Performing Arts
‘New Aestheticism’ and the Media

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English Studies/‘Anglistik’ today seems to have developed into some pool for an indiscriminate variety of questions about things ‘English’. Methodologically, however, these questions (or research objects) all seem to be invariably connected with some kind of textuality. ‘English’ texts may, on the one hand, be treated discursively as documents expressing some extratextual ‘social’ fact; some of them may, however, also be read non-discursively as monuments of some ‘artistic’ preoccupation. If the discursive project finds itself also pursued by historians, philosophers, theologians and the like, the counterdiscursive one might be in the responsibility of literary scholars and philologists – ‘Anglisten’ – only. Their object is the text as (inter)medial art. The question about art is not so much what art is but what it does. As a consequence, the recently observable ‘aesthetic turn’ may be interpreted as a newly instigated interest in exploring the intrinsic anthropological embeddedness of human experience in media of all kinds, which may in turn be described in terms of their (of necessity) latent performativity.

1.

I want to begin with two texts. One is Edward Estlin Cummings’ ‘Grasshopper’ poem, the other one is the Austrian poet Ernst Jandl’s “oberflächen-übersetzung”. The text of the Cummings poem reads like this:

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1 Inaugural lecture held on June 18, 2009 at Karl-Franzens-Universität Graz. My thanks are due to Werner Wolf, Walter Bernhart and Bernhard Kettemann for their support and encouragement; they are also due to the Bad Bederkesa group, especially to Roger Lüdeke for the ‘instigation’ and to Sabine Schülting for the ‘response’.
In comparison to this, the second part of Jandl’s “oberflächenübersetzung”, which I quote here, looks much simpler at first sight:

mai hart lieb zapfen eibe hold
er renn bohr in sees kai
so was sieht wenn mai läuft begehen
so es sieht nahe emma mähen
so biet wenn ärschel grollt
ohr leck mit ei!
seht steil dies fader rosse mähen
in teig kurt wisch mai desto bier
baum deutsche deutsch bajonett schur alp eiertier (Jandl 1997: III. 51. 11–19)

Both examples pose the question of ‘what this is about’. This seems to be one of the central questions asked when facing modern/postmodern art, or perhaps even art in general. It addresses paintings, photographs, sculptures, ballets, performances, ‘events’, and, of course, texts. An audience traditionally wants to know what it is that they see – watch, hear, listen to, witness, read, consume; on the other hand, quite a lot of them seem to be losing interest as soon as they think that they have found out. Nevertheless, they keep coming back so that one may draw the conclusion that art seems

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2 For the sake of accessibility cf. also Allison et al. (ed.) (1983: 1044), where the poem is printed slightly differently.
to constitute some necessity in life even though it may be difficult to point out what exactly that necessity is.

Scholars and scientists observe phenomena; they draw conclusions; they attempt to classify; they offer interpretations. Natural scientists, it has been said, observe things; social scientists observe people; the ‘Humanities’ may be said to observe human artefacts or ‘ideas’, trying to explain and attribute ‘meaning’. Facing the Cummings or the Jandl poem, one might be tempted to ask ‘what is this?’ (But, of course, one may just as well come to the straightforward conclusion that this is rubbish, or to put it a little more politely – or aesthetically – ‘nonsense’).³ In the case of asking, one of the next questions that arises is the one addressing the framework where one might expect a possible answer. This is the question of ‘discipline’. Whom would one, helplessly facing the Cummings or the Jandl text, turn to? Some would say that one might turn to some ‘expert’ professing literature: a writer, a critic, a ‘professor’ of literature or literary scholar, or, to be more precise, some specialist in English and/or American and/or German and/or Austrian and/or Comparative philology. Where would one find such a person?

In the following remarks, I will first concentrate on the question of ‘discipline’; I will then go on to address the problem of motivation or interest before I discuss the ways and means of finding things out; I will conclude by coming back to the two poems, addressing the question of aesthetics as an old (and potentially new) field of research.

2.

‘Anglistik’, it has been said, may be a field of research without a paradigm (cf. Iser 1984).⁴ If biologists study plants and animals, and sociologists people and societies, Anglisten seem to be studying a bit of everything. There are experts in plant names from the period of Old English up until today; there are specialists in the development of English society from the Restoration to the Victorian age; there are researchers dealing with the dash in eighteenth-century prose.⁵ Anglisten seem to be working as sociologists, biologists, historians, musicologists, art historians, political scientists at the same time; they seem to be drawing on almost all fields of research, provided that their object is to some extent connected to the English-speaking

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³ For a vigorous and well-informed defence of ‘nonsense’ see Lecercle (1994).
⁴ For a recent synopsis of the (pluralist) state of the art in English Studies in Germany and a surreptitious wish for the reconstruction of some “common ground” see the contributions to Nünning/Schlaeger (eds.) (2007), esp. the introductory essay by the editors (7–22, the quote 18).
⁵ Evidence could be given for each of these instances.
They observe ‘English’ things, ‘English’ people, and ‘English’ artefacts or ‘ideas’.

On the other hand, however, there are also ‘proper’ historians who deal with English history, political scientists who are doing research into the idea of an English ‘constitution’, musicologists talking about Dowland, and art historians describing and explaining Turner. The question may be put like this: who is raiding into whose field? And what is more: is there such a field as ‘Anglistics’? This is the question of ‘discipline’; it is also the question of ‘interdisciplinarity’. The answer to the question at present seems to be largely due to the denomination adopted. Talking about ‘Anglistics’ (or ‘Americanistics’) or about English (or American) Studies or about English philology or about Linguistics or Literary or Cultural or Media Studies in English seems to be making all the difference.

In addition to this, there seems to be a decisive disciplinary gap between the English-speaking (or ‘native’) countries and a foreign perspective. Doing ‘English’ in Great Britain or the United States seems to narrow down the scope of what is done within the field quite considerably, since there are other representatives of the Humanities such as historians or philosophers or social scientists doing their bit quite naturally with reference to their immediate (i.e. English-speaking) surroundings. As a consequence, interdisciplinarity seems to be structured differently in a native context than in a non-native one. Germanisten in the German-speaking countries working on the construction of the railway line to Baghdad, on Flaubert’s novels or on the negotiation of power in early modern drama (with, faute de mieux, special reference to Shakespeare’s histories) may still be looked at more askance than German representatives of English Studies writing about English food, the London Underground or the topography of the Lake District.

Of course, there is nothing wrong with a wide-ranging interest. The only thing is who, in a highly differentiated scientific world, is the one to make statements about what. (This is the restrictive aspect of the term ‘discipline’.)

6 For a similar observation cf. Culler (1997: 43): “Professors of French writing books about cigarettes or Americans’ obsession with fat; Shakespeareans analysing bisexuality; experts on realism working on serial killers. What is going on?”

7 For the question of ‘discipline’ see the remarks in Culler (1997: 1ff.). This question seems all the more important since there can be no interdisciplinarity without disciplines, ‘genuine’ interdisciplinarity, as it seems to be propagated by some (especially by the advocates of a ‘pluralist’ approach in Cultural Studies), being a mere contradiction in terms; for the debate on interdisciplinarity see e.g. the contributions in Kocka (ed.) (1987).

8 For a recent survey of the state of the art in American Studies, with special reference to Austria, cf. Fellner (2008).

9 For the debate on ‘English’ in Britain see e.g. Eagleton (1983: 17ff.), as well as the contributions to Widdowson (ed.) (1982) and Bassnett (ed.) (1997).

10 Again, evidence could easily be supplied.
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At times, nowadays, one seems to gather the impression that anyone might make statements about anything, which, to some extent, seems to diminish the illusion of expertise rather than heighten it. But, indeed, who would make statements about the Cummings or the Jandl text? A possible suggestion would be ‘word-lovers’, philologists.\(^\text{11}\) They are the ones that might explain what people do with words in general, and what a certain writer did in writing a specific text in particular. This is what is neither done by historians nor by social scientists nor by geographers. It would be the unique terrain for people dealing with linguistic (or verbal, or rather semiotic) artefacts, placing them in contexts, and attributing to them functional ‘meaning’.

This is where the adjective ‘English’ comes into play again: English studies could then, first of all, be about (English) ‘language’ in ‘texts’, and ‘texts’ in ‘contexts’ (with all three terms placed between inverted commas, since ‘language’ could also be taken to comprise non-verbal media just as ‘texts’ could also be photographs, films, choreographies etc., ‘context’ being a functional term anyway).

3.

Wanting to know what language does in texts and what texts do in contexts, implies a certain ‘method’.\(^\text{12}\) Methods in the Humanities seem to be different from what they are in the empirical sciences.\(^\text{13}\) In physics, chemistry or medical research, it seems much easier to standardise a certain approach and set a group of scientists to the task of fruitfully going through the same procedure time and again than in the Humanities. This seems to be due to a lack of ‘hard facts’ (and a certain, to some extent subject-specific, innate

\(^{11}\) For the philological aspect of literary studies cf. Stierle (1996).

\(^{12}\) For an overview of the (to a great extent German) debate about ‘methods’ (‘Methodendebatte’) in literary studies see Winko (2000); for (largely dissatisfactory, old-style) presentations and discussions of different ‘methods’ (‘Methodenrevuen’) see e.g. Maren-Griesebach (1977) or the conspicuously polemical volume by Nemec/Solms (ed.) (1979).

\(^{13}\) There is a plethora of terms designating methods in the Humanities, ranging from ‘theory’ over ‘methodology’, ‘method’, ‘approach’, ‘technique’, ‘procedure’, ‘tools’, ‘paradigm’, ‘strategy’ to ‘frame’, ‘focus’, and ‘lens’, etc. This is not the place for an attempt at differentiation, but one might begin by distinguishing between ‘theories’ as methods ‘from above’ (setting the frame in which one’s statements will be placed) and ‘procedures’ as methods ‘from below’ (providing the tools with which one’s statements may be reached). For methods from below see Griffin (ed.) (2005); for methods from above see e.g. Geier (1983); Nünning (ed.) (1995); Schneider (ed.) (2005). For a general defence of theory cf. Bode (1996); for its interminability cf. Culler (1997: 15): “Theory is [...] a source of intimidation, a resource for constant upstagings: ‘What? you haven’t read Lacan! How can you talk about the lyric without addressing the specular constitution of the speaking subject?’ [...] ‘Spivak? Yes, but have you read Benita Parry’s critique of Spivak and her response?’”
boredom with standardisation). As a consequence, instead of talking about a ‘methodological’ path through a ‘disciplinary’ field in the Humanities, I would rather suggest to talk more modestly of ‘questions’ (‘what do I want to know?’), ‘approaches’ (‘how do I find this out?’), ‘results’ (‘what do I get?’), and ‘problems’ (‘what do I not get?’).  

Adopting a simple model of communication, one could roughly cross-classify this (as has been done) with the basic instances of ‘author’, ‘work’, ‘reader’, and ‘universe’, placing the work in the centre and investigating the relations between work and author, work and reader, work and universe, and work and work (see Abrams 1971: 6ff.; the illustration p. 6).

This would lead to various possibilities, depending upon whether the motivation of the research is historical, anthropological, political, systematical, aesthetic, autonomous, etc., i.e. depending largely on whether I want to make statements about causes in the past, relations in the present, or effects in the future. Focusing the relation between work and author might then answer questions such as ‘how can I explain the creation of a work of art?’, either individually (biographically), sociologically, or epistemologically (within the framework of a ‘history of ideas’); concentrating on the relation between work and reader could help me address questions such as ‘how can I account for different readings of a work in different contexts?’, either historically or culturally; exploring the relation between work and world would give me an idea of how a work of art addresses problems of a past or present or future society whereas going into the relation between work and work would tackle the question of how a work of art is made. The questions to be asked might thus be questions about the work (as in textual criticism, New Criticism, Russian formalism, structuralism, post-structuralism, decon-

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14 For an attempt to describe interpretation as a rule-governed behaviour see Titzmann (1977); for a British (and to some extent American) equivalent of aspiring to some ‘scientific’ standard, and clarity, in literary, and cultural studies, cf. Culler (1997) and the activities of the ‘New Accents’ group, notably Hawkes (1985: esp. 123ff.) and Belsey (1987).


16 For this attempt at systematisation cf. again Weiß (1979: 59ff.).
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A scientific (or scholarly) mind knows no forbidden questions; in the scientific community, there are (or at least should be) no questions barred. But, of course, there may be silly questions, ‘good’ (promising) ones and ‘bad’ ones. Whatever I ask, there must always be some plausibility why it seems reasonable to ask precisely this, and whatever I do, there must always be some rational procedure which shows and explains how I have gone about to obtain my results. There seems to be some agreement that ‘scientific’ or ‘scholarly’ statements should at least fulfil three basic requirements: they ought to be intersubjective (i.e. communicable); they ought to be non self-contradictory (i.e. straightforward in their argumentative structure); and they ought to be verifiable or falsifiable (i.e. reproducible in following the same path) (cf. Titzmann 1977: 20ff.). Making statements that elude understandability, that circumvent some inner logic, and eschew the demands of (whatever it is) ‘truth’, may sound ingenious – if not congenial – but seems of little epistemological use. Statements of this kind may serve a certain way of academic (or mostly pseudo-intellectual, or even pseudo-‘literary’) self-

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18 For falsifiability as the ‘proof’, and justification, of all theory see, of course, the writings of Sir Karl Popper.
fashioning rather than opening up the opportunity of rational discourse: of a critical, reciprocal dialogue about some chosen object of research. Despite their affected cleverness, such discourses look tritely—and, in the last analysis, one-sidedly—phatic.¹⁹

Treating things ‘English’ then implies, as does any other type of scientific (scholarly) interest, a controlled approach. The basis of the vast majority of questions asked in our ‘discipline’ seems to lie, first and foremost, in ‘texts’. Whether I want to know about Old English names for plants or about the Long Eighteenth-Century or about the history of the dash, I will always turn to ‘texts’ as my first source of investigation; so will I when inquiring into some photographs by Mapplethorpe, a Jarman movie, courtly dance rituals, ‘Canadian’ rodeos or British ‘ punks’. There seems to be no ‘anglistic’ research without some material artefact. These artefacts can be said always to consist of some material base (without which they would be indiscernible), some (more or less conventionally codified) component attributing what is called ‘meaning’, and a (more or less flexible) ‘joker element’ called ‘use’; i.e. they can, in a first step, be analysed according to their syntactic, semantic, or pragmatic aspect. This is the field of semiotics (cf. Morris 1971: 417). Its principles seem to tally with the model of communication referred to above in the sense that the pragmatic aspect predominantly covers questions concerning ‘author’ and ‘reader’, the semantic one those concerning the ‘universe’, and the syntactic one mainly questions about the ‘work’ itself.

Whatever I want to know, then, seems to be in some way connected with some aspect of ‘textuality’.²⁰ My research begins with making statements about ‘texts’, and what I offer as a first step is a structural analysis of the material artefact at hand. For this, I must be informed about its potentiality; I must be able to describe how it is ‘made’, and how it could have been ‘made’ differently, i.e. I must know something about its poetics.²¹ This implies some language of description (cf. Fricke 2003). Whether I am confronted with a sonnet, or an Elizabethan jig, or a photograph by Cindy Sherman, or a painting by Constable, or Hitchcock’s The Lady Vanishes, or English breakfast, or one of the good-bye tours of Phil Collins, I am always in need of some terminology with which to describe what I am observing. A controlled approach implies a controlled vocabulary. Analysing a sonnet, I must know about its generic rules and boundaries; analysing a movie, I must be aware of its use of images, sound, spoken language, of their interplay as well as of the conventions of the chosen genre; describing a ballet demands a possibility of notation fixing what is happening on stage before I go on to

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¹⁹ For this, see the concise remarks on (un)understandability in Stierle (1996: 1172); cf. in a similar vein the treatment of “deconstruction on the wild side” in Norris (1986: 92ff.).
²⁰ For a productive, and operational, wide notion of ‘textuality’ see Lotman (1990).
²¹ For the notion of poetics as the study of how something is made cf. Culler (1989).
interpret what I think I see. All these are acts of constructing a grid without which I would not be able to discriminate. Without attributing syntactic, or pragmatic, or semantic features in the first place, I would not know what to expect. ‘Textuality’ implies a ‘language’ in which this ‘textuality’ is expressed, and it is only in developing such a ‘language’ that one becomes aware of the mediality of the whole enterprise.

5.

Every culture seems to be based on some kind of textuality. Texts, as has been suggested, can be seen as ‘meaning-generating mechanisms’; their organisation forms, and perpetuates, what has been called the human ‘semiosphere’ (cf. Lotman 1990: 11ff. & 123ff.). The task of texts then is to provide (and to produce) cultures with ‘meaning’, which they process and reprocess incessantly so as to stabilise (and inadvertently shift) their ‘identities’. ‘Englishness’ or ‘Indianness’ are thus no stable features but functions of processes pervaded by material artefacts used as texts. As an ‘anglicist’ or representative of ‘English studies’, I may (and should) be interested in the way this ‘Englishness’ or ‘Indianness’ is textually constructed, describing thus the culture-constituting aspect of textuality. This may be called the discursive quality of culture. If one accepts that the term ‘discourse’ refers to systems of (political, economic, religious, etc.) thought, my interest in this case would lie in a mapping of all textuality onto some overall cultural ‘meaning’. My main focus would be the semantic aspect of a semiotics of culture; my readings would be largely ‘mimetic’, highlighting the representational character of all ‘texts’ under scrutiny; my interest would be to show the ideologies at work and to describe their textual negotiation.

Of course, there is nothing wrong with that. I can read *The Taming of the Shrew* as an early modern expression of patriarchal repression; I can see the courtly masque as a measure of disciplining a self-confident nobility into the framework of an absolutist court; I can interpret *The English Patient* (at least partially) as a reflection of a misled colonialist exploitation of the Gurkha and view the *Rocky* films as a snug glossing over of the US class problem. In all these readings, however, I would treat my texts as mere
evidence for some extratextual problem: I would not so much want to make statements about the texts themselves than about something else for which the texts only serve as an illustration. This attitude has been called ‘expressive realism’ (cf. Belsey 1987: 7ff.). It sees texts as documents of some historical or social fact and treats them as if they opened up directly to some problem of the world. As a matter of fact, it more sees through texts than seeing the texts themselves; what this approach is interested in is not so much the (structural) analysis of a text but its semantics – and its manifest social function.27

As a consequence, looking at the Cummings or the Jandl poem, I might find out that the one ‘is about’ a grasshopper hopping (‘who, as we look up, now gathering into a/the... leaps, arriving to rearrangingly become grasshopper’28) and interpret this, say, as an expression of the repressed desires of American minorities in the 1930s, and that the other one ‘is about’ a Wordsworth text (“my heart leaps up when i behold / a rainbow in the sky / so was it when my life began / so is it now i am a man / so be it when i shall grow old / or let me die! / the child is father of the man / and i could wish my days to be / bound each to each by natural piety / [william wordsworth]”) (Jandl 1997: III. 51. 1–10)29 and see the German (or rather Austrian) replica as some reappropriating lyrical protest against Anglo-American Coca-colonization.

6.

But this may not be the whole story. I can also enjoy The Taming of the Shrew as a source of (even doubly) gender-based laughter; I can admire the courtly masque as a multi-medial mise-en-scène of seemingly endless amazement; I can take pleasure in The English Patient as a postmodern(ist) novel displaying a complex self-conscious use of narrative technique and

27 For the distinction between ‘manifest’ and ‘latent’ function cf. Luhmann (1974: 69); for a theoreatisation of latency with regard to literature see Haverkamp (2002).
28 This opens up a ‘mimetic’ reading of the poem; cf., in contradistinction to that, the view that the grasshopper text “does not permit the establishment of any kind of illusion in the first place” in Wolf (1998: 286).
29 There is a slight change from Wordsworth’s “My Heart Leaps Up”; cf. Allison et al. (1983: 551):

My heart leaps up when I behold
A rainbow in the sky:
So was it when my life began;
So is it now I am a man;
So be it when I shall grow old,
Or let me die!
The Child is father of the Man;
And I could wish my days to be
Bound each to each by natural piety.
view the *Rocky* films as a celebration of unattainable (and, to some extent, admittedly pointless) brutal male force. This also applies to the Cummings and the Jandl texts. “Do not forget”, the older Wittgenstein cautiously warned (himself), “that a poem, even though it is composed in the language of information, is not used in the language game of giving information.” (Wittgenstein 1967: 28e) Against this background, one might venture to say that the Cummings poem is not really ‘about’ a grasshopper, nor is the Jandl text conclusively ‘about’ a Wordsworthian pre-text. Neither of the two texts seems to constitute a mere mimetic riddle which is ‘solved’ as soon as one has found out what it refers to. The grasshopper poem seems to be just as little about a grasshopper as Dürer’s painting of the “Hare” is about a hare or Van Gogh’s “Sunflowers” are about sunflowers. The picture gallery (just as is the poem) is not the place I turn to if I wish to be better informed.30 If it were, I would simply take up the information and turn to the next picture to see what I can learn there. But this is not what I do. Rather, instead of merely taking up what I see, I begin to focus on how (and why) I see what I see; instead of concentrating on the discursive or ‘thetic’ aspect of the material artefact, I begin to concentrate on its ‘counter-discursive’ or ‘aesthetic’ aspect.31

In other words, I change the game. I no longer see the material artefact as a document of some social (political, psychological, ideological, etc.) issue; rather, I begin to see it as a ‘monument’32 of some (possibly) cognitive issue that to some extent eludes my capacities. It is in this sense that the aesthetic has tentatively been described as the ‘imminence of a revelation that does not come’.33 As a consequence, what I experience in reading the Cummings or the Jandl text may not be so much what they mimetically refer to – the ‘idea’ behind the text – but what they actually ‘do’. This may be called the ‘performatif’, or the ‘pragmasemiotikos’, aspect of art.34 It may also be called ‘new aestheticism’.35 It draws attention to what (in art) is

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30 For a (slightly misconstrued) polemic against the conception of art as mere communicative ‘information’ cf. Easthope (1983: 3ff.).
32 For the distinction between ‘monument’ and ‘document’ cf. the introductory chapter to Michel Foucault (2002b).
33 Cf. the laconic remark in Borges (1980: 133): “esta inminencia de una revelación, que no se produce, es, quizá, el hecho estético.”
34 This is what I have tried to develop in Mahler (2006); cf. also (again) Wolfgang Iser’s use of ‘performativity’ in Iser (1993: 250ff.).
35 For this concept see the contributions to Joughin/Malpas (eds.) (2003), esp. the introduction (1–19); this ‘new’ aestheticism, however, it must be said, runs the risk of being just as ‘new’ as was the ‘New Historicism’ when it was introduced as a ‘method’ by Stephen Greenblatt on his move from the East to the West coast of the United States of America. – For a highly suggestive recent (Kantian) defence of the aesthetic as one of the decisive cognitive pillars
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of democratic culture, opening up a ‘free play of our cognitive capacities’ (‘das freie Spiel der Erkenntnisvermögen’), see the profound remarks in Peper (2002: esp. 32ff.); characteristically, Peper, too, (inductively) begins to develop his theoretical thoughts on the basis of a Jandl poem (“fortschreitende räude”, 2f.). What we experience is our own ‘eccentricity’\(^37\), the mechanism of what has been called our ‘cognitive matrix’ (Mahler 2004). In playing the game of Cummings’ grasshopper ‘aesthetically’, I do not only convert syntactic material – what has been called the language’s verso (the text of the poem) – into semantic gratifications – its recto (a grasshopper hopping) – but I also re-convert the idea of hopping (the recto) into the syntactic display of the ‘letters on the page’ (the verso), creating a to-and-fro movement which leads me time and again across the medial gap between the two inverted levels characteristic of any kind of ‘language’.\(^38\)

Likewise, in experiencing the Jandl text – which, as the “oberflächenübersetzung” that it is, seems to be some kind of (English/German) verso-verso-transposition itself – I can engage in a recto-verso game, enjoying the syntactic gratification of a new material artefact\(^39\), as well as in a verso-recto

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\(^{36}\) This is again the notion of latency (see above note 27).

\(^{37}\) For the notion of ‘eccentricity’ as the basic human condition cf. Plessner (1981: 360ff.).

\(^{38}\) For the notions of ‘verso’ and ‘recto’ cf. Saussure (1985: 155ff., esp. 157; for the illustration see 99), for the English version cf. Saussure (1959: 111ff., esp. 113), where they are rendered as ‘front’ and ‘back’: “Language can also be compared with a sheet of paper: thought is the front and the sound the back” (for the illustration cf. 66f.); see also Mahler (2006: 229ff.).

\(^{39}\) This is what Eva Müller-Zettelmann does in her reading of the Jandl text as a self-denying (implicitly metalyrical) parody of the religious subtext in the Wordsworth poem (cf. Müller-Zettelmann 2000: 250ff.).
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This is precisely what happens in so-called ‘mondegreens’ where mishearings are used as alternative (transposed) signifiers (verso) opening up new and unexpected readings (recto) (cf. Keiper 2008).

For the notion of a ‘radical imaginary’ as opposed to a ‘social imaginary’ cf. Castoriadis (1987).

For the fictive as an agency of ‘realising’ the imaginary by means of re-using elements of the real cf. Iser (1993: esp. ch. 1).

This refers to the basic tenet of the New Critics (cf. Belsey 1987: 15ff.).

This additionally activates the punctuation in that the single bracket plus colon in line 5 can be seen as a zero form of the animal leaping, just as the comma and the semicolon embracing the grasshopper in the last line may be interpreted as some provisional halt.

7.

But, again, this is not yet the whole story. Looking at the Cummings text, I cannot only ‘read about’ a grasshopper hopping, I can also ‘see’ one actually hop. What I discern is not only a scriptural representation of the movement of the animal but also a visual presentation of it. In other words, I get the ‘message’ (whatever it is) through two media at the same time. I do not only read the ‘words on the page’43, but I can also look at something material hop, ‘gathering’ from a right-justified and hyphenated “r-p-o-p-h-e-s-s-a-g-r” in the title into an upper case “PFEGÜRHRAS” in line 4, invisibly (“aThe:)”) ‘leaping’ through lines 5 to 10, before it lands as a rather confused and disorderly “gRrEaPsPhOs” in line 11, only to ‘r-e-a-r-r-a-n-g-e’ itself into the wonted, and left-justified, “grasshopper” in the last line (14).44 Eva Hesse, the congenial and imaginative German translator of this poem, has clearly recognised this, visualising the leap from “R-Ü-P-F-E-S-A-G-H-R” to “PFEGÜRHRAS” to a barely distinguishable “T:er” to “gRraPfeHüś” to an
ordinary lower case “grashüpfer” in the end, as can be seen in her German version of the poem:

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\begin{align*}
\text{R-Ü-P-F-E-S-A-G-H-R} \\
\text{der} \\
\text{wic wic(h)in} \\
\text{sich jetzt auf} \\
\text{PFEGÜRHRAS} \\
\text{bäumt} \\
\text{zum T:er} \\
\text{hU} \\
\text{pf:} \\
\text{T} \\
\text{und} \\
\text{(s} \\
\text{eTzT} \\
\text{gRraPfeHüs) auf} \\
\text{sich wie (an) der (ord) zum (nend)} \\
\text{grashüpfer;}
\end{align*}
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(Hesse/Ickstadt (eds.). 2000: 282)\(^45\)

Both the English and the German ‘Grasshoppers’ thus operate two versos – one based on digitalised writing, the other one based on analogical visualisation. This is a true case of what has been called ‘intermediality’, involving, as has been said, two conventionally distinct media – words and images or, rather in this case, words as words and words as images – in one and the same process of expression or communication.\(^46\) Cummings’ ‘Grasshopper’ is a poem, and a picture, at the same time; it is (doubly) a ‘visual poem’ in that it simultaneously uses letters, on the one hand, as an arbitrary sign system ‘speaking about’ its object and, on the other, as an analogical means of directly ‘depicting’ its object. This opens up the possibility to play the verso-recto/recto-verso-game on two levels at the same time. ‘Reading’ the poem verbally and pictorially thus makes me hop about myself between the two versos and their corresponding rectos (which might probably even be only one).

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\(^45\) Again, the layout differs slightly from the original.


\(^47\) Cummings himself uses the term ‘Poempictures’.
My verbally achieved syntactic gratification equals my pictorially achieved semantic gratification and \textit{vice versa}. Consequently, I begin to lose myself in an interminable game, which, inadvertently and pleasurably, makes me acknowledge, and enjoy, my media-based condition as a meaning-making animal.\textsuperscript{48} In the eternal criss-crossing between the verbal and the pictorial, there is forever meaning, no end of making meaning, only without any definitive (i.e. ‘meaningful’) result.\textsuperscript{49}

8.

The same can be said to apply to the Jandl text, especially to its 1984 recording made, and performed, by the poet himself (Jandl 1984). The performance of the poem is divided into four parts. The first part gives us a straightforward classical recitation of Wordsworth’s “My Heart Leaps Up” spoken by a woman’s voice (Lauren Newton) in what I would classify as an upper class American East coast accent and accompanied by an old-fashioned, organ-like synthesizer (00:00-00:27); this is followed by a male voice (Ernst Jandl himself) articulating the German/Austrian part of the “oberflächenübersetzung” in a sharp declamatory tone, with the instrumental accompaniment changing from festive organ to a rather improvisatory jazz-like flute (00:28-01:03); the third part is then an overlay of the two verbal versions without any instrumental accompaniment at all (01:04-01:34); and the fourth part, which is by far the longest, ends in letting organ and flute peter out in an increasingly disharmonious coda (01:35-02:44).

What we thus get is, as it were, an acoustic version of the ‘Grasshopper’. Where the Cummings poem uses visual material both verbally and non-verbally, the Jandl performance gives us both verbal and non-verbal sounds (with the non-verbal sounds finding themselves in addition characteristically

\textsuperscript{48} For the cognitive aspect of Cummings’ poems see the chapter “Inferences from a Cummings Poem” in Jakobson/Waugh (1979: 222–230); cf. my introduction and commentary to the German version in Jakobson (2007: II. 717–731). For (medial) interminability cf. also Mahler (2009b).

\textsuperscript{49} The formulation refers back to, of course, Stephen Greenblatt’s well-known dictum ‘There is subversion, no end of subversion, only not for us.’
produced by two different wind instruments). As a consequence, it can be seen as an intermedial dialogue between spoken language on the one hand and music on the other, again operating on two versos competing for (potentially) one recto at the same time.\textsuperscript{50} Where the verbal material of the two languages opens up the possibility to articulate two (and more) entirely different things on the basis of (apparently) one and the same phonic substance, the musical sounds can either be interpreted as (semantically) confirming (and/or denying) the solemnity of “My Heart Leaps Up” as a hymn appropriately backed up by an organ and the disrespectfulness of the “oberflächenübersetzung” adequately mirrored in the sounds of a free jazz-like flute, accentuating the ‘classical’ character of the one as well as the ‘modernity’ of the other – or they can be seen (or rather heard) as (altermedially) performing what the texts are doing, which seems to be particularly prominent in the noises made by organ and flute in the coda, which increasingly threaten to sound very much like what happens – I beg your pardon – “wenn ärschel grollt”. Words lose their meaning, and music begins to signify.

9.

Both Cummings’ grasshopper poem and Jandl’s “oberflächenübersetzung” thus (intermedially) draw attention to their own mediality. They make us aware of the means, and instruments, with which we generate meaning – the illusion of representation, order, harmony – in order to make plausible to ourselves what we are wont to call the ‘world’: they give us a (‘revelatory’) glimpse of how cognition works, they playfully – aesthetically – open up a terrain that must normally remain closed. In performing their own mediality, they seem to be subject to no other function than the one they represent: the work of art. And it is for this that we need, as a valid and fruitful method of analysis, an old, and new, ‘aestheticism’.

\textsuperscript{50} If the tilting of the ‘Grasshopper’ poem can be called centripetal in the sense that it tends to give us different mimetic shades of one and the same representation (the grasshopper), the tilting of Jandl’s “oberflächenübersetzung” looks rather centrifugal in that it performatively opens up new presentations offering the activation of new material (such as German signifiers and musical sounds).
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