the fact that visual poetry originates in geographical regions beyond English-speaking territories, it was necessary to translate, even partly, some of the poems. We can often compare the full-length original version of the text with an English excerpt, which helps to comprehend the content and this is relevant to readers who do not know French or Spanish. Not only is Bohn a careful reader himself, but he also cares about his readers and this is why the reading of his book is entertaining along with enriching and intellectual experience.

The structure of *Reading Romantic Poetry* is defined by Stafford's focus on the perspective of intimacy, as explained above, and this is most valuable for the simple reason that Stafford returns to the importance of reading for reading's sake. The pleasure of the text, the very palpable, but also spiritual act of reading, is followed by other aspects. For instance, cultural issues Romantic poets were concerned with, the problem of solitude and friendship (or any different social connections), but also the Romantic poet as a reader. Being the reader gains a new dimension in Stafford's study and she presents a comprehensive analysis of Romantic poetry: the way she grasps connections between different poems written by different authors is smooth and thoughtful. For example, she indicates how remarkable in Romantic poetry was the theme of companionship and honor bestowed upon friends, and this is presented as an anti-thesis to solitude.

In conclusion, *Reading Romantic Poetry* and *Reading Visual Poetry* are studies which connect similarities between types of poetry across time and space. Awareness of the rich tradition in literary scholarship and a plethora of scholarly sources mark both books. Reading any text from this perspective is an extraordinarily challenging task. What is more, to read and communicate results in a way that will be noticed and appreciated is almost impossible, but in my opinion *Reading Romantic Poetry* and *Reading Visual Poetry* are successful. Although different in style and content, Stafford's and Bohn's studies share in general similar critical views and said studies advance our knowledge of poetry, a much neglected genre today, whether in scholarship or in the actual production of new texts.

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