"Let this put me   another way…"[1]:
Centring Lines in Lissa Wolsak's *Squeezed Light*
and in Other Poetry

Louis Cabri

I feel as if I've been seeing centred lines become – am I alone in this? – a popular way to formally signal on the World Wide Web that a text is poetry or poetic. Centring appears to seal online poetic value and even trump print-based aspects of poetic form: "The Rhyme of the Ancient Mariner"'s quatrains, for instance, centred. So song lyrics: online, often front and centred. And whether poem or lyric, on either side are ads for weight-loss regimes, where there used to be margins. My niece shows poems typed for school: invariably in italics, they end-rhyme centred lines.

Lissa Wolsak and a handful of other poets cause me to rethink my view of these associations that at least connote enthusiasm and are of recent (digital) origin. These are poets who activate line-centring as a literary device the way twentieth-century English-language poets activated puns: by detourning implicit consensual associations and judgements about the device. Wolsak centres lines in four of her eight poems in *Squeezed Light: Collected Poems 1994-2005* (2010), even centring one that in a previous chapbook version was left-justified. Among Wolsak's contemporaries, Karen Mac Cormack centres some lines in *Marine Snow*, and Dorothy Trujillo Lusk appears to be using them in the ongoing sequence, *Decorum*.

The poetic act of centring lines predates internet response to them, emerging from and linked to print technology history. Ronald Johnson's completed booklong poem *ARK* – almost entirely centred – was published in 1996 (Google was still in developmental stages then) and mostly written in the previous decades. In 1986, Penguin Australia published Alan Wearne's verse novel, *The Nightmarkets*, with one centred-lines chapter whose varying stanzaic forms engage several syllabic meters. The designer of Wilfred Watson's *I begin with counting* (NeWest, 1978) still remembers the work of laying-out the centred lines' vertical axes.[2] John Cage began to write vertically-spined poems ("mesostics") and Johnson to centre poems in the

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late 60s when Letraset (dry transfer decals) was part of any designer's toolkit.[3] Lionel Kearns's stacked-verse poetry of the early 1960s predates the capability of some commercial presses to easily create alignment through a vertical axis – such as Ryerson Press that used hot metal typesetting.[4] Doubleday evidently handled Norman H. Pritchard's *The Matrix: Poems 1960-1970*, which contains several centred-lines poems, among other tears for typesetters. Michael McClure's earliest published poems with centred lines date from 1956 – meaning before that ball of joy, the IBM Selectric typewriter. There are other instances of line centring (Henri Pichette's "Poème offert," 1955; Jean Cocteau's "La crucifixion," 1946 – also his 1922 "Idole" that I quote in full, below; and Apollinaire's "Du cotton dans les oreilles" published in 1918 in *Calligrammes*, one page of which centres the syllables of words into five columns) and in English an early and great example of its usage are two sections of Melvin B. Tolson's poetry book *Libretto for the Republic of Liberia* that was commissioned for the 1947 centennary of Liberia and published in the US in 1953.

One assumption I've made (evident in opening paragraph) is that a centred line doubles as an ESC key out of the history of poetry, especially the "problem" of lineation. Another of my assumptions has been that centring a line appears to move in the opposite direction of philosophical, literary, social, political and artistic values associated over the last half century or more with postmodern *de*centring (which is presumably why there's little written about centred lines and why so few poets have tried them?). If centring lines is neither a timely intervention in tune with the last half-century of critical thought, nor a historical intervention in tuned response to literary tradition (to lineation, for example), then how situate its poetic usage? My view coming out of this essay is that often (though by no means always) line-centring has formally enacted a kind of aesthetic freedom and ideal transcendence, so that instead of showing timeliness or literary-historical acuteness, line-centring has enabled a resurgent transcendentalism.

But what I want to try to do in this essay is begin to "ground" this transcendentalist effect in the experience of reading centred lines, leaving to another time (or to someone else) the greater challenge of interpreting these poems in the context of histories and philosophies of

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[3] The last three poems of Johnson's *Valley of the Many-Colored Grasses* (1969) have centred lines in all but a portion of the very last poem.

[4] It was the offset mimeo revolution of small presses like *Tish* and those that still used letterpress like *Delta* magazine that could – and did – properly set Kearns's stacked-verse poems.

transcendentalism (the USAmerican Transcendentalists, in particular, being important to many of these poets).[5] I hope to show that the centred form can itself be a kind of empirical proof for what I'm calling an optical illusion of transcendence. Features inducing such an effect include the vertical axis, the fact of centredness, geometricization of the virtual page, and, in a politically curious phrase of Johnson's, "balanced dissent" between form and shape. Having introduced these features via poems by some of the poets listed above, I'll then turn to consider how these features combine to affect syntax in a text by Lissa Wolsak – a text that offers two great "before-and-after" snapshots of a poem once justified left ("before") and now centred ("after"). I'll end by briefly returning to a theme touched-on in passing, commodity-form and line-centring.

the vertical look

The basic look of print-based poetry, in much of its English-language history, is text with flushleft margins and linebreaks. Twentieth-century poetry changes that, yes. But if page replaces line as unit of verse for Mallarmé in *Un coup de dés jamais n'abolira le hazard*,[6] then, with a keystroke one century later, centring seems to replace line *and* page and to usher-in the "immaterial" condition of online text on screen. That is because a centred line isn't framed in relation to any spatial unit larger than itself – such as the page. Centred lines are shaped in relation to each other – they themselves create the centring effects (centring is not created for them by some other frame, like the page).

A clue for me to centred lines and to their popularity lies in a recent forum post by a user of Adobe's InDesign desktop publishing software. The designer – someone whose job it is to think about page layout – writes that when poetry lines are centred words acquire such presence they float above the page.[7] The designer implies that centring organizes lines into one visual unit and lifts that unit as textual object (a poem) above and separable from page as object. A reader no longer need think about the page and spacing – that remains designer's work – since the centred poem appears to transcend its material conditions.

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[5] I note with humility that I'm imitating the same rhetoric of deferment Guy Davenport used decades ago in regards to Ronald Johnson's poetry and the Transcendentalists.

[6] Mallarmé suggests in the poem's preface that the page's white spacing around word clusters creates "une vision simultané de la Page," a simultaneous vision of the page – both recto and verso. *Cosmopolis* magazine printed a single-page layout of the poem in 1897. *Un coup de dés jamais n'abolira le hazard* was only printed following all the poet's instructions in 1914 (Drucker).

[7] In an online Adobe forum, Marian Apineda writes about lines "resulting in a floating text (poem) centered in the page, producing a superb presence."

I wonder if the act of centring arose as an incremental transformation away from the left margin or as a polytopic leap toward visualizing poem as shape. Two books with canonical roles in visual poetry suggest the latter. In George Herbert's *The Temple* (1633), centred lines appear to obtain only with "The Altar" and "Easter-Wings," even though other stanzaic forms in *The Temple* have quite elaborately-structured line-indents that verge on centred-lines appearance. "Mortification," for instance, has a six-line stanza in which the relative number of left-indents for lines 1 through 6 is 2, 0, 1, 3, 1, 0. The stanza's centred appearance is especially due to lines without indentation being longest (lines 2 and 6), and the line with the most indentation being shortest (line 4 has 3 indents). The same can be said even for Guillaume Apollinaire's usage in *Calligrammes*: that he resorts to line-centring only when doing so helps to visualize poem as representative shape. As in a calligramme, Apollinaire's occasional centred lines imitate the poem's theme or subject. Otherwise, he will never use centred lines when a variety of indented lines from the left margin will do instead.

In a year celebrated for momentous, inaugural modernist texts, including Eliot's "The Waste Land" and Joyce's *Ulysses*, 1922 also appears to mark a transition from the use of centred lines in a calligramme to their outright substitution for left-indented lines. In that year, Jean Cocteau's little poem "Idole" (Idol) was published in his poetry book *Vocabulaire*:

<div align="center">

Toutes les vieilles cicatrices

Terre

font le charme

de ta figure de guerrier

[49]

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All the old scars / Earth / make up the charm / of your warrior figure. Soundplay on the noun "terre" (earth) with the (ungrammatically-placed) verb "taire" (to hush up [e.g., the truth]; to be silent) can ironize the "charm" of this earth-as-warrior figure, seeing as the poem is published so soon after the First World War (the semantic distance between seemingly cognate words "earth" and "world" is enormous). "Idole" to my mind is transitional in that while lines are centred they

retain calligrammic traces that include the seeming slightness of the work (just four lines) and its title that embraces all the poem's elements in a symbolic image.

Melvin B. Tolson references Cocteau (Apollinaire too, incidentally) in the extensive notes to *Libretto for the Republic of Liberia*, though not Cocteau's long centred-lines poem "La crucifixion" that is reprinted in *Poèmes*, 1948 – which is the year a version of Tolson's poem was being rejected both by *Poetry* and the *Atlantic* (Farnsworth 138). Tolson's *Libretto* bristles and sparkles with innovative layouts for poems, including fully-justified prose-blocks centred away from left and right margins,[8] and centred lines. Unlike almost all poets I've read who come after Tolson and who centre their lines, Tolson's lines follow writing procedures.[9] Two of the poem's eight sections display centred lines in repeating stanzaic and rhetorical structures. Seven stanzas of eight lines each comprise the poem's first section (titled "Do," as in *do re mi*), of which lines 2 and 3, and lines 6 and 8 end-rhyme. "Do"'s structure is rhetorical too in that each stanza's line 1 is a question ("Liberia?"), 2 begins with negation ("No") that 3 and 4 elaborate on, 4 ends with a colon (the turning-point from negative to positive), 5 is an apostrophic address to the poem's subject ("You are"), and 6 through 8 expand on establishing the good character of the poem's subject. *Libretto*'s seventh section, "Ti," creates variation in stanzaic length, and retains for each stanza a similar rhetorical style of address, and where each stanza begins anew and from a different angle on the same theme, and arrives at its last line with a repeated commandment ("*Selah!*") to weigh or to measure what has just been said. One stanza from "Ti" ends:

O Peoples of the Brinks,

come with the hawk's resolve,

the skeptic's optic nerve, the prophet's *tele* verve

and Oedipus' guess, to solve

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[8] Aldon Lynn Nielsen has argued for some time that formal precedents for many poetic techniques can be found in overlooked writings by African American poets. Tolson's fully-justified prose blocks set away from left and right margins is a formal precedent for some of Ray Di Palma's poetry published decades later (for instance, *Raik*).

[9] One poet that I've read who comes after Tolson, who centres his lines, and who follows a procedure is Michael McClure in his longish poem "Man of Moderation," almost every line of which begins "I'm the" (or "I'm a") and ends "man."

the riddle of

the Red Enigma and the White Sphinx.

Selah!

[ll. 371-377]

The mounting word- and phrase-final [v]-sounds in three closely clustered nouns ("resolve," "nerve," "verve") followed by [v]-sounding transitive verb ("solve") culminate in the phrase "the riddle of" whose line-final [v] precariously balances on a mere function-word, a preposition – but whose placement on the line is rhythmically and visually imprinted in advance of its actual appearance due to preceding [v]-effects. But while there is certainty in the recognition (as in: aha! the [v] sound arrives on "of"!) the fact of when a [v]-sound will actually occur is paradoxically unpredictable in the poem, since in addition to having structure the centred lines are also in non-syllabic free verse cadences. Centring lines of varying lengths enables Tolson to vary end- and internal-rhyme placement and accent, and to insert into the line's tradition (he's reading very widely) new and greater variation in blues and jazz rhythms and intonations – than, say, a Yeatsian four-beat folk ballad quatrain might permit. But a key question for my purposes is whether these same effects of new and unpredictable rhythms and rhymes could have been created with flush-left lines, as Eliot in *Poems* (1920). That is what I'm attempting to explore, whether there's a specific poetic contribution centring lines make.

My larger point for now about centred lines is that a poem such as the *Libretto* that has centred lines but has not the shape of a represented thing (i.e., words shaped to represent altar, wings, vase, hat, necktie, rain, etc., in the calligramme tradition) still is a kind of visual poem in that it self-referentially represents the-shape-an-object-takes-with-centred-lines. I'll explain. The form of the centred line is a figural shape at the very least in a geometric sense: the reader infers from sight a centre to the line and through each line's centre a vertical axis for the poem. Left and right page margins also must be inferred when lines are centred. Left-justified lines evoke the vertical axis at the left margin – which is a sense of verticality that can be emphasized through acrostics but is otherwise conventionally a default setting or control in a poetic experiment that is focussed elsewhere (namely in the line's right endzone of linebreaks and

enjambment). A *centred* vertical axis deviates (in the literary-formalist sense) from its left-margin default setting and control role.

reading the vertical axis of a centred line

A key to the centred-line reading-experience for me is its vertical axis. The inferred and palpable presence of a vertical axis in the centred-lines poem is so strong that all the words' outer edges, on the left and on the right, coalesce to form a single verbal shape standing out from the page – hence centring-lines' proximity to concrete and visual poetry traditions.

What the conventional left margin's vertical axis of flush-left lines signals is where to begin reading. Instead of signalling a beginning, the vertical axis shifted to the centre cuts the line in half, throws reading off its adventure before or just as reading begins. That is, in a centred poem a reader has to disentangle any automatic association of a poem's vertical axis with beginnings. The long tradition of lineated verse in English tells a reader that the poetic line creates a horizontal orientation as eye moves right. Senses of verticality are added to this rightward movement each time the eye drops off the end of the line and moves down and across and back to the left again to start over with the next line (while furtively traveling up the page, as cues warrant).[10] Centring complicates this push-and-pull-forward-and-down by disconcerting reading momentum. Not only the centred line's vertical axis but its horizontal axis as well no longer automatically connects to the eye's movement rightward across the page. Here I want to introduce the idea that seeing that the line is actually centred induces a sort of optical illusion affecting orientation and directionality in reading the horizontal axis. With a centred line, the eye's movement continues rightward along the horizontal axis but must also travel leftward *even though* it already began on the left. The eye's double take leftwards is actually *backwards* against forward reading flow (which flow is conventionally to the right of the vertical axis of a poem). The eye-mind in its simultaneous movement rightwards and leftwards along the line then is able to take-in the line's look, its shape, creating a momentary stasis or "centring" in the fact of recognizing a centred line. It seems to me that one reads centred lines (a) left-to-right and (b) backwards while experiencing the jagged left as (c) a seemingly-ersatz linebreak where (d) one is in fact supposed to begin (again).

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[10] William Watkin constructs a hermeneutic square of four movements based on the act of reading the eye's motion over a page of lineated poetry. See his blog entry for lineation, inspired by Agamben's essay "The End of the Poem."

Reading, not just looking at, this shape, calls up some basic questions. The centred line breaks at both ends. Do the ends work as linebreaks? A longstanding productive feature of left justification is (rhythmical, semantic) tension created between syntax and line. Do centred lines increase or dissipate that tension? In short, how does centring's shape alter sense?

geometry vs field

While I've suggested that the centred line and its vertical axis are proximate to a literary tradition like the pattern poem, a centred line doesn't belong exclusively to any particular tendency. To say that form is "neutral" in this way, however, isn't to say that a centred line (for example) has an essence that can exist *without* belonging to a particular poetic tendency; rather, it is to say that a centred line can be contested by belonging to more than one specific tendency. This is evident in the mid-century disputes between "closed" and "open" verse when a few poets implicitly start to ask: Are centred lines part of a literary inheritance of "closed" forms (sonnet, villanelle, etc.) or can they be put to use in an "open" form poetics? For poets working from Charles Olson's ideas about "projective" verse circa 1950, could centred lines help to score the page so as to enact what "open" often means to signal, the time and qualities of speaking? Olson's promotion of "multiple margins" of variable lengths, of forward slashes, of open parentheses, and of other features within the poet's purview thanks to the typewriter, all help to score speech. Centring lines is not among them.

It is with Olson's concern for discovering the situated realities of a speech-based measure that the early Frank Davey objects to centred lines – for whom a centred vertical axis seems to imply Neoplatonism. Davey's essay in *Tish* 3 (1961), "The Problem of Margins," confirms the immaterial quality of centred lines that the designer I cite above lauds, and the challenges of reading centred lines summarized in my last section.

Disputes over "closed"- and "open"-form poetries partly focus on breaking down – or on breaking open – elements of the page, including the normative status that the left margin has had of indicating where lines begin. For instance, Olson's poem "ABCs" (written 1946) deflates the left margin's traditionally elevated literary status: "The word forms / on the left: you must / stand in line…" (*Collected* 171). Like Olson, Davey urges poets to "admit margins" as a variable determined by where the line of type begins – implication being that it should no longer be expected to always start on the far left. Enter the problem of a centred vertical axis:

– poems which do not admit margins, are dead /

are unreal,   viz. poems whose lines are

balanced on a central axis as

   Herbert's "The Altar"

   Thomas's "Vision and Prayer"

to give geometry to a poem is to escape reality

    is to abstract

    is to lose the poem

   in a Mondrianesque tautology

…………………………………………………………………………………

A line moves either in one direction or nowhere at all. It cannot go

two ways at once.

             [*TISH No. 1-19*, 66]

In conserving "one direction" only – rightwards – for the reading act, Davey rejects the optical illusion of bi-directionality induced by centred lines (he says a line "cannot go two ways at once": the line in composition-by-field is a Heraclitean river). Davey dispenses with conceiving of the page as a geometry of intersecting vertical and horizontal axes, favouring instead the page metaphorically conceived of as field (as in Williams's "field of action" and Olson's act of "composition by field," and as abetted by Duncan's eponymous phrasing, "the opening of the field").

performing the vertical axis of "stacked verse"

  Conversely to Davey's position on centred lines, the early Lionel Kearns dispenses with conceiving of the page as "field" and prefers instead thinking of the frame of the poem as a

geometry of horizontal and vertical axes – on the promise that structural linguistics will disclose how to represent "real speech." Kearns finds a brilliant way to have centred lines help score a page so as to enact the time of speaking. Let me set up Kearns's idea of stacked verse by showing that one can perceive in the inferred vertical axis of centred lines the faintest palimpsest of the medial caesura of Anglo-Saxon verse in print. Usually the medial caesura is thought of in temporal speech-based terms as indicating a pause, which it does, but visually it also infers something like a centre to the line, as in Earle Birney's satiric "AngloSaxon Street" (1942) that opens:

> Dawndrizzle ended   dampness steams from
>
> blotching brick and   blank plasterwaste   [74]

Here the movement of line-boundaries is as much from line-to-line as from caesura-to-caesura – or they at least contest each other for line-boundary determinations through (vertical-tending) enjambment and between (horizontal distichs of) alliteration.

For Kearns, the route to the pre-Gutenberg era of accentual metre is a circuitous one through modern linguistics and free verse (and through free verse co-terminants such as sprung rhythm).[11] In the early 1960s, Kearns invents a "stacked-verse" stanzaic form organized around a central "stress axis" descending vertically through the one primary-accented syllable on each line. That is, by writing (by "measuring" out) one utterance per line, Kearns apportions one primary accent per line. "Utterance," here, is not part of casual speech but is a linguistic hypothesis that delineates the formal unit for measuring speech, the one proposed by post-Bloomfieldian linguists George Trager and Henry Lee Smith, Jr., whom Kearns follows closely. Trager and Smith define the utterance as a minimal unit of speech whose perceptible features are that it can be heard to begin and end and to have one syllable louder than the other syllables in the same utterance (the loudest syllable is the one designated as having the primary accent). Kearns takes this linguistic unit – which in the aural free-verse preponderance of his poetic

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milieu he says his contemporaries are using "unconsciously" (Kearns, *TISH No. 1 - 19*, 338) – as the basis of his poetic line. One could say, for instance, that there are four utterances, two per line, in the excerpt from Birney's "AngloSaxon Street" (cited above).

Since utterances naturally vary in length (as do the number of character-spaces they take up on a printed line), and since primary stress will likely occur on a different syllable-place along the length of every utterance, the stress-axis won't vertically pass through the centre of the lines. What the vertical stress-axis centres is the regular *beat* of the poem's oral performance on the ear: stacked-verse is isochronous, every line, regardless of its length, scored to be roughly of equivalent performed duration, Kearns's ambition for stacked-verse being "to correlate page lay-out and oral delivery" (ibid. 338) with a notation system for his speech idiom.

A mimeographed saddle-stitched chapbook of Kearns's stacked-verse poems, published by Tish Books in 1963, *Songs of Circumstance*, helpfully shows the stress-axis drawn in for all poems. Figure 1 reproduces the poem "Process" from the chapbook (first published in *Tish* 14 [1962]). When "Process" was republished in *TISH No. 1-19* (1975), a vertical line was not drawn to indicate stress-axes. Without a line drawn in, the stacked-verse method of composition at work in the poem becomes somewhat imperceptible, I think – unless, that is, a reader hears each line as a linguistic utterance and is able to discern that there is a vertical string of vowels taking the primary stress. In a further reduction in perceptibility of Kearns's poetic method of composition, and presumably because centring each stanza around its stress-axis was "a printer's nightmare" (ibid. 339), "Process" and all other stacked-verse poems collected in Kearns's *Pointing* (Ryerson Press, 1967) appear entirely left-justified. One has to remember that for the early Kearns a poem is not realized on the page, but in performance.

not performing the vertical axis of "number-grid poems"

For Wilfred Watson as for Kearns, performance realizes poem. Unlike Kearns's stacked-verse, Watson's "number-grid poems" create a massive disjunction between what the eye sees on the page and what the ear would hear were the poem to be aurally performed. What the eye sees is a vertical axis of numbers – 1 through 9 – per stanza, and, on either side of each number, a slot (the exception is number 9 that has only one slot). Each slot is either filled with a word or phrase,

or left empty. But this elaborate visual layout doesn't notate a score for performance.[12] Visual layout doesn't in any way affect syntax – sentence structure is normative (even the boustrophedon that occurs in some poems doesn't affect the syntax – which one merely reads from right to left instead). In performance, only the words are spoken, and the words, for the most part, are slotted to serve the fundamental functions of English sentence structure: Subject-Verb-Object.[13]

Watson's number-grid poetry denies a reader the identification of a correlation between shape and sense – and usually to achieve such an identification is the artful purpose of shape. By virtue of not performing the vertical axis, and of not using the other visual elements as performance-cues, the sense of Watson's number-grid poems transcends their shape, and appears to exist in an originary way as if without derived material shape at all, except for in the mouths of his performers.

centred line & page frame

My underlying question is: How does centring's shape alter sense? The relationship of centred lines to the frame of the actual page should bring this question closer.

What centred lines centre – first and foremost – is each line in relation to every other line, not each line in relation to the page. A poem with centred lines needn't be centred on the page but can be set off to the left or right on it.

There are two limit cases of this, the first occurring when centred lines are centred on the page to create visual symmetry. Ronald Johnson's "*ARK* 55: The ABC Spire" consists of 26 square-shaped poems centred on the page, the last being:

Z I

O N

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[12] The exception are those poems that notate a score for performance in a preliminary way, in that they have double numbers per stanza – two sets of numbers 1s (i.e., four potential slots for words or phrases), of number 2s, etc. My understanding is that such poems are to be performed by two voices simultaneously.

[13] It may be useful to consider Watson's numbered "slots" for grammatical functions in relation to K.L. and E.G. Pike's tagmemic linguistics. A question to answer would be whether Watson was familiar with their work.

The dipthong that the linebreak highlights allows one to hear an aural pun, "Zzzzz… I yawn": so free from hardship in the promised land, one drowsily awakes at leisure. The lines create the visual symmetry of two letters per line; the letters create the aural symmetry of alternating the order of consonants and vowels. To perceive a square-shaped poem centred on the page and exhibiting symmetry is to witness a live demonstration of the primary disappearing-act of centring lines: what disappears is, to use an Erin Moure locution, the material frame of the page as a situated and active element of the composition. While a centred relation to the frame of the page undeniably remains present here, its effect is paradoxically (like magic!) to have the poem appear to transcend it. Symmetry, when doubled, cancels out: page symmetry + poem symmetry = no symmetry!; or 1 + 1 = 0. What appears instead is the frameless frame of the word-form, perceptible because spatialized into its constituent elements as four letters on two lines read in a zed pattern.

A second limit case occurs when a poem has but one letter per centred line, where syntax goes completely vertical, as in Norman H. Pritchard's "Point":

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Unlike Johnson's square, "Point"'s single column of downward-legible letters can't be placed in symmetrical relations with each other (I'm excluding words-within-words, such as "esse" and "sent" in "essential," which appear accidental to me because the poem doesn't insist that we recognize them). "Point" combines and thereby contrasts verticality with syntax. Effects remain syntactical: between verb and noun (in the word "point"), absence and presence (the rhetorical form of making a point, asserted then withdrawn), ideal transcendence and concrete example (essence and existence).

It might seem to be reaching a third limit, the limit of the absurd, for me to engage a redundancy by asking whether centred square-shaped poems might have been indented to the centre of the page, rather than centred. But doing so gets me to minute mechanics. What about these lines:

How to inquire

within the fire?

["Beam 11, *Finial*"]

Centred or indented? The difference of two character-spaces between them (sixteen in the second line, fourteen in the first) is not perceptible because spacing is proportional (page set by computer, not typewriter[14]). Earlier in *ARK* the same words appear this way:

How to inquire

within

the fire?

["Beam 3"]

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[14] Wikipedia says the Selectric II that IBM put out in 1971 did allow for the insertion of an additional letter between two letters.

In the two-line version above, the syntactic form of the question predominates, while the finer play of sound elicited by the prepositional function-word "within" is not as audible (to me). In contrast, giving prominence to the word "within" by centring it solo in the three-line version, makes perceptible the patterning of short-i (/ɪ/) and long-i (/aɪ/) sounds: "inqu<u>i</u>re / w<u>ithin</u> / … f<u>i</u>re." To be more exact, however, the connection remains only weakly perceptible to me, that is, between heightening the visual patterning of sound, and line-centring, since it would seem that left-justified lines – i.e.:

> How to inquire
>
> within
>
> the fire?

– italicized or not, create a similar effect of heightened soundplay just due to "within" being on its own line. Nevertheless, there's one additional element that the centred lines have: the greater visual and spatial proximity to each other of the words "inquire" and "within" in the centred version increases the noticeability of soundplay. In this example, then, spatial proximity on the page is brought about by centring the lines. This next example shows how such spatial proximity is an outcome of the lines being centred in relation to each other, and not vice versa.

Aspects of *ARK* demonstrate what Robert Zend coined as the letter-drop poem.[15] In a letter-drop, letters inside words vertically line-up with the same letters inside completely different words on a previous or subsequent line. Spatial proximity of the letters on the page is key to perceiving the letter-drop device. But in Johnson's *ARK*, ensuring that lines remain centred in relation to each other is key, even when using letter-drop. When letters in one word are found in another word on the next line, the identical letters in each word are not vertically aligned with each other so as to lay bare the letter-drop device. Letter-clusters "or" and "ra" in the word "orchestra" drop down and repeat themselves in the next line by forming words "flor" and "rayd" respectively; looking closely, the "or" of "flor" does not vertically align with the "or" of "orchestra."

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[15] Vertically-aligned lettering – the letter-drop – is a dominant practice in much of bpNichol's poetry as well as Zend's, among others. For an introduction to Zend's poetry, see Cain.

of

orchestra

flor   rayd

chest

[“ARK 39, *The Roswell Spire*”]

The centring principle overrides – just by a touch – letteral alignment – which is enough to confirm that centring dematerializes the page, de-emphasizing it as a framing literary device.

optical illusion of transcension

I've been arguing that vertical and horizontal axes shape a centred line. To put this another way, centring is empirical proof for the existence of a whole other virtual page that completely covers over the material page by way of a structural geometry of intersecting horizontal and vertical axes and coordinates governing the placement of text.

The virtual or "transcendental" page has always been there, form infusing matter, the rules determined by technologies and economies of writing and printing. But now in the internet age the isomorphism seems complete and the virtual page become manifest. Matter has only form: centred form.

Nineteenth-century advertisers and printers made the leap toward visualizing the page when they began to divide up the text like real estate in order to find pleasing proportions (of balance, etc.) with the help of a hidden grid-work of intersecting vertical and horizontal axes. Johanna Drucker remarks how Mallarmé's *Un coup de dés jamais n'abolira le hazard* is in a visual dispute with these same commercial interests that are thinking about economies of space and type. Figure 2 reproduces (from Drucker's *The Visible Word*) an advertiser's page which looks like the geometric skeleton of a text-soon-to-be-poem with centred lines. Seeing as this grid form is a virtual reproduction of – and as valued as, if not more real than – the material page, there is a structural homology waiting to be reflexively acknowledged, between frame of page, and culture-as-commerce / commerce-as-culture. The entire page is cognitively mapped-

out in advance for commercial purposes, yet, contained elements of surprise and unpredictability remain at the level of the line, not because there are routes of escape (there are no routes of escape: the commodity form cannot be escaped) but because verbal play is permitted. The allegory that centred lines tell, then, from this historical distance afforded by (afforded by!) their visual shape, is that of the aesthetic object attempting to transcend the materiality of its commoditized production.

"balanced dissent"

Johnson's *ARK* demonstrates a high cultural literacy in literary form, indebted more to Zukofsky than Olson in musical phrasing, complex literary allusion, linguistic play (phonic and visual punning, rhythmical variation in the centred line, unpredictable punctuation placement, etc.). I need to make just one point about Johnson's use of centred lines, a feature of *ARK* that is key to any consideration of centred lines. Rather than central, balanced and symmetrical, Johnson creates all sorts of *imbalanced* effects with and between centred lines. His lines create (despite the allusion to the symmetries of Popeian rhyme in this quote) "balanced dissent: / enlightenment — on abysm bent." (BEAM 2), or to use a Shelleyean phrase (picked up by Guy Davenport in his essay on Johnson), Johnson's centred lines create "harmonious disarray."[16] It's going to be difficult for a line-centring poet to shake-loose harmony and balance from dissent and disarray, as the next section tries to show.

form vs shape

In contrast to Johnson's highly literate form, and his accompanying playful imbalances in rhythm, syntax, and length of centred line, the beginning of "RANT BLOCK," a 1961 poem by Michael McClure, declares there's a distinction to be made between "form" and what he calls "shape." While I take McClure's distinction implicitly to refer to *poetry*'s form versus its shape, more importantly for his poetics, I think, is that it refer to *being*'s form versus being's shape. The idea of being's form would seem to entail a metaphysical proposition, whereas being's shape entails a physical proposition.

THERE IS NO FORM BUT SHAPE! NO LOGIC BUT SEQUENCE!

---

[16] I'm grateful to Andre Furlani's essay on Johnson for bringing Shelley's expression to my attention (Furlani 95).

SHAPE the cloak and being of love, desire, hatred,

hunger. BULK or BODY OF WHAT WE ARE AND STRIVE

FOR. ((OR

[*The New Book* 31]

McClure's poems often offer the reader an experience of sequentiality that isn't predominantly governed by an argument's logical development (there are significant exceptions, as even in the passage above and as poems such as "Poisoned Wheat" or "Listen Lawrence" make plain). The units of sequentiality in his poems are centred line and sentence. Units of sequentiality without logical development can be generated just by centring a line, an act that arrests (as I've suggested) the reader's forward and downward propulsion through the linebreak. With arrested forward motion, the reader then notices the line, that it is centred. To imagine the line as a shape is not difficult to do when the line is centred, but McClure intends more by "shape" than looking at the line. Much in the way that the vertical shape of Kearns's stress-axis is not only for the reader's eye but is meant to audibly mark the isochronous beat in a performance of the poem, McClure associates "shape" not only with the look of centred lines on the page but with gesture off the page. His texts' gesture is toward gestures beyond the page, embodied in performance, in being ("BODY OF WHAT WE ARE"); his texts don't enact gesture projectively or proprioceptively on the page. An early reviewer of the 1974 longpoem *Rare Angel* (and the only writer in a 1975 symposium on McClure to comment then and as far as I can tell since then on his line-centring) writes that his centred lines have "the axis of a dervish, but then spin is not of one direction, and they never land in a *normal* place" (Southern 29). Here the reviewer imagines the centred-lines poem to three-dimensionally spin like a top on its gravitational axis (i.e., the vertical axis created by centred lines) much as would the shape of an upright human body that spins around like a dancer: a visual projection, into four dimensions, and a gestural embodiment, of the poem's geometric properties of shape.

Further along in "RANT BLOCK," McClure makes the anti-aesthetic declaration that, in contrast to shape (and in contrast to gesture), "FORM IS AN EVASION!" (31).[17] McClure elaborates on the form versus shape distinction in a 1959 letter to Olson. In his writing "that comes from the pre-anagogic desire centers – there is nothing to cling to in its shape save the morphological fact on the page. […] The existence of physiological writing is not to fill a form of false beauty. [...] My writing deals with morphology (mine), physiology, and Sight and Senses" (*Scratching* 99-100). McClure's syntactic form of sentence does, however, favour direct address (he doesn't "evade" the English-language sentence structure of Subject-Verb-Object, nor does he leave a part or two of speech incomplete – as in the rhetorical feints of Bob Perelman, John Ashbery, or Lissa Wolsak). Formal decisions do – as they must – organize sentence-breaks, informing the shape of his line. These formal decisions are purposefully not as playfully cultured and literary as one finds in Johnson, nonetheless they are formal decisions. For instance, note the repeated /eɪ/ sound that opens (SH*A*PE) and closes (h*a*tred) and thereby forms (informs) the second line with a symmetry and balance to complement the default visual symmetry and balance found in any centred line. Note also the reversal from final place in line 2 to initial place in line 3 of the /h/ sound and trochaic rhythm of "hatred, / hunger." Finally, note the visual and phonic euphony in the fourth line, "FOR ((OR," which compensates for, and downplays the syntactic imbalance created by double-open parentheses. These formal decisions are in effect decisions about shape as well. What McClure wants to avoid by "form" is literary allusion.[18] McClure's language-elements exist in relations of "balanced dissent" between syntax and line, and with a snappily curtailed vocabulary to boot, while absent from them for the most part is the predominance of form as literary allusion as one finds that practiced – to contrastive ends, one aesthetic, one political – in Johnson's *ARK* and Tolson's *Libretto*.

for a centred defense of being

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[17] For McClure, there is an uncharacteristic irony this poem displays, between "form" as practiced presumably by a gay poet like Duncan (form playfully replete with literary allusions) – which McClure feminizes in a seeming derogatory way by associating with decorativeness ("EVASION") – and "shape" which he will connect with what he calls "meat science" elsewhere. McClure dedicates several poems to Duncan and emerges from the same San Francisco scenes.

[18] Despite McClure's preference for the term "shape" over that of "form," the extent to which he does not pull form completely away from shape becomes evident when his verse is compared with Wilfred Watson's. In Watson's number-grid poems (desribed above), form and shape are pulled apart at a fundamental level due to the massive disjunction they establish between page-as-score and sense.

Relations between form and shape in centred lines come to the fore in the publishing history of one of Lissa Wolsak's *Squeezed Light* poems. So I'd like to compare the flush-left chapbook version of "A Defence of Being, First Ana," to the centred-lines *Squeezed Light* version. In Allen Fisher's Spanner imprint, the opening lines look like this:

> brilliance of
>
> neighbourhoods still ling-
>
> ered on earth, tell not
>
> my own dream to me

In *Squeezed Light*, however, these lines are not just centred – with the touch of a key – on the page like this:

<div align="center">

brilliance of

neighbourhoods still ling-

ered on earth, tell not

my own dream to me

</div>

They are altered to look so:

<div align="center">

Brilliance of

neighbourhoods

still lingered

on earth

</div>

Tell not

my own

dream to me

To what extent does the act of centring require, or entail – bring about, make possible – these additional changes, such as the capital first letter to the first word of every stanza (the B in "Brilliance," the T in "Tell"), the one less punctuation mark (the comma), the altered linebreaks, the stanza now divided in two, shape altering sense? In other parts of the poem, words change.

Hyphenating the word "ling- / ered" is radiant with suggestion. A rough durational unit in phonology, the mora, derives from Latin for "linger," "delay." To hyphenate this word emphasizes not only the word's semantic richness but the rhythm of the first four equal beats (in Kearns's terms, primary accents):

/

brilliance of

/   /

neighbourhoods still ling-

/

ered on earth, tell not

In that hyphenated word, we linger over the idea of neighbourhood. We cling to this idea, as the rhythm of these four beats, awkwardly balanced on three lines, eventually is interrupted after the caesura in the third line by another rhythm. The word "lingered" divides syllables, which heightens phonic and visual qualities of the words in the first two lines, the perceptibility of verbal patterning. Sound-wise, for instance, the short vowel in "still" and the nasal vowel in "ling-" carry forward the same short vowel followed by nasal dipthong in "brilliance" (line 1). Visually, the word-fragment "ered" creates a visual pun on "red." When semantically extended

to the political imaginary of the poem, "ered" / red reinforces the statement-level of these lines that reference the passing of the idea of neighbourhood (the "brilliance of / neighbourhoods" here attributed to social values derived from a "red" or left-leaning politics). When semantically extended to the colour palette, "ered" enriches the metaphor of earth (red earth) and the relation these lines assert between the idea of neighbourhood and that of earth (culture and nature connect, for once). Sound and visual patterning combine when the three instances in lines 1-2 of the consonantal /l/ – in "brilliance," "still," and "ling-" – is carried forward in "tell" by virtue of "tell"'s visual proximity on the page as part of line 3. Linebreaks also help to induce the perceptibility of patterning: spondaic "tell not" is reinforced by spondaic "still ling-." Breaking "ling-" and "ered" somewhat elides the hard /g/ sound in "lingered": readers will likely add it regardless, but the break shows the notational limits of orthography. There is also a reversal from opening dactyls in lines 1 ("brilliance of") and 2 ('neighbourhoods") to anapests in lines 3 ("ered on earth") and 4 (my own dream"). All this complexity is "the stuff of poetry" as readers have come to understand the materiality of poetic language. This is, poetically, the idea of a neighbourhood.

An idea that the book version of the poem will mourn the loss of, it turns out. For remarkably, almost all these effects – which, to repeat a mantra of poetry, heighten perceptibility of poetic pattern – are absent from the centred-lines version published eight years later in *Squeezed Light*:

<div align="center">

Brilliance of

neighbourhoods

still lingered

on earth

Tell not

my own

dream to me

</div>

The opening four-beat rhythm is now contained to a first stanza rather than dispersed across three lines. The contrastive beat of a spondee (two stressed syllables in a row) neatly begins at a second stanza where because of the stanza-break one might expect a change to occur anyway. The first word of every stanza begins with a capital letter, and these first two stanzas now confirm the sentence-form as stanzaic unit of the poem (in the chapbook, no letters are capitalized at all, not even in the title, except for the first letters of the author's and epigraphist's names). In the book version, once again the visual look of the centred poem asserts itself, so that one notices how the syntax has been combed and straightened, each line compartmentalizing a part of the sentence form (subject, verb, predicate). There are just over twice as many stanzas in the book version (23 to 11), confirming an overall neatening-up by way of division into discrete sentence-units, parts of speech. In the book version, poem-shape has been simplified into a figure of geometry, centred lines manifesting the grid-work of the virtual page. The material seams of textuality, key to the left-justified "neighbourhood version," rendered more seamlessness.

Effects on syntax are marked. It seems to me that a fair assumption to make about hyphenated words in a left-justified, right-ragged poem, is that they would heighten attention to twists and turns – to the knottiness – of syntax in the lines. A hyphenated word breaks the word-form into its component elements, elements that can then syntactically combine in more than one way ("ling- / ered," "ling- / ual," etc.), thereby heightening surprise. It turns out there are four times as many words hyphenated in the flush-left than in the centred version,[19] which suggests that syntax in the flush-left version is knottier, as indeed in respects described above it is.

What about other indicators of combed or shaggy – to borrow Dante's terms and to apply them not to words but to – syntax? What about commas? Stein famously disliked commas because for her they created a hierarchical society out of the syntax: commas are the hired coat checks of wealthy clauses that can effortlessly come and go because of them. While commas in a left-justified, right-ragged poem heighten attention to the twists and turns of clauses throughout the lines, they don't necessarily heighten overall syntactic knottiness (resistance) but in fact might lessen it, as Stein suggests, by creating order that brings efficiency to the clauses class. It

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[19] There are eight hyphenations in the flush-left version: "ling- / ered" (p. 1); "re- / turning" (3); "re- / founded" (6); "stone- / petal" (7); "con- / fusedly" (7); "hemi- / spheric" (9); "heck- / led" (9); "atom- / tagging" (10). There are two hyphenations in the centred version: "stone-pet- / al" (176); "atom- / tagging" (182).

turns out there are almost three times as many commas in the centred-lines version (45 to 16). What are they doing? They are helping to comb-out syntax form. Interestingly, however, a comma at the end of a line creates visual imbalance, because a comma tips reading forward with syntactic momentum, whereas a centred line without punctuation at its end (nor at its beginning) invites a reader to dwell on centredness. Comma at the end of a centred line is an instance of "balanced dissent" between syntax and line.

But even with an increased number of commas in the centred-lines version, rarely are the clauses cleanly segmented or segmentable: Wolsak's syntax is not so "combed" as to be unabashedly normative like Watson's. This is a significant point. The job of Wolsak's commas cannot be summed up by the following exemplary instance of clean semantic parsing, from Johnson's *ARK* :

O

Tree

into the World,

Man

[Beams 21, 22, 23, *The Song of Orpheus*]

where the comma ensures that a reader will read but will not count as significant the phrase "World Man."[20]

Now compare these flush-left lines of Wolsak's:

after the

anguish of becoming

what one resists

---

[20] The words of these lines open Johnson's *Radi Os* (I am grateful to Steve Collis for reminding me of this), which fact reinforces their structural difference from the latter work. The spatial layout of words in *Radi Os* evoke the ghosted spatial structure of the pages of an 1892 edition of Milton's *Paradise Lost*. The spatial layout of words in "Beams 21, 22, 23, *The Song of Orpheus*"evokes its own structure as a poem with centred lines.

so what

specious rule-pkg […] [6]

with their centred version:

After the anguish of

becoming what one

resists,

so what

specious rule-pkg […]

[173]

The comma eases (it emphasizes) the forward motion of syntax. Without the comma, when centred, "so what" would rest in the look of itself as a complete phrase, synonymous with units of expression such as "who cares." With the comma, when centred, reading "so what" as synonymous with "who cares" still holds, but in addition, can be read as synonymous with "therefore what" because the latter's causality ("therefore") abets the comma's forward push. Left-justified, there is less danger of losing one of these two readings of the phrase "so what." Centred, the role of the comma is both to preserve sense as the line's shape is altered (from left-justified to centred) and adjust for the sense the centred arrangement of lines suggests.

In the centred lines, the comma in the lines "resists, / so what" helps to ensure that the "w" in "what" isn't read as typo for the "t" in "that" ("resists / so that"). Here Wolsak's comma exacts a syntactic difference functionally-identical to Tolson's first comma inserted in the lines

All cultures crawl

walk hard

fall,

flout

under classes under

Lout,

[ll. 304-309]

Tolson's comma directs a reader away from hearing the phrase "fall / flat" – which is the more predictable syntactic direction for these lines at this juncture to take. In both poet's cases in these examples, contra Stein, the comma doesn't facilitate clean semantic parsing for greater "combed" and predictable phrasings like "resists / so that" and "fall / flat." So if Wolsak's syntax is – though diminished – still comparatively "shaggy" (and it is), then what has really changed in the centred version?

In the centred version, the ordering of words (the syntax) creates balanced dissent (via euphony) that *alters the sense*. Left-justified, "anguish of becoming" on its own line is a redolent phrase, "of becoming" unmistakably bound to "anguish," particularly given the suspended definite article in the previous line ("after the") which sets-up the reader to expect completion of a noun-phrase ("the / anguish"). The centred lines version breaks the phrase "anguish of becoming" into "After the anguish of / becoming what one" so that the semantic impact of the original phrase is entirely lost among dominant line-balancing-and-centring assonantal effects – in line 1, of the a-sounds (/æ/) in "After" and "anguish" that create two identical dactyls, and in line 2, of the "uh"-sounds (/ʌ/) in "bec<u>o</u>ming what one [pronounced "w<u>u</u>n"]" that also create a balanced line. The centred version drops the philosophy of becoming evoked in the phrase "the / anguish of becoming" for a more combed-out straightforward syntax where "becoming" is simply a verb of transformative action but one that *won't change certain fundamental (socio-historically and ideologically pinned-down) relations of being*. In the centred-lines book version, the anguish of becoming what one resists is much more pronounced – literally, pronounced. That is, eight years later, in the centred version, there is historically no longer a distance afforded by irony (after the anguish, the indifference of "so what") or cynicism (anguish – so what). There is available *only*, *exclusively*, luxury goods of euphonious sound, in an aesthetics desiring to

transcend hardships that otherwise cannot be socially resolved – and exactly because of widespread utter impoverishment. To quote the italicized epigraph to Wolsak's poem: "whoever endures a moment of the void either receives the supernatural bread or falls" (Simone Weil).

A centred line tends to create symmetries out of its elements, centred on the line itself rather than on propulsion through it, while syntax can work against symmetries by tipping forward and down – and hyphenation, and commas in line-final position, can help and hinder that tipping. Wolsak's centred lines gravitate toward poise in two ways: rhythmically, by giving phrases and clauses their own lines (thereby creating durational balances between phrases much like Kearns's unit of line-as-utterance); euphonically, by allowing for assonance between vowels usually at the start and end of the line (as with McClure). This gravitational pull toward a balanced centre in each line is nonetheless offset by syntactic feints forward – not to the extent of Ashbery or Perelman (think of the great rhetorical feints in *First World*, for instance, where line after line promises an advancement that is often never achieved). In this respect I must correct an impression I may have left: in "A Defense of Being, First Ana," the sentence-form is not fleshed out to the extent that it is in the opening two stanzas that I've examined above. For all its combed-out centring, Wolsak's syntax at the stanzaic sentence level remains knotty and resistant to normative grammatico-syntactic patterning. On the one hand, the formation of statements is often syntactically elusive (unlike in McClure, for instance); yet on the other hand, syntax propels the line forward and down, in spite of statemental disjunctures. This forward-moving effect of syntax is also partly created by poem-expanding vocabulary – which suggests that the forward movement of syntax is as much a movement through (or along) a paradigmatic axis of word-selecting as it is a movement along the horizontal axis of the syntax proper. In Wolsak's poems with centred lines, I get the sense that the stanzaic sentence heroically maintains itself despite the many lines, so much so that it seems the stanza could expand indefinitely outward, because the interruptive breaks within the lines enable an equal expansion to occur paradigmatically "inward" into vocabulary.

alternative syntaxes

Karen Mac Cormack's poems with centred lines in *Marine Snow* often acquire balanced dissent by adding a period to the end of each line, so that each line internalizes sentence form: her lines contain syntax, rather than her syntax contains lines (as is conventionally the case). On

the few occasions when there isn't a period at line end, as in the poem "Unspoken Isn't Invisible," clauses are organized by line so as to achieve formal balance: for instance, the parallelism of lines 2 and 3 that end on unstressed syllables that are prepositions:

A stiff pageant.

Leather's not a locus come to

or compass points apart from

the antidote to sleep.

[41]

While Mac Cormack's line swallows syntax by the sentence, Dorothy Trujillo Lusk's line spits syntax out – and tries even to expunge it from inside words. In Lusk's centred poems in the ongoing sequence *Decorum*, it is the parts of words that recreate syntax's ordering principles in their own image, an order that often extends only as far as the word-form's boundaries, and usually only as far as the word-fragment. Without syntax ordering words into phrases, words and word-parts appear to be pasted onto centred horizontal spaces formerly called lines, suggesting collage technique.

p a n a x

Retreaxelle

w o m

p o u t

neutricidic   frustrum

since   1852

["Sclebiscite" 41]

Playing both sides of the root meanings of *pharmakon* – poison and cure – Lusk's letter-play includes neologisms reminiscent of product names ("Retreaxelle"), word-form play (including inter-letter spacing that challenges word boundaries, but also the mashing of different word-form possibilities into one), and word fragmentation and recombination that would be reminiscent of early Grenier and Coolidge if only they had had Shoppers Drug Mart and an advertiser's branding imperative for their sub-word sound and letter transformations.

As with the last third of Johnson's *ARK* (he's writing centred tercets), collage doesn't seem to need, as much, a descriptive argument like the one I've made here about "how to read" centred lines. Effectively Lusk's centred-lines usage in *Decorum* has no truck with transcendentalist directions for the aesthetic dimension of poetry, and I offer her ongoing text as a sobering centring within the verbal pharmacy of the commodity-form – which from the vantage of nineteenth-century advertisers and publicists, centred lines never left.

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Fig. 1 First page of Lionel Kearns's 1963 chapbook, with vertical lines drawn by poet.
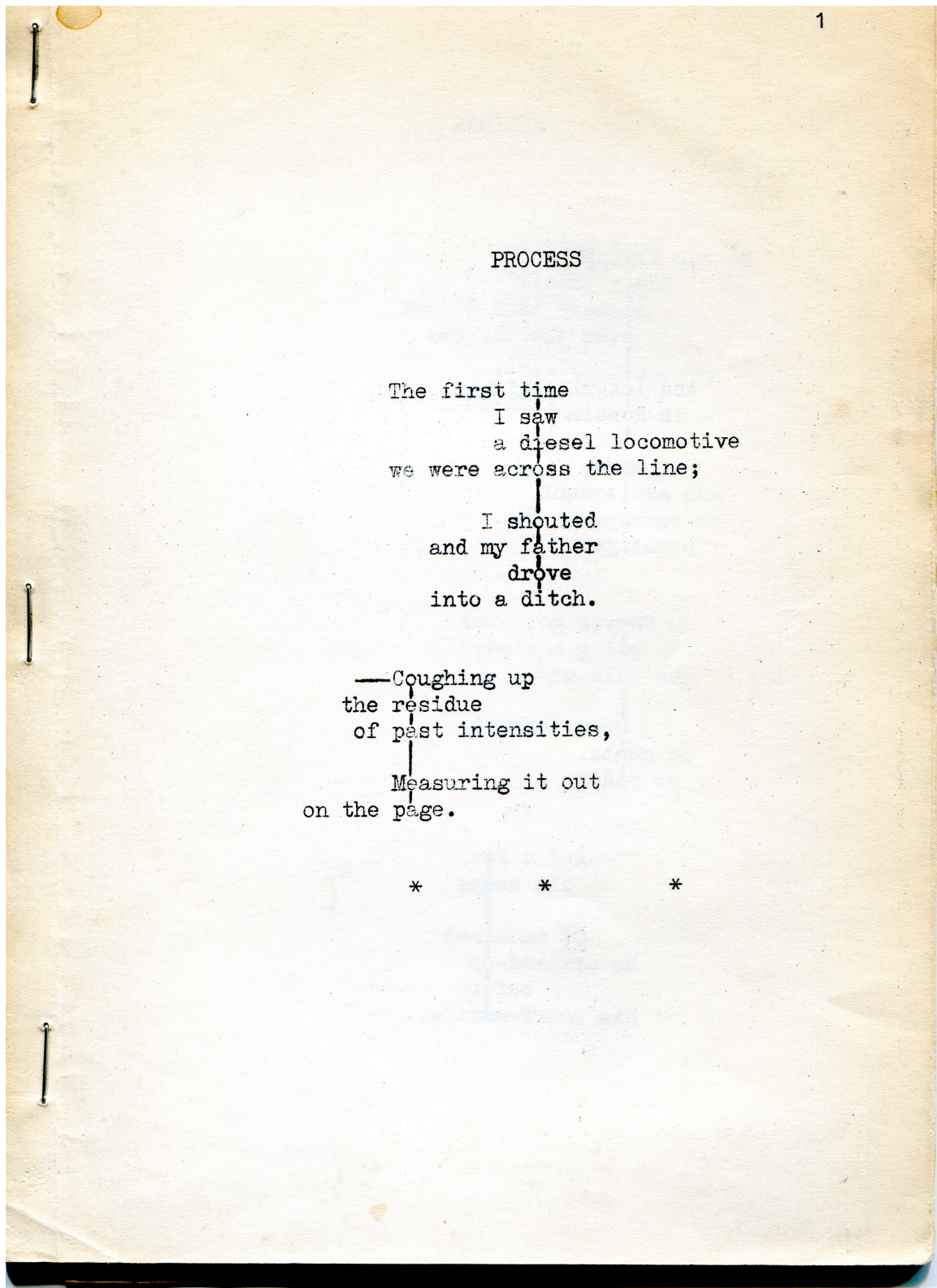

1

PROCESS

The first time
        I saw
            a diesel locomotive
we were across the line;

        I shouted
    and my father
            drove
        into a ditch.

——Coughing up
    the residue
     of past intensities,

        Measuring it out
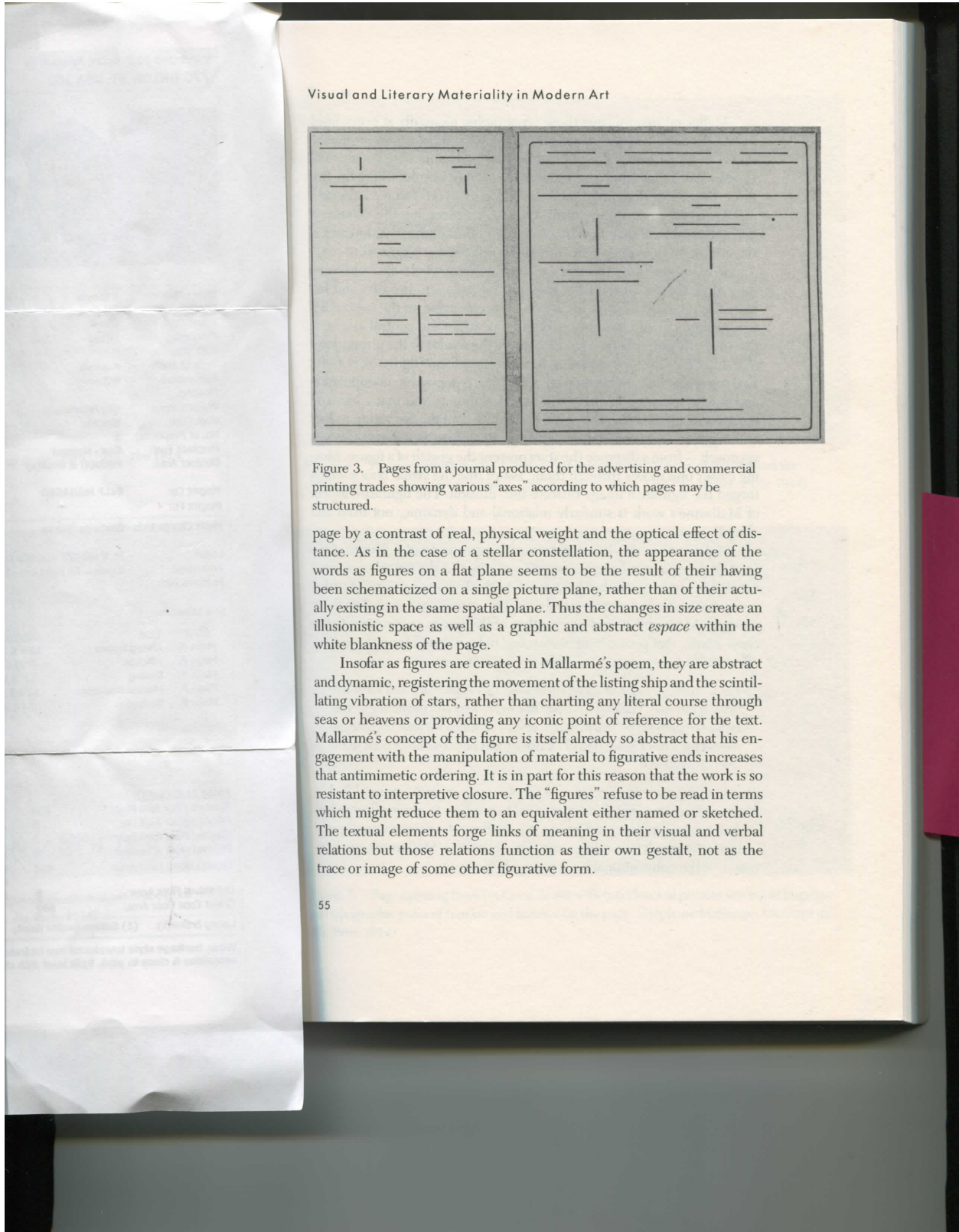on the page.

*   *   *

Fig. 2 Nineteenth-century real estate of the page (reproduced from Joanna Drucker's *The Visible Word*)

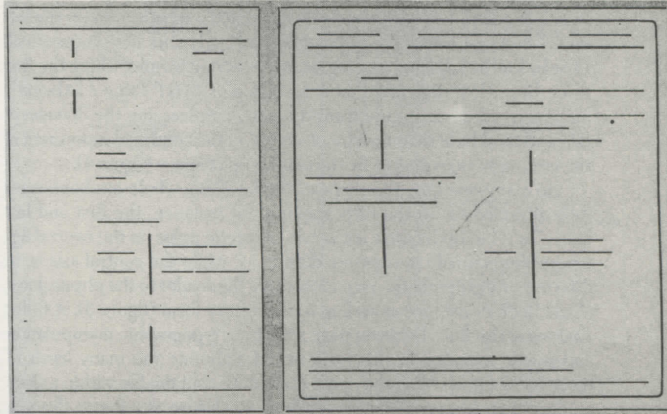Visual and Literary Materiality in Modern Art

Figure 3.   Pages from a journal produced for the advertising and commercial printing trades showing various "axes" according to which pages may be structured.

page by a contrast of real, physical weight and the optical effect of distance. As in the case of a stellar constellation, the appearance of the words as figures on a flat plane seems to be the result of their having been schematicized on a single picture plane, rather than of their actually existing in the same spatial plane. Thus the changes in size create an illusionistic space as well as a graphic and abstract *espace* within the white blankness of the page.

Insofar as figures are created in Mallarmé's poem, they are abstract and dynamic, registering the movement of the listing ship and the scintillating vibration of stars, rather than charting any literal course through seas or heavens or providing any iconic point of reference for the text. Mallarmé's concept of the figure is itself already so abstract that his engagement with the manipulation of material to figurative ends increases that antimimetic ordering. It is in part for this reason that the work is so resistant to interpretive closure. The "figures" refuse to be read in terms which might reduce them to an equivalent either named or sketched. The textual elements forge links of meaning in their visual and verbal relations but those relations function as their own gestalt, not as the trace or image of some other figurative form.

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Louis Cabri's recent poetry books are *Poetryworld* (CUE) and the chapbooks *Poems* (Olive) and —*that can't* (Nomados). An essay on unanimism, proceduralism and the crowd will appear in Jacket2. Books include an online edition of *The Mood Embosser* designed by Damian Lopes for Coach House Books. He has written essays on Andrews, Inman, Mac Low, Miki, Nichol, Strang, Wah, and Zukofsky, among other poets. He teaches in the BA and MA programs in literature, creative writing, and language at the University of Windsor — which hosted the first symposium on Ron Silliman's *the Alphabet* last spring and will host Alan Davies as fall 2011 writer-in-residence.