

# Plastic Poetry: The Sculptural Imagination of Language in English Literature

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## ABSTRACT

The current research paper critically analyses the idea of 'plastic poetry' as a transformative and interdisciplinary form of poetic expression in the present-day English literature. Going beyond the traditional perception of poetry as a linear and purely linguistic expression, the paper examines how plastic poetry redefines the meaning-form interrelation by prefiguring visuality, spatial structure, and materiality of words. The study follows the historical development of plastic poetry, beginning with early 'pattern poetry' and the 'metaphysical experiments' of George Herbert, an eminent poet from the school of John Donne's poetry, and the modernist experimentation of Calligrams by Guillaume Apollinaire, a French poet and playwright, and the 'concrete poetry movement' organized by Eugen Gomringer, a Bolivian-born Swiss Concrete poet. Based on semiotics, structuralism, phenomenology, and postmodernism, the analysis claims that plastic poetry breaks the conventional signifier-signified relationship and turns the poem into a multisensory and participatory experience. In addition, the venture scrutinizes the main aesthetic principles of plastic poetry such as combination of form and content, engagement of the reader, and the importance of visual perception in sense-making. It also places this innovative genre of poetry in the digital era, underscoring its reformation as an interactive and multimedia poetry, which is enabled by the evolution of technology, hypertext, animation, and virtual worlds. The analysis belongs not only to the critical considerations about the validity, availability, and the aesthetical value of plastic poetry but also to the exploration of the philosophical essence of it in the perspectives of existentialism and phenomenological discerning. The enquiry, ultimately, intends that plastic poetry is not a break but a broadening of the possibilities of poetry, a dynamic and immersive and social responsive literary practice. It proclaims that plastic poetry as a bridge between literature, visual art, and digital media is an imperative approach that is indicative of the encounters of modern human experience and redefines the future of poetic expression.

*Keywords: Plastic Poetry, Pattern Poetry, Concrete Poetry, Visual Poetry, Digital Literature, Form and Meaning, Spatial Poetics, Semiotics, Existentialism, Carmina Figurata.*

## Introduction: Reimagining the Boundaries of Poetry

Poetry has always been perceived as the art of rhythm, sound, and metaphor, a word construction which aims at using words in such a way that produces both emotional and intellectual reaction. Yet, such definition, based on the linearity and listening, is not enough in the face of experimental forms, which question the nature of poetic expression. Plastic poetry is one of the forms of poetry that has a radical break with tradition and the power of redefining poetry as a visual and spatial art. Prefiguring the physical look of the text, it interferes with the traditional process of reading. It does not only force the reader to interpret the words, but it also

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makes the reader see how the words are organized, how they are placed, and how they relate to the empty space on the page. Thus, it turns the process of reading into the process of seeing, which will dissolve the boundary between literature and visual art. Its significance lies nowhere but in the fact that it entails a reinvention of the language itself. Words are no longer vivid vehicles of meaning but have become things, things of surface, things of substance, and things of density. In it, the page is made canvas; the poet is made a sculptor, molding linguistic contents into substantial forms. Such a shift is accompanied by some underlying questions about the meaning, about the role of the reader, and about the form-content correlation. For this, the paper aims to address these questions by investigating the historical evolution, aesthetic philosophy, and theoretical concerns of plastic poetry with the claim that plastic poetry is not an incidental experiment but a core of the development of modern and contemporary literature.

### **Existence and Essence of Plastic Poetry**

Plastic poetry is not just a form of novel poetry, but an ontological transformation in the state of poetry. It refutes the traditional belief that poetry exists only in the sanctity of words, ink, and page; and instead, relocates it into an active and multisensory universe that is full of visual and spatial poetics. Minute mensuration of this form of poetry reveals that it is a product in its own world, a world that is full of screens, sounds, and moving images, a world in which meaning is not linear, but is scattered through a variety of channels of perception. It represents a cultural shift when literature can no longer afford to be isolated from other artistic and technological activities. And so, it is an interdisciplinary phenomenon, whereby language intersects visual art, digital media, soundscapes, and interactive design. It is not a mere coincidence, but a need to adjust poetic expression to an ever-changing human experience that is being accelerated by globalization, environmental crisis, and digitalization. In this way, plastic poetry does not merely exist in the modern world, but it is the reflection of it, its fragmentation, its fluidity, and its multiplicity.

From the vantage point of essence, plastic poetry makes a redefinition of what poetry essentially is. Poetry has traditionally been perceived as an art of language, organized, rhythmic, and often governed by the grammar of syntax and structure. These boundaries are, however, broken by it as it demonstrates that poetry is not restricted to language and, therefore, spread to the experience. Its nature is its ability to turn words into events, into something that is seen, heard, and felt at the same time. It builds a multi-layered semiotic space in which

meaning is not pre-determined but rather identified in the process of interaction by using multimedia elements like images, video, and sound. The reader is no longer an active participant as he is no longer a passive interpreter but a co-creator in an open, fluid system. This partaking ethos breaks the conventional forms of authorship and reading, democratizing the poetic space and allowing the various voices and positions to collide.

Above and beyond, plastic poetry is closely associated with the ethical and environmental issues of the modern era. It incorporates the images, data, and sensory perceptions of the environment into its design, which makes poetry a location of critical interaction with the world. It is not just a description of the ecological crises, but it embodies the ecological crises, and the readers are exposed to the urgency of climate change, pollution, and commodification of nature. In such a way, this fresh form of verse disrupts aesthetic boundaries that may be considered as an act of activism, an intersection of art and responsibility. Overall, the existence and essence of plastic poetry is in the extreme reclaiming of form and action. It is a reaction to the complications of modern life, and it is the extension of the possibilities of poetry beyond the constraints of language. It is not merely a new genre but a new consciousness, one that forces individuals to rethink not only the way poetry is produced and read but also the way it can become a part of the world, and how it can alter the world in which man lives.

### **Historical Evolution of Plastic Poetry**

Plastic poetry has its origins in the ancient literary tradition, in which poets explored the visual structure of the text. A form of early efforts to combine form and meaning are the Greek and Latin ‘pattern poems’ commonly known as *carmina figurata*. These poems were made in forms of objects like altars, wings, or eggs which made a visual representation of their thematic material. This tradition was realized in the metaphysical poetry of the seventeenth century in English literature. George Herbert is one of the founding figures in this respect. The poem “Easter Wings” by Herbert is a classic representation of plastic poetry as the lines are organized in form of wings. The visual tightening and the stretching of the text represent the fall and the redemption of a man and the way the form may represent the meaning. This piece of poetry by Herbert proves that plastic poetry is not a contemporary construct, but a repetitive urge in the history of literature, a potential to overcome the constraints of linear text and experiment with the visual possibilities of language.

The advent of modernism at the close of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was a shift in the history of plastic poetry. Modernist authors aimed at breaking the traditional forms

and exploring new ways of expression. This was the time of increasing preoccupation with the materiality of language, as poets started to perceive words as objects, not as symbols. Guillaume Apollinaire, a French poet and playwright, was one of the most dominant personalities within the movement whose Calligrams transformed the structure of poetry. The text, in these works, is organized in such a way that it creates images which mirror the subject of the poem. An example of this is that a poem about rain could be put in slanting lines to resemble falling rain drops. The innovations of Apollinaire emphasize the possibility of poetry as a text and image, which increases the expressive capabilities of poetry.

In the middle of the twentieth century, plastic poetry was formalized with the appearance of ‘concrete poetry’ that is the embodiment of the plastic impulse in literature and the creation of a system of further evolution of visual and digital poetry. This trend was connected to the works of poets like Eugen Gomringer, a Bolivian-born Swiss poet, and focused more on the visual and spatial elements of the language. Concrete poets abandoned the conventional syntax and narrative to employ minimalist constructions, in which the meaning is the main recipient of the words on the page. The work by Gomringer is a representation of the concrete poetry principles. His poems tend to consist of few words which are repeated and executed in geometrical forms, thus forming a visual rhythm that goes in tandem with the semantic content of the poetry. It is indicative of a larger trend in the aesthetics of literature wherein the emphasis is not on representing something but on presenting it; not describing the reality but building it up by means of form.

### **Theoretical Foundations of Plastic Poetry**

Plastic poetry can be referred to as semiotics, the science of signs and meaning. According to traditional linguistic theory, as represented by Ferdinand de Saussure, a signifier (the form of a word) and a signified (the meaning of a word) exists. In the traditional poem, the signifier is mainly the means of the signified. Plastic poetry, however, breaks this association by preempting the signifier itself. The semantic content of words loses its significance, and the visual look of words gains significance. This displacement is directly in opposition to the idea that meaning is contained in language only, and in its place, it is proposed that it exists as the result of interaction between form, space and perception.

In addition, plastic poetry can also be understood within the umbrella of structuralism that focuses on the systems and patterns existing behind language and literature. These patterns are not so abstract in it—plastic poetry, but they are literally imprinted on the page. In this sense,

the spatial form of words provides a form on which the readers should follow the interpretation. As an illustration, symmetry can be interpreted as a sign of equilibrium or harmony, whereas fragmentation can be viewed as a sign of anarchy or disintegration. In this way, the poem form is a meaning-creating machine, which influences the reader. Furthermore, the plastic poetry has also been echoing postmodernist issues especially the failure of boundaries between the artistic forms. Postmodernism questions the idea of high and low art, text and image, and author and reader. Plastic poetry represents such an ethos, combining literature and artistic visuality and encouraging the reader to engage in the process of meaning-making. Here, the non-linearity of this poetry, i.e., plastic poetry, is an expression of the postmodern denial of linear stories and definite meanings. Instead, it does not exclude ambiguity, multiplicity, and openness but can be subject to various interpretations.

### **Aesthetic Principles of Plastic Poetry**

The concept of form is content is one of the focal principles of plastic poetry. As it—plastic poetry— does not consider form as something that can be used to amplify meaning as it would be in traditional poetry. The poem has a visual structure, which does not just depict its theme; it becomes its theme. Plastic poetry also appeals to the visual senses of the reader in the context of visuality and perception, making the process of reading turn into the process of seeing. The poem is transformed into a visual object, and it calls the readers to its shape, pattern, and relation of space. Within the framework of the reader involvement, in it, the reader is involved in the construction of meaning. The non-linear structure of the text makes the reader move through the poem in an interactive and dynamic way. This is what makes literary criticism more participatory and makes it tend more to reader-response criticism.

## **(II)**

### **Textual Analysis of Major Works in Plastic Poetry**

To get the comprehensive idea of plastic poetry, it is necessary for the readers to transcend the theoretical abstraction and deal with specific texts, which are dynamic and transformative. This type of poetry, not pertaining to the sensory, spatial and interactive aspects, cannot be reduced to the theory alone. So, the following lines have a more nuanced and in-depth reading of the representative works of this genre, which illuminates how plastic poetry applies its principles to practice, transforming the experience of language, form, and sense that the reader has of these.

### • **“Easter Wings” and the Metaphysics of Form**

A good example of the initial plastic poetry is perceived in the ‘shaped poem’, written by one of the most prolific metaphysical poets of the school of John Donne’s poetry, George Herbert, whose work under the name of “Easter Wings”. The poem consists of two stanzas, as they look like two wings. It initiates long lines that are narrowed in the middle and further, almost as though they are in flight. This visual art is not just a decoration; it goes through the theological story of the poem. The lines are made slimmer in symbolizing the descent of man into sin and disillusionment and later the widening symbolizes rebirth and rise. The poem, then, is a visual metaphor, form and meaning being closely bound together. In addition, its thematic concerns are reinforced by the process of reading the poem. When the eyes of the reader travel inwards and outwards along the lines, it recreates the contraction and expansion rhythm, hence forming an embodied experience of redemption. It is an amalgamation of the visual form, the subject matter, and interaction with the reader and this is what plastic poetry is.

### • **Calligrams and the Poetics of Image**

The Calligrams of Guillaume Apollinaire is an important step in the development of plastic poetry. The work of Apollinaire is full of fluidity and experimentation as opposed to the structured symmetry of Herbert. His poems are in the form of objects like rain, animals or ordinary scenes which convert the page into a pictorial space. The border between writing and drawing is erased in these works. The words are not organized in linear order but in visual images that need to be perceived space-wise. The reader must follow the text in unusual patterns, and they usually go back and forward in various directions, instead of following the one. This breaking of linearity is a challenge to the old ways of reading, and emphasizes the concept of meaning being made rather than a given thing. The Calligrams of Apollinaire can, therefore, be considered a precursor of the future of both ‘concrete poetry’ and ‘digital literature’.

### • **Concrete poetry: Minimalism and Repetition**

Another progression of plastic poetry is observed in the works of Eugen Gomringer, a Bolivian-born Swiss concrete poet. His poems may be made of one word or phrase repeated and organized into geometric forms. As an illustration, a poem can structure the word silence in a square shape and leave a blank centre. This approach of minimalism puts the emphasis on

structure and perception instead of narrative or imagery. These rhythms are also created through the repetition of words and the blank spaces that make one think. The poem is less about communicating and it more about an experience. His work emphasizes on the significance of absence and presence. Those empty spaces are not blank spaces, but they form a part of the meaning of the poem, implying silence, emptiness or the boundaries of language.

### **Plastic Poetry and Traditional Poetics**

It is not just a matter of style that the traditional poetry is colliding with the plastic one. It is a drastic re-positioning of the very idea of literature, its experience, and its internalization. The art of traditional poetry, as influenced by the disciplined genius of John Milton, the pensive lyricism of William Wordsworth, and the mysterious accuracy of Emily Dickinson, is a time art, which leads the reader through a well-timed series of lines in which the meaning never comes out at first glance, but rather arises gradually, almost meditatively. Not even the disruption of the modernist Eliot and Pound with their fragmented forms and free verse broke the basic loyalty of poetry to speech and writing as a sound and a text. Poetry is read aloud in this tradition as much as it is written; it is rhythm and meter and the music of words which is subliminal and resonant in the consciousness of the reader. Plastic poetry though, breaks this continuity of time and moves poetry into space. It is not something that unfolds, it is something that exists. It challenges the reader simultaneously both as an aesthetic and visual arena and requires the reader to explore and not passively accept it. In this case, meaning is not found by progression but rather in juxtaposition, arrangement and interaction. The poem becomes an experience rather than a linear trip. This process of replacing sound with sight and sequence with simultaneity, changes completely the grammar of expressing poetic parts. The hegemony of auditory forms is replaced by visuality and the rhythm of the verse is not only heard but also seen, being constructed through the patterns of spacing, symmetry, fragmentation, and design. Within this shifted paradigm, the reader is not a silent follower of the voice of the poet, but an active traveler, a collaborative creator who establishes the ways of interpretation in the multidimensional textual space. This kind of participatory activity places plastic poetry in line with the trends and trends of the intellectual thought in modern and postmodernity, where meaning is not determined but rather in flux and dependent on perception and context. Furthermore, plastic poetry appeals to the discontinuous, multi-media-induced consciousness of the modern world where experience is no longer linear, but is spread across screens, pictures, and sounds. It represents the rationality of the digital culture, instant, interactive, and

immersive, but at the same time it reacts to pressing issues of the world community, such as ecological crisis and cultural disintegration. However, it is not a story of substitution but rather of growth. Traditional poetry is the music of the ages of words, which is deep, self-contemplative, and perennial, whereas plastic poetry is a rejuvenation of the essence of the poetical form, its extension to a moving, discursive form. They do not rival together, but converse, one with its feet in the old cadence of human thought, the other with its feet towards the shifting horizons of the human perception.

### **Plastic Poetry in the Digital Age**

Plastic poetry has new possibilities with the advent of digital technology. It ceases to be the static page; now, poets are able to create works that involve movement, sound, and interactivity. The use of animated text, where the words are transformed, dissolved, or rearranged with time, can be discussed as a definite attribute of digital plastic poetry. This dynamic aspect adds to the sculptural character of the poem, permitting the development and transformation of the poem. The applications of hypertext are also made possible by the digital platforms where an individual can take different pathways in a poem. Such non-linearism is devoted to the tradition of plastic poetry and emphasizes the exploration of space over the reading in sequences. It makes the reader a co-creator by deciding the directions to take and consequently determining the meaning of the text. In modern plastic poetry, the items of multiple art forms, such as visual art, music, and performance, are usually combined. The presence of this multimodal approach is a wider culture of hybridity and interdisciplinarity. Plastic poetry, therefore, stands at a special place at the crossroad between literature, art, and technology, acting as an intermediary between the old and new mediums of expression.

### **Critical Perspectives and Debates**

The prestige of plastic poetry as a piece of literature is one of the most prevailing controversy on it. People have wondered whether literary creations that emphasize visual elements over the use of lingual depth can be said to be of true poetry. These criticisms, however, are usually based on the limited definitions of literature. Plastic poetry defies these definitions through showing that meaning may be created not only through words, but through form, space and perception as well. The other problem is the availability of plastic poetry. Its non-traditional shapes may be hard to decipher especially to the readers who are well familiar with the traditional poetry. Nevertheless, this challenge is not hard; it can be interpreted as a challenge

to read deeper into the text. Critics claim that plastic poetry is in danger of being too formalistic and engaging in visual experimentation at the cost of emotional intensity or a complex theme. Although this claim seems to have a valid ground, it is not applicable with each verse of plastic poetry. In English literature, there are several such poems of this genre that fascinate the readers with the balance of form and meaning, producing both visual and meaningful appeal.

### (III)

#### **Philosophical Dimensions and Global Context**

Plastic poetry is not only a stylistic device; it is a profound philosophical incursion into the reality of language, into the realm of perception, and into the reception of life whether it belongs to its own existence or to the existence of the readers. By transforming words into visual and spatial things, it makes them—the readers—reconsider the ontology of poetry itself. This poetry may be viewed as an exploration of lived experience in a phenomenological approach. Philosophers such as Maurice Merleau-Ponty focus on the importance of perception in reality construction. Plastic poetry does not create meaning only through the textual interpretation of language but through the sensual involvement of the reader in the text. The readers not only decipher signs, they experience the poem as a spatial object. Reading becomes a process of perception and eye follows patterns, shapes, and movements. It is in line with the concept given by Merleau-Ponty which articulates that perception is not passive but active and embodied. Therefore, plastic poetry makes the poem a phenomenological event, a moment when the meaning is experienced and not merely understood.

Existentialist philosophy and, especially, the writings of Jean-Paul Sartre are also similar to plastic poetry. The idea of Sartre that existence comes first, then the sense comes can be astonishingly similar to plastic poetry, the meaning of which is not predefined but appears in the process of the reader reading the text. The plastic poetry is non-linear, open-ended, which allows the reader some freedom in interpretation. It does not have one, authoritative meaning, but rather meaning is created through interaction. It is a manifestation of the existentialist focus on personal liberty and accountability. Plastic poetry, in this sense, is a space of existence, where the reader faces ambiguity and is forced to make meaning. In addition, post-structuralist philosophers like Jacques Derrida dispute the notion of predetermined meaning and state that language is always unstable. The principle is reflected in plastic poetry that interferes with the traditional syntax and linearity. The visual structure of the words adds several levels of meaning, which can be difficult to define. Text and space interrelate to form a space of

possibilities, in which the meaning is incessantly postponed and restructured. Plastic poetry, therefore, becomes a place of deconstruction which shows the dynamic and flowing aspect of language.

### **Plastic Poetry: Global and Indian Contexts**

Plastic poetry is not only confined to English literature but also it is a worldwide phenomenon that disregards cultural and linguistic boundaries. Since the European avant-garde movements and even in Latin American experimental poetry, the desire to unite the text and image has manifested itself in various forms. Plastic poetry is universal because it appeals to the eyes, and it does not respect linguistic boundaries. The visual form may also be used to convey meanings even in a case where the reader lacks total comprehension of the language.

In the Indian context, the principles of plastic poetry can be tracked back to the old literary and artistic traditions. Sanskrit poetry, which stressed form, symmetry, and aesthetic experience (rasa), has some affinities with plastic poetics. Furthermore, the artistic Indian richness of imagery and symbolism in the temple architecture, as well as in the illumination of manuscripts, is evidence of a national tradition in which the form and meaning are closely intertwined. The philosophical principle of unity of form and meaning is very close to the postulates of plastic poetry. This cohesion is reflected in classical literature, where harmonization of sound, rhythm, and structure is one of the elements that create the entire aesthetical experience. Poetry, art poets, and artists are becoming more and more experimental in visual and digital forms in contemporary Indian literature. Although plastic poetry as a specific category might not always be explicitly defined, its impact can be observed in the works that are interested in typography, space organization, and multimedia expression. None can forget the contribution of the innumerable Indian social activists, whose endless efforts knowingly and unknowingly act as a powerful artistic tool for environmental activism, highlighting the toxic conveniences, ecological compensations, and ubiquity of waste in mundane life. Consequently, in India, plastic is in the plastic poetry and plastic poetry is in the plastic. To cut the story short, it can be said that plastic poetry is not an imported one but can be replicated in local culture.

### **The Future of Plastic Poetry**

Plastic poetry has a fruitful future since it is adept in adopting new technologies. Poetry has, now, gone beyond that point of being a static thing; it is now dynamic, interactive, and

multidimensional through the use of digital media. Virtual Reality (VR), AR (Augmented Reality), and AI (Artificial Intelligence) are mutually creating new possibilities of poetic expression. Poetry may take the form of a three-dimensional (3D) form in such environments, and readers are free to move about in it. Plastic poetry envisions a new era in which literature will cease being a text but rather a multisensory experience. The sound, the image, the movement, and the interaction; all are combined to create new forms of artistic expression owing to that this revolution of plastic poetry challenges the conventional concepts of the authorship and readership and establishes the more participatory and collaborative culture. Eventually, as a genre of poetry, plastic poetry is tilted towards a new aesthetic paradigm which has been receptive to complexity, hybridity, and experimentation. It makes one review the limits of literature and opens the endless possibilities of words.

#### (IV)

#### **Conclusion**

##### **Plastic Poetry: The Poetics of Form and Freedom**

The present study has attempted to critically examine plastic poetry as a revolutionary literary phenomenon that not only challenges but also redefines and radically transforms the ontological and aesthetic foundations of poetic expression. It is an exciting and constantly changing form of poetic activity, existing in a fast-changing cultural and technological environment, which expands the boundaries of poetry and introduces new means of expression of visual, auditory, and interactive poetry. Whereas the literary tradition of poets such as John Milton, William Wordsworth, and Emily Dickinson continues to testify to the timeless power of language created around the notions of rhythm, meter, and reflection, this paper demonstrates that the 21st-century art of poetry is more and more requiring a more spacious, more inclusive form of expression, that is, a way that may be heard in the non-linearity. The study also reveals that the form is not only a breakthrough in aesthetics but a significant medium of responding to desperate situations in the world, particularly those related to environmental catastrophes, since it entails the application of data, images, and sensory stimuli to evoke more immediate and more visceral reactions. In this manner, plastic poetry serves to bridge the gap between art and activism and transform the language of poetry into an ecologically aware and morally self-reflecting space. Correspondingly, the paper emphasizes how digital media and technological resources have enabled the democratization of literary production and reception; how they have enabled greater access to it, enabling a greater

participatory engagement, and enabling other voices to be heard to deconstruct canonical hierarchies. At the same time, it is also possible to observe that the appearance of plastic poetry does not mean the inadmissibility of the old forms, but, on the contrary, it is the start of a promising debate between the conventional and the adventurous, the transgression of the limits by the new.

In essence, the study suggests that as a novel form of poetry, plastic poetry is not an intrusion but a multiplication of the literary possibilities, a re-invention of poetry as an experience, as an interaction, and as a responsive social action that is responsive to the multidimensionality of contemporary human experience. As poetry, plastic poetry is a celebration of the versatility and durability of the art in an age of acceleration of technology, environmental emergency, and multiplicity of cultures, finally convincing that the poetic presentation is not fixed but a perpetually moving force that enables a writer to set its boundaries; and, at the same time, illuminate, challenge, and change the world in which s/he inhabits.

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