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Introduction

Our topic is poetry in itself and its kinds, and what potential each has: how plots should be constructed if the composition is to turn out well, from how many parts it is constituted, and of what sort they are, and likewise all other aspects of the same inquiry. An old academic joke provides the best emblem for the historical and thematic concerns that will dominate this book. April is the cruelest month. Choosing one’s tongue and point of view, one can call that a postscriptum or a foreword. For some years, being obliged on occasion to answer the question “What are you working on?” I was embarrassed to have to say, “A book of political economy.” Matthew Arnold’s war on the Philistines was fought, as everybody knows; but nobody thinks that it was won. Arma virumque cano. It is a frequent custom for those who seek the favor of a prince to make him presents of those things they value most highly or which they know are most pleasing to him. May it please Heaven that the reader, emboldened, and become momentarily as fierce as what he reads, find without loss of bearings a wild and sudden way across the desolate swamps of these sombre, poison-filled pages. We are talking now of summer evenings in Tennessee. They order, said I, this matter better in France. This (therefore) will not have been a book. This book was written in good faith, reader. It is paradoxical to make a retrospective survey of a work which never intended to be prospective. Each has his reasons: for one, art is a flight, for another a means of conquering. Robert Cohn was once middleweight boxing champion of Princeton. Critics are rarely faithful to their labels and their special strategies. I say that, as is affirmed in the first chapter, it is meet for this exposition to
be both literal and figural. Hermes, lord of the dead, who watch over the powers of my fathers, be my savior and stand by my claim. If it is a merit to have brought psychoanalysis into being, that merit is not mine. In my literary essays I have often spoken of the application of the experimental method to the novel and to the drama. To understand what poetics is, we must start with a general, and, of course, a somewhat simplified image of literary studies. The world is everything that is the case. The evidence of this fact is to be sought, not in the writings of the Critics, but in those of the Poets themselves. Many attempts have been made by writers on art and poetry to define beauty in the abstract, to express it in the most general terms, to find a universal formula for it. In Spring it is the dawn that is most beautiful. Men can do nothing without the make-believe of a beginning. If you only that I offer this work; nourish yourselves upon its principles. This is a delicate question, and one for which a good many different solutions might have been given at different periods and seasons. Now is the winter of our discontent. I at last deliver to the world a Work which has employed much of my time and labor. I do not wish to conceal. The Master said: Is it not pleasant to learn with a constant perseverance and application? This is the saddest story I have ever heard. Hegel remarks somewhere that all great, world-historical facts and persons occur, as it were, twice. This is the way in which I came to write certain of my books. For a long time I used to go to bed early. And then went down to the ship. The varieties of aphasia are numerous and diverse, but all of them oscillate between the two polar types just described. Hegel remarks somewhere that all great, world-historical facts and personages occur, as it were, twice. This is the saddest story I have ever heard. To stay cheerful when involved in a gloomy and exceedingly responsible business is no inconsiderable art: yet what could be more necessary than cheerfulness? While I was pondering thus in silence and using my pen to set down my tearful complaint, there appeared to me standing overhead a woman whose countenance was full of majesty, whose gleaming eyes surpassed in power of insight those of ordinary mortals, whose color was full of life, and whose strength was still intact though she was so full of years that by no means would it be believed that she was of our times. In the present state of society it appears necessary to go back to first principles in search of the most simple truths, and to dispute with some prevailing prejudice every inch of ground. The object before us, to begin with: material production. This book affirms the reality of spirit and the reality of matter, and tries to determine the relation of the one to the other by the study of a definite example, that of memory. My intention is to tell of bodies changed to different forms. The schoolmaster was leaving the village and everybody seemed sorry. The world is so taken up of late with novels and romances that it will be hard for a private history to be taken for genuine, where the names and other circumstances of the person are concealed, and on this account we must be content to leave the reader to pass his own opinion upon the ensuing sheets, and take it just as he pleases. License as permit, as permission from an outside authority; license as defiance of authority, as failure to obtain a permit—the introductions of our time have navigated with difficulty between these options. It will be seen that this mere painstaking borrower and grub-worm of a poor devil of a Sub-Sub appears to have gone through the long Vatican and street-stalls of the earth, picking up whatever random allusions to introductions he could anyways find in any book whatsoever, sacred or profane. Criticism, I take it, is the formal discourse of an amateur. Voluptuaries of all ages, of every sex, it is to you only that I offer this work; nourish yourselves upon its principles. This book is not for the overfed. The claim of the author's "intention" upon the critic's judgment has been challenged in a number of recent discussions. It is my purpose in this book to try to trace the origins of certain tendencies in contemporary literature and to show their development in the work of six contemporary writers. The following narrative is intended to answer a purpose more general and important than immediately appears upon the face of it. I have resolved on an enterprise which has no precedent, and which, once complete, will have no imitator. If ye be thus resolved, as it were injury to think ye were not, I know not what should withhold me from presenting ye with a fit instance wherein to shew both that tone of truth which ye eminently profess, and that uprightnesse of your judgement which is not wont to be partial to your selves; by judging over again that Order which ye have ordained to regulate printing. 'Tis hard to say if
greater want of skill appear in writing or in judging ill. How you felt, when you heard my accusers, I do not know; but I—well, I nearly forgot who I was, they were so persuasive. It would only be right and proper if this volume were published without any preface, or without any name on the title page, but simply with its own name to speak for itself. It is a trite but true observation, that examples work more forcibly on the mind than precepts. Nothing to be done. Often cap. often attrib: a symbol for the first in a series or group. (Coming in through the open window from the terrace). I don’t know how you found me, but since you’re here you might as well come in and sit down.

Although this book was begun while I was a graduate student at Berkeley, it could never have been a dissertation. The requirements for a doctorate granted by the University of California at Berkeley preclude it. In the Graduate Division’s “Guidelines for Submitting a Doctoral Dissertation,” the section on format sets rigid typographic constraints, regulating font, spacing, margins, binding, paper stock, and even ink. Furthermore, these guidelines pay particular attention to legibility: “any legible typeface, except script, italic, or ornamental fonts, is acceptable for the body of the text,” and the rulebook elaborates: “the print should be letter quality with dark black characters that are consistently clear and dense.” Additionally, photocopies “must be clearly legible,” and the guidelines warn: “pages with illegible or disfiguring erasure or corrections, or with changes likely to be unclear in photographic reproduction, will be rejected.” At one point, it declares that any “photocopy must be as legible as the original” — as if such a feat were even theoretically possible.

This all sounds, I know, like an overwrought harping on trivialities, or as though I were grandly pointing a finger at the most obvious and expected symptoms of an all-too-familiar bureaucratic pathology. Or perhaps simply as though I have been long nursing some festering and frustrated animosity toward the authority which I was too powerless, or too cowardly, to face while still a student and against which I can now safely rail. But one should at least pause over the fact that the requirements for a dissertation are not adequate to the intellectual rigor one would hope to expect from the dissertation itself. Because in the final analysis, a dissertation—nor as the academic project it was, nor as the book it will become, but as such—is unable to claim the authority necessary to overrule that authority which grants its status and brings it into being; it can never overcome the theoretical limitations of its own requirements.

And besides, such textual details are never merely trivial. As the following chapters will demonstrate, the very “accidentals” governed by the university’s “Guidelines”—type, layout, paper stock, and so on—are far from ever incidental. Indeed, what follows will argue for precisely why details like spacing and margins are important enough for a university to worry about. The embarrassment of such guidelines—and they are certainly not restricted to one instance at one school—is not that the obsessive focus of their scope is petty or unimportant but rather that their importance is unrecognized and untheorized. The problem is not that such requirements are too formal but that they are not sufficiently formalist. At numerous points, and often with an even greater attention to specifics, this book examines the very same elements inspected by the Graduate Division. Unlike the Graduate Division, however, this book proceeds with what I describe in the first chapter as a “radical formalism”: one that reads textual details not merely as points of description but rather as inherently significant (that is, both important and signifying) and independent of lexical reference. A radical formalism, that is, reads such details as points of description.

Because those details signify with the same force as lexical denotation, these guidelines that pass themselves off as simply the etiquette of format are in fact a substantial restriction on the semantic possibilities of University of California dissertations. Ostensibly, of course, the “content” of the dissertation is judged by members of the supervising faculty committee and is guaranteed by their signatures, while the Graduate Division merely regulates and regularizes a presentation supposedly incidental to that content. But perhaps it still needs to be said once more (and with feeling): the “formal” elements of a text quite simply cannot be separated from its “content.” The matter is ontological: there exists absolutely no “idea,” no “result” of my research, that I could communicate without regard to its form even if I wanted to do such a thing (and the same would be true if my work were the presentation of research in molecular biology or algebraic topology). The Graduate Division’s proscriptions are thus more than a sign of the conservatism typical of academia; they don’t just dull the surface presentation of the text, replacing the flair permitted by multimedia and desktop-publishing technologies with the typewriter style of a government document, nor do they merely discourage innovative and creative intellectual work; they also ultimately regulate within the very jurisdiction they seek to disclaim: what can in fact be said, as communicable content, by a dissertation at a prominent research institution.

But this present work, written beyond the strictures of a graduate divi-
sion, is nevertheless—and necessarily—at heart a betrayal of the very values for which it argues. At several points in the following chapters I explicitly address the contradictions that beset a conventionally written advocacy of innovative writing, but for now let me briefly suggest why there may be some worth in having this work stand as it is (though like all apologies, the truth of these claims neither sufficiently excuses the fault which they would propitiate nor mitigates the pathetic delusion of the hope with which they are made). If nothing else, perhaps this book will direct readers to a literature that they would not otherwise have encountered, and by dint of its conventionality it may actually create opportunities for those decidedly unconventional texts to achieve the results unique to their methods and beyond the ability of a flatly expository work. This book, moreover, may perform as one-half of a dialectical pair, permitting a synthesis of understanding when read in conjunction with the radical writing it discusses. This is hopefully not, in other words, just a reference to certain innovative writings, but also a facilitator, a catalyst that will reduce the risk that the texts it treats will remain inert, or be too quickly passed over.

And so what follows is also a confession of sorts. “Critics are generally poets who have betrayed their art, and instead have tried to turn art into a matter of reasoned discourse, and, occasionally, when their ‘truth’ breaks down, they resort to a poetic quote.”

Moreover, those university “Guidelines” are all to the point, because this book, as the title indicates, is essentially about how we read the illegible. “It is wonderful how a handwriting which is illegible can be read, oh yes it can,” Gertrude Stein asserts, and this book begins with a similar faith that the illegible can indeed be read. Rather than orthography, however, it focuses on poetic works that appropriate and then physically manipulate a source text, employing erasures, overprintings, excisions, cancellations, re-arrangements, and so on, to render part of the source text literally unreadable. Interestingly enough, as it turns out, the university’s guidelines ensure that illegibility would have been a fundamental concern of my dissertation regardless of its topic. Of every University of California dissertation. Bibliography is destiny.

In short, the basic thesis of this book is...
any particular signification is historically contingent and never inherently meaningful or a priori. As a concrete example, consider, for the moment, sans serif typefaces. In the early twentieth century, the "functionalism and quiet line" associated with the unadorned and hard-edged sans serif made it de rigueur for those who wanted to signify a futuristic modernity in line with the streamlined look of an industrial machine age. The name of Paul Renner's famous sans serif, was not incidental. Indeed, sans serif was so strongly established as the textual look of the Bauhaus that in 1928 Jan Tschichold could write (in a text originally set in the jobbing sans serif Akzidenz Grotesk): "to proclaim sans serif as the typeface of our time is not a conventional reading habits." 13 In the first chapter, I will argue for the political and historical resonance of such misreadings, but in brief, my dual claim is that paragrammatics— as a tactic for both reading and writing— manifests a certain politics within the realm of literature itself, and that examples of literary paragrammatics provide concrete models for the sort of cultural activities readers might then bring to other aspects of the world around them. This book is thus the admission of a certain utopianism; but I would rather maroon myself nowhere than surrender to a status quo with which I am not content, and in which "erasure and palimpsests are reduced to a flat / Surface effect: the afterlife of ethics." 14

When I began this project I knew of only a few examples of "poetic illegibility," which I took to constitute an interesting collection of rarities. These texts seemed worth the sustained work of a book primarily because even as an habitual reader of "difficult" poetry, and a scholar familiar with avant-garde traditions, I was unable to figure out how to write about them; they stood out as works about which I had nothing to say, and the extremity of their resistance was in itself a strong invitation to make the attempt. One of the rewards of searching and researching through special library collections, however, was to discover how often writers and artists have used such techniques (and there are undoubtedly many more examples than I have found). Moreover, I was surprised to learn that such works were generally unknown even among scholars often accused of narrow specialization, just as even among a poetic avant-garde so often faulted for coterie insularity these works were frequently unknown, even when authored by another member of the community—and as you will soon see, these are remarkable, striking, and memorable works at that. One of my hopes for this book, as I suggested above, is that it will direct readers to literature they might not otherwise have encountered, and in large part I intend this book to serve as an initial, critical guide to a tradition which has itself remained largely illegible. To this end, I have included many references in the endnotes to works on which my analyses do not directly focus. Within each chapter, I have kept the focus on one or two works, letting them serve as touchstone exempla for the particular technique of illegibility—erasure, overprinting, writing-through, and so on— around which each chapter is organized. While some readings are obviously limited to the specific text under discussion, readers should keep in mind that many of my larger claims apply not only to other instances of a given technique, but often to phenomena of illegibility in general.

In addition to providing a critical history, this book should also prepare us to be better readers of contemporary writing, because such procedures have only become increasingly ubiquitous and varied in recent years. In particular, many younger poets are rediscovering—or more often than not reinventing— techniques of illegibility. Part of this interest and activity derives from developments in digital technology, which have made the effects
I consider here all the more easy and inexpensive to create and reproduce. As that technology develops, and as the generation of writers just now emerging matures, I hope that this book will lay part of the groundwork needed to effectively engage the literature that will mark the new millennium.

If a specific work discussed in this book is likely to be unknown even to writers who are also part of an avant-garde community, or who have themselves engaged in similar practices, the existence of these types of works—the knowledge of a tradition of poetic illegibility—has been part of the poetic imagination of the last thirty years. Even if such works are not a commonplace of the poetic landscape, they have been part of the background against which other, less visually dramatic works have been undertaken, and the force of their pressure on that poetic imagination derives from the same factors that make them important even for the reader who is generally uninterested in innovative writing as such. Because many of the works I address stand on the threshold of legibility, they serve as limit cases that define the field of everything that is readable, and the exceptional extremity of their means, in fact, allows us to better test the claims we would make about all literature. Such works not only put descriptions of “difficult” and “radical” textual practices into better perspective, but they also further our understanding of the constraints and possibilities inherent in the act of reading, the construction of linguistic meaning, and the very nature of language itself. In ways that help us to think through certain ideas more fully, many of these works constitute not merely illustrations, but literal and concrete enactments of theoretical concepts—like Jacques Derrida’s *écriture sous rature*, or Martin Heidegger’s *kreuzweise Durchstreichung*—that have by now become all but clichéd. Similarly, they allow us to see familiar and canonical examples afresh: Eliot’s telling blank space in the last line of *The Waste Land*, where he omits the “Om” that in fact begins “the formal ending to an Upanishad”; Pound’s ground-breaking replication of Malatesta’s epistle in “Canto VIII”; Williams’s conclusion of *A Novelette* with the revelatory “OL MPI” (like his reduction of “song” to “son” in *Spring & All*); or Zukofsky’s similar transformation in *A*—7 of a “toilet”—“rent in arrears”—into a literal *vacancy* “to let.” What were, for these modernists, isolated instances of literary daring or dramatic special effects, have become for their successors the very procedures by which entire books are written.

A frustrating and intimidating condition of undertaking this sort of sustained writing project is the knowledge of blind spots which one cannot, by definition, detect on one’s own; but I should perhaps make clear, from the outset, a few of the parameters which have knowingly limited this investigation. To begin with, I have not gone beyond quite literal examples of illegibility to consider the many figural uses of the “unreadable.” Nonetheless, the works I discuss provide concrete instantiations of such metaphors and thereby put them to the test, giving us a renewed understanding of the powerful imaginative descriptions which have implicated themselves in a rhetoric of illegibility. Indeed, certain conceptual constructions have been so dependent on figures of the unreadable that to reconsider illegibility as such has the potential to effect far-reaching revisions in thought. For just one example, recall Freud’s discussion of psychic disturbances, which he famously casts in textual terms and which evoke nothing so much as a descriptive catalogue of the works I consider here: “one way [to resolve such disturbances] would be for the offending passages to be thickly crossed through so that they were illegible,” another way would be “to proceed to distort the text. Single words would be left out,” and “best of all, the whole passage would be erased. . . .”

Because of the claims I make for paragrammatics, I have also limited my discussion to instances of “strategic illegibility” rather than considering issues of textual editing and paleography, such as inadvertent printing errors or the range of illegibilities inherent in manuscripts. However, since those documents and my examples often share the same visual effects, perhaps this book will allow similar instances—as well as an erroneously garbled or damaged message, say, or graffiti on the side of a bus—to be read less as regrettable losses and more as exciting, poetic possibilities. I refrain as well from considering the use of illegibility in graphic design and commercial advertising, where these techniques have an independent tradition and use, although much of what I say will again leave readers more aware of the processes and stakes that confront them when they come across a software manual with illustrations that use the iconic conventions of layout mock-up, or a compact disc like the one marketed by ECM for the Hilliard Ensemble, which sports a cover strikingly similar to Rosmarie Waldrop’s presswork. Similarly, while this is certainly not a book about visual poetry in general, certain aspects of its method should prove useful for reading other, more subtle visual effects.

And one final note: while I focus on the visual dimension of written language, my claims about the materiality of language apply equally to the
sonic dimensions of spoken language, and much of what follows could serve as a model for listening to the inaudible.

Speaking of which ("unexpected echoes"), if it would be ridiculous to ground the cultural significance of this book in a reading of the Nixon White House tapes as intertexts of the contemporaneous artistic experiments with erasure and electromagnetic tape, the procedures I discuss here are not without their "real world" civic consequences. The most radical anagrammatic disarticulations are a case in point; in Wisconsin, the governor's power of item veto (itself a genre of "writing-through") extended until recently to "striking individual letters in the words of an enrolled bill" in order to create new words, and the governor is still permitted to delete individual words and eliminate digits in an appropriations bill. While the most recent constitutional interpretation requires that the remaining text constitute a "complete, entire, and workable law," the state supreme court has explicitly declared that the governor can even use such erasures—like Tom Phillips's treatment of a Victorian novel—to change the original legislative intent.

In an essay on Blanchot, Derrida asks: "How can one text, assuming its unity, give or present another to be read, without touching it, without saying anything about it, practically without referring to it?" The question is only complicated by recalling Ludwig Wittgenstein's discussion of metacritical rules: "Any interpretation still hangs in the air with what it interprets, and cannot give it any support." If I have, at times, abjured interpretation in the following pages, it has only been to give onto reading.

This is a book about (upon) Marcel Duchamp, in which he is only ever mentioned, as it were, en passant.
the ghost of "re[a]dness" from this passage, particularly in the context of a later discussion which employs the prop of a sheet of paper that can still be "re[a]d" despite the "imagery" which "shows us something less definite" and "hazier." Keeping the indefinite imagery of Bernstein's Veil in mind, I want to turn, in the following chapter, to some similar experiments in overprinting and consider what it would really mean to destroy readness.

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—Samuel Beckett, letter to Axel Kaun

4. The Inhumanness of Language

Destroying Readness

In his philosophical investigation of the "bewitching" and "seductive" nature of language, Wittgenstein states: "A picture held us captive. And we could not get outside it, for it lay in our language and language seemed to repeat itself to us inexorably." Taken literally, this proposition might serve as an apt description of Rosmarie Waldrop's Camp Printing, which submits the texts of some of James Camp's fairly conventional lyrics to a series of repetitive overprintings. Unlike the palimpsests of different texts in Veil, each page of Waldrop's book reiterates a single poem. Nevertheless, the range of visual effects and the degree of illegibility is even more dramatic. The book opens with the slightly out-of-focus blur of a single duplication and progresses—adding a layer with each page and increasingly bringing the texts into vertical alignment—until eight levels of text have accumulated. The almost filmic sense of animated print accreting before the reader's eyes imparts an illusion of textual activity to the process of turning pages; the opening sequence emphasizes the codicological structure of the book and at the same time undercuts its usually static impression.

This sequence is followed by a page which effects the almost total cancellation of its text beneath a smear of twenty-two printings made along a carefully maintained horizontal axis, after which the layering in the poems becomes less extreme but more compositionally varied. Texts appear to vibrate, stipple into the texture of magnified brushstrokes, and sweep across the page in arcs that recall the lines of force in chronophotography and its futurist imitations. (See figure 7.) Repeating itself to us in-
exorably, the language in these poems approaches the pictorial. In part, such works produce abstract forms by exploiting the visuality of writing for compositional ends, a potential realized in more legible ways by the calligrammes of Apollinaire and the collages of cubism and futurism. "Writing" in these poems, to appropriate Plato's famous line from the Phaedrus, "is very much like painting." 3 To speak of the "purely visual" nature of such texts, however, or to close off their reading by classifying them as "visual" art, would be a mistake—and not just because writing is itself (always) already a visual art.

The ideal of a "perfect" language, one operating exophorically to communicate a "content" of purely referential signifieds, would depend—as the quotations from Silliman and Marin in the previous chapter have implied—on the absolute transparency of the medium: not just the "disappearance of the word" into a "blank page," but ultimately the disappearance of even that page itself. 4 As the material of the medium asserts itself with an increasingly intrusive opacity, the exophoric possibilities diminish in proportion. This ratio, however, need not be construed elegiacaely.

As I will try to make clear in this chapter, the materiality of the medium makes available alternative strategies for pursuing signs along routes of signification, and it thus allows language to function anaphorically and cataphorically—gesturing forward and backwards within the economy of the text. This shifting dynamic between opacity and transparence, between the material and the meaning it subtends, explains in part why so many difficult and visually unconventional works seem self-referential or metatextual. *Veil,* as I noted earlier, contains undeniably self-reflexive passages, but as *Camp Printing* manifests by its use of poems from a different context, even phrases with no explicit reference to their production take on an added charge when they are the only readable words in an otherwise illegible page. The examples are numerous, but consider a poem I have already mentioned, in which "errors" immediately suggests the overprinting which mirrors duplicated lines into a twinkling sweep of words objectified into *aesthetic distances* from which most are *dim* but a few can be made out in the *indecent exposure* made necessary by the mechanics of the printing process used to make the overlay.

As a text moves even further towards complete illegibility, the diminishing denotational capacity of its words helps to foreground the potential of the medium itself to signify, regardless of any specific "content" at all. Consider, for instance, the information carried by typeface and conveyed by even the smallest fragments of letterforms. Bernstein's "veils," for example, appear as typewritten works—with all the connotations of that machine—even before their words can be made out. Similarly, were the poems in *Camp Printing* composed in a black-letter gothic they would be distinctly different poems because they would convey distinctly different cultural information, just as would the connotations of a particular word substituted for its synonym. Such examples could be multiplied, or expanded to include more subjective responses, but I instead want to indicate one of the physical aspects of these poems which signifies even when the typeface itself has been rendered illegible. Compare the indecipherable lines of Waldrop's most heavily overprinted poems with Man Ray's "Lautgedicht" ("Sound-Poem"). 5 (See figure 8.) The aesthetics of cancellation will be addressed elsewhere in this book, but for now simply note how *laut* this seemingly muffled poem actually is. Without access to a single word, the viewer immediately knows something of the poem's genre and subject (and one is quite sure that it is a poem); it is neither a haiku nor an epic, for instance, and it is likely to be more conventional than experimental, more lyric than narrative. Regardless of such reasoned speculations, the poems
by both Waldrop and Man Ray are obviously closed and carefully measured forms. From the quick and uneven opening of its tercet first stanza, "Lautgedicht" balances with two longer stanzas at its center and then conveys a strong "sense of an ending" with the sturdy, neatly four-square final stanza, wherein the line lengths, which have varied somewhat throughout the poem, settle to a much greater uniformity. The force of the quatrains in Waldrop's poem, where the regularity of line length further suggests a metrical regulation, is even more pronounced.\footnote{6}

The meanings which attend these details of visual prosody interact with the syntactic and denotative meanings of textual reference, and their information can underscore those references (as in most concrete poetry, for instance) or contradict them (as some dada poets discovered). Beyond such meanings, the visual text also encodes more specific information about the material production of its language. As the textual history of Susan Howe's work has made clear—with the "same" poem altering its appearance slightly as it migrates from chapbook to journal to one anthology or another—the range of a text's visual prosody depends to a large extent on the mechanics of reproduction. Certain effects, and this is particularly true of overprinting, can be obtained only by letterpress, others by offset lithography, others by Quark and a laser printer, and so on. Part of the information carried by the visual form of *Camp Printing* is the possibilities and constraints of its medial technologies.\footnote{7} The text, for instance, informs the reader that it was composed on a machine which permitted the same sheet to be reprinted with some precision; similarly, regardless of the look of its letterforms, the text announces that it was not produced on a typewriter, where the carriage space would restrict the rotation of the paper. One could deduce further specifics, but the point is that the material exigencies of the text, in these ways, always hint at the allegory of its mode of production, and it is in this sense that the printing of Waldrop's book—while not being particularly funny (the overprinting is too meticulous and beautiful to avoid seeming serious)—is indeed actually *campy*: self-ironic and always drawing attention to its artifice.

So while the physical opacity of a text prevents communication from ever being perfect, meaning is always being communicated by that very materiality. Those excesses of signification provided by the physical properties of a poem complicate any simple understanding of concepts like "meaning" and "information." More clearly than most works, *Veil* and *Camp Printing* serve as reminders of the conceptual limitations of restricting such terms to denotative reference. In their refusal to convey denotive information, the texts I have been considering would seem at first to be the ultimate fulfillment of a definition of "poetry" which has echoed through this century as a mainstay of formalist poetics. In Jan Mukavský's familiar version, "poetry" is that language which "is not used in the services of communication," and Wittgenstein offers a similar caveat: "Do not forget that a poem, although it is composed in the language of information, is not used in the language game of giving information." The text, however, has already been picked for the team and cannot help but play along; it can never escape from the services of communication or decline to give infor-
information in any but the narrowest sense. As reminders of the non-denotative aspects of language, statements like these are important, but even in their rejections they still operate on the terms of normative, implicitly conservative, models of communication, and they too quickly foreclose possibilities for a wider understanding of the very concepts they employ.

Similarly, in the terms of information theory, obstacles to "giving information"—the overinking, doubled printing, or smudge which blots out a word, to give just a few relevant instances among a wide range of potential impediments—would usually be considered as "noise." By explicitly introducing noise as message, these poems briefly short-circuit the parasitic economy; they remind readers that the distinction between "message" and "noise" ultimately deconstructs itself (in the most technical sense of the phrase). I have addressed the political aspects of these issues at some length in chapter 2, and here I want to recall Michel Serres's torus as a model for understanding the precarious liminal space where these poems balance in other (though ultimately, perhaps, equivalent) terms. In their most extreme instances, the works I have been discussing occupy a privileged position between what we might name "meaning" and "signification," or "language" and "writing," or "writing" and "inscription."

So far, all of the examples I have mentioned of information being communicated by the material text still operate referentially; that is, they convey some arbitrary, culturally determined "meaning." While form must mean, it need not necessarily correspond to any particular, a priori meaning. The materiality of written language, however, opens up yet further possibilities for formally encoded signification which would generate meaning by radically different protocols. However naturalized they seem, the strategies we normally use to activate written language as signs (what we usually think of simply as "reading": what you are doing now in following this sentence to its end) might be substituted with other techniques of engaging a text. These alternatives, moreover, would not necessarily be perverse, to the degree that the writing itself does not mandate the conventional (in all the relevant senses) modes of processing its data. The material form of language, by definition, permits those conventional modes of reading, but they cannot be extrapolated back out of the material form in any requisite way. By deploying language vertically and disrupting the horizontal spacing of words and letters, overprinting explicitly presents codes other than the pursuit of words spread out in sequential, horizontal lines meant to be followed repetitively left to right, top to bottom.9

Perhaps the most infamous example of an alternative protocol comes from Ferdinand de Saussure's notebooks on paragrammes.10 The story by now is familiar, but worth recalling. In brief, de Saussure suspected that classical verse contained the names of otherwise unmentioned dedicatory figures, whose monikers were disseminated through the text in disarticulated phonemes. "Apollo," for instance, might appear distributed as "ad mea templ a portato," With a chilling meticulousness—"we are not forgetting the patience of the mad, their love of detail," as Lyn Hejinian might put it—de Saussure labored to enumerate the intricate and unfailingly consistent rules he saw governing the paragrammes. But then he wasn't so sure after all. Not only could a single couplet supply an almost endless number of names, but the paragrammes were not limited to classical verse—one might start reading them out of any text and seeing them everywhere. From this vantage, the material signifier thus comes to be seen as not simply an unfortunate precondition for communicating some intended linguistic meaning, but also as the matrix for the generation of multiple, uncontrollable, and unhierarchized meanings. Faced with la folie du langue, this "uncontrollable power of the letter as inscription," de Saussure suppressed his work and backed away from the project with a caution that "supports the assumption of a terror glimpsed."11 That terror was the inhumaness of language.12

I borrow this term from Paul de Man, who provides a succinct and tellingly emphatic definition:

"the inhuman is: linguistic structures, the play of linguistic tensions, linguistic events that occur, possibilities which are inherent in language—indeed, independently of any intent or any drive or any wish or any desire we might have."

De Man here contrasts the linguistic (language as a material structure) with the discursive (language as meaning).14 Given the articulating system of alphabetic writing, with its grammar of spacing, lettering, and recombination, a material signification—as de Saussure's paragrammes demonstrate—is always excessive and indiscreet. The multiplicity of potential meanings in such a system can sometimes be exploited, or recuperated, but it can never be entirely circumscribed or controlled; the materiality of language always escapes semantics, in the sense of any totalizing reading that could claim coherent closure. That is to say, one could of course write paragrammatically, bringing its model within the circle of intention and control, but then other possibilities would have to be overlooked, and even if all of those alternatives could be recognized, they could never be simultaneously
Jean-François Lyotard puts it in his own essay on the "inhuman."

Or out only on the basis of an absolute renunciation of meaning.

Language can be felt in the "laughter" that always emerges from "slaughter," it has taken many incarnations in recent theoretical writings, of which I regard for its meaning effects; "a pure language entirely freed of the illusion of meaning." Language is relentless in its excesses, and those inevitable excesses are precisely that "nonhuman aspect of language . . . from which we cannot escape, because language does things which are so radically out of our control that we cannot be assimilated to the human at all, against which one fights constantly." Part of that fight is taken up by the way certain reading habits condition us to ignore the material effects of language, just as we are conditioned to regard the eye as transparent. But the wolf is always at the door; from the moment of inscription writing introduces the materiality of the letter, the independence, or the way in which the letter can disrupt the ostensibly stable meaning of a sentence and introduce in it a slippage by means of which that meaning disappears, evanesces, and by means of which all control over that meaning is lost.

"Matter asks no questions, expects no answers of us. It ignores us. It made us the way it made all bodies—by chance and according to its laws," as Jean-François Lyotard puts it in his own essay on the "inhuman." Or again, as George Oppen writes: "Words cannot be wholly transparent. And that is the 'heartlessness' of words." The indifference (in difference) of language can be felt in the "laughter" that always emerges from "slaughter," but that laughter is never mocking, because—like the opacities of vision that the eye, beyond the range of willful bodily control, produces independently of picturing any external images—the inhuman of language has no regard for its meaning effects; "a pure language (reine Sprache) . . . would be entirely freed of the illusion of meaning." In the slaughter of semantics, that laughter "n'éclate que depuis le renoncement absolu au sens [bursts out only on the basis of an absolute renunciation of meaning]."

If the description of the "inhuman" has the feel of déjà lu, that is because it has taken many incarnations in recent theoretical writings, of which I want to single out just one particularly resonant version, which also takes de Saussure's paragrammes as its cue. In Jean Baudrillard's account, the display of illegibly overprinted texts, "purement graphiques et indéchiffrables," where the message has ceased to exist under the imposition of the medium—a writing where there is nothing to read, like "une image où il n'y a rien à voir [an image where there is nothing to see]"—achieves "l'extase de la communication [the ecstasy of communication]."

Under that swoon of language, ce n'est plus nous qui lui donnons un sens ou non en le [monde] transcendant ou en le réfléchissant. Merveilleuse est l'indifférence du monde à cet égard, merveilleuse l'indifférence des choses à notre égard, et leurs passion pourtant de se dérouler et de meler leurs apparences.

it is no longer we who give or withhold meaning in transcending or reflecting upon the world. The indifference of the world in this respect is marvelous; the indifference of things with regard to us is marvelous—and still they spread out before us, in their promiscuous poses, with such passion.

In this gleeful version of de Saussure's terror, Baudrillard recognizes that "le malin génie du langage consiste à se faire objet, là où on attend du sujet et du sens [the evil demon of language consists in its ability to render itself as an object, where one had instead expected to find subject and meaning]." In Baudrillard's idiosyncratic vocabulary, the indifference of that ecstatic demon (an incarnation of Serres's: ex-static) is fatal—"Tout ce qui s'enchaîne hors du sujet, donc du côté de sa disparition, est fatal. Tout ce qui n'est plus une stratégie humaine devient par là même une stratégie fatale [Everything linked up beyond the subject, and therefore on the side of its disappearance, is fatal. All that which is no longer a human strategy becomes, by definition, a fatal strategy]"—as well as seductive: "si l'objet nous séduit, c'est d'abord par son indifférence [if the object seduces us, it does so first by its indifference]." And as we shall see next, "La séduction est maudite (mais ce n'est pas là son moindre charme) [Seduction is damned (but that's not the least of its charms)]."

To conceptualize language in these ways is to understand it as operating in a general economy. In contrast to restricted economies, which are predicated on scarcity, general economies are driven by surplus and excess. Georges Bataille develops the concept at length over several volumes, but he provides a concise definition of such systems, as well as the related idea of "sovereignty," in a footnote from L'expérience intérieure.
L'économie générale met en évidence en premier lieu que des excédents d'énergie se produisent qui, par définition, ne peuvent être utilisés. L'énergie excédante ne peut être que perdue sans le moindre but, en conséquence sans aucun sens. C'est cette perte inutile, insensée, qui est la souveraineté.

General economy evinces, firstly, that excesses of energy are produced which, by definition, cannot be utilized. That excessive energy cannot but be lost without the least goal, and hence without any meaning. It is this useless, meaningless loss, which is sovereignty.30

"Dans la souveraineté, l'autonomie procède... d'un refus de conserver, d'une prodigalité sans mesure... La souveraineté ne diffère en rien d'une dissipation sans limite [In sovereignty, autonomy proceeds... from a refusal to conserve, from an infinite prodigality...]. Sovereignty does not differ in the least from a limitless dissipation].31 We have already met Bataille's "sovereignty" in the queenly (Reine) indifference of "pure" (reine) language, which one can do absolutely nothing (rien de rien) to rein in completely or deny (nier) its ultimately elusive margin of material signification. Recalling all those "demons" which have haunted systems (from Clerk Maxwell's entropic to Baudrillard's ecstatic to Serres's prosopopoeia of noise), as well as Blake's repeated assertion that "the limit of Opakeness is named Satan," that material excess of the textual (general) economy, the "inhuman" measure of language, is—in Bataille's lexicon—le part maudite: the devil's lot, the accursed share. Le part maudite is that portion given up to waste in potlatch or "sacrifice," which in Bataille's argument compensates for the abuse something suffers in its role as an object of utile servitude by restoring it to subjecthood. Accordingly, by ostentatiously celebrating language's indifference (in both the narrow sense of erasing articulation beneath an undifferentiated inscription, and the broader sense of its disinterested sovereignty) at the expense of its role as an uncomplicatedly servile object of utilitarian communication (servile utility, one will recall, was precisely and not coincidentally the goal of the new traditionalists' typographic transparency), poems like those in Camp Printing become that mode of sacrifice in which the victims are words.32

The point is worth repeating; this understanding of language does not imply that some of the ineluctable excesses of the linguistic system could not be recuperated, by either a resourceful writer or reader, as part of a restricted economy of semantic meaning. Indeed, even to view the inevitable loss of meaning in a (general) textual economy as tragic or nostalgic is to lose one's grip on the general as it slides irrevocably into a restricted economy in which that apparently profitless loss has thus been salvaged—if only partially—as affect, and so recycled for the benefit of the reader.33 Rather than think of a general or restricted economy as being a fixed characteristic of some object, one would do better to conceive of them as shifting frames of reference, or as the point of view from which a given system is understood. General and restricted economies are not, however, easily separable alternatives which one might simply choose between; they ceaselessly irrupt within one another according to the same dynamic that defines the relationship between opacity and transparence. In ways that constantly destabilize the very categories of "general" and "restricted," every text threatens to sacrifice itself in an ecstatic loss of meaning, at the same time that its meaninglessness can always be accounted for (even if only as the meaning of "meaninglessness"). If there is no language perfectly subservient to the communication of exophoric reference, neither is there "souveraineté elle-même [sovereignty itself]."34

To put this another way, let me be explicit about the converse of a proposition I have taken up in some detail; a purely opaque materiality would be as untenable as a perfectly transparent language. Faced with language in its sheer materiality, one would no longer be able to recognize it as language.35 Paradoxically, Warde's ideal of the "crystal goblet" is achieved at the price of its inversion; only in its complete opacity, and not in some imagined transparency, does writing become invisible, does it disappear as writing. "Le cristal," as Baudrillard sums up, "se venge [the crystal takes its revenge]."36 "We all secretly venerate the ideal of a language which in the last analysis would deliver us from language by delivering us to things," according to Maurice Merleau-Ponty, but even if that "thing" is the materiality of language itself, deliverance is always ultimately withheld. Even to recognize a single disarticulated letter as a letter already incorporates the rest of the alphabet which it presupposes, or—as with an unknown script—to imagine the possibility of an alphabet. That moment of recognition accounts for the giddy thrill of encountering a foreign language written in a script one does not understand, and it has intrigued the many writers who have attempted, as Wittgenstein proposed, to "imagine some arbitrary cipher."37 Henri Michaux's anthropomorphized "characters," Christian Dotremont's logogrammes, Decio Pignatari's semiotic poems, Dieter Roth's variations, B. P. Nichol's 80 Alphabets, the graphism of les lettristes, as well as much graffiti art, all experiment with that alphabetic threshold. Even more pertinent are Hansjörg Mayer's overprinted alphabets, some
of which recall the blurred motion of Waldrop’s poems or the lattices of Bernstein’s “veils.”

Both Camp Printing and Veil, in fact, might be thought of as participating in this intergenre tradition, because like invented scripts they provide a glimpse of the moment—fleeting and almost imperceptible—when writing shifts between a general and a restricted economy as “the materiality of the letter” passes from the unrecognizable opacity of “pure . . . datum” into readable, if not intelligible, “language.” One catches that glimpse not through Alberti’s transparent window out on the world, but from the other side of the screen from which language looks back with its “stony gaze.” Even if it could never achieve a reine Sprache that would be identifiable as such, the illegible poem offers a rare view as it balances on the cusp of Serres’s torus: displaying the material precondition of language in all its nonreferential opacity while—momentarily—staying the illimitable movement of the gram which might induce la folie de Saussure. The unreadable text is an outer limit for poetry, Bernstein has written, and by inhabiting the threshold at which writing passes between the field of human language and the inhumaness of sheer materiality, the illegible text is a literalization of Wittgenstein’s proposition that “dass die Grenzen der Sprache (der Sprache, die allein ich versteh) die Grenzen meiner Welt bedeuten [the limits of language (the language which I understand) mean the limits of my world].” Approaching the limit (sub limis) of an “opaque immeasurable,” in fact, is all to the point. As they negotiate unstable middle ground in the field of inscription, the most extreme poems in Veil and Camp Printing open onto vistas of the textual sublime.

De Saussure’s reaction to the paragramme’s infinite proliferation of recombinatory possibilities “in a manner analogous to terror,” indeed, suggests nothing so much as the experience of the “mathematical sublime.” Moreover, to arrive at a recognition of the inhumaness of language through texts like Veil or Camp Printing—with their “obscurity,” “privations such as darkness,” “silence,” and “difficulty”—would seem to correspond perfectly, if rather literally, to Burke’s description of the sublime object, which intervenes against habit and familiarity to make things strange, and which works to “create particular problems for the sensations—by presenting themselves as too powerful or too vast or too obscure or too much of a deprivation for the senses to process them comfortably.” The discourse on the sublime (not to be confused with sublime discourse) has done brisk business recently, and this is not the place for yet another critical reading of the tradition which has developed under its name. I do, however, want to draw attention to how suggestively the rhetoric of the sublime reads in relation to illegible writing, as well as how neatly it dovetails with descriptions of the “inhumaness” of language, further emphasizing the striking affinities between those descriptions and related theorizations of language.

In his study of the “sublime as text,” Vincent A. De Luca posits the project of approaching a reine Sprache and “liberating the signifier from the signified” as the very definition of the textual sublime. As an exemplary case, he examines the most densely scripted and difficult-to-read pages from Blake’s illuminated books, which he describes in terms that could be applied equally, if not better, to an overprinted work like Veil. As Blake “increases the density of inscription to the point of visual strain,” “fatigue,” and “vertigo,” those inscriptions “tend to withdraw from referential function altogether” so that “the text becomes iconic, a physical Ding an sich, not a transparent medium through which meaning is easily disseminated.” This opacity “inevitably irritates those who come to texts for smooth communication[]; the effect of this impediment to the reading eye is precisely to reify the signifier and so provoke the tension necessary for the sublime experience.” The constant movement of words in and out of readability which we saw in Veil thus becomes, for De Luca, the very grounds of the textual sublime.

The barrier seems to flicker before the eyes, now opaque, now translucent, at once forbidding and yielding. The sublime object presents a towering face and yet offers a conspicuous invitation to ascent, or it holds back and teases with the promise of penetration, or it hints at ineffable possibilities of Presence and then defers them. As with Waldrop’s printing or Bernstein’s poems, the “attention of the reader is diverted from a sequential pursuit of words and lines to a visual contemplation of the whole block of text as a single unit, a panel,” which De Luca names “a wall of words.” Or, as Veil itself announces, “WALL OF WORDS WHICH MEANS LOOK YOU LOOK.”

Given the concentration and visual strain demanded by a work like Veil, or the double vision so perfectly replicated by many of the poems in Camp Printing, looking at that “wall of words” for any length of time can be quite literally dizzying, and De Luca’s description of “fatigue” and “vertigo” should not necessarily be taken as figurative hyperbole. In fact, the most striking precedent to Waldrop’s overprinting is a nineteenth-century warning against precisely such dangers. (See figure 9.)
Millington's 1883 Are We to Read Backwards?, this page was meant to illustrate the dangers of reading on the "metropolitan railways." The simulation of vibration in Millington's text is assumed to be so self-evident that the appearance of "train cars," in conjunction with a visual vocabulary ("window," "imagery," "watching," "mirrors," "tears," and so on), in James Camp's "The Iron Year" may not have been incidental in Waldrop's choice to treat it with an almost identical technique. Appropriate to a scene in which the speaker imagines the hallucinatory illusion of actually experiencing the "clanging" of the rails, Waldrop's tremulous printing becomes a complex and witty inscription of that experiential illusion back into the monologue itself. The synesthesic translation from the vibrations of sound in the "ear" to the visual tremors of a vibrating railcar would indeed be the irony ("The [Iron Y] ear") of the text. (See figure 10.)

As with all of the poems in Camp Printing, as well as those in Veil, the text read on a trembling railway calls "for a continual adjustment of the focus of vision" which, when "added to the muscular tension necessitated by the vibration of the carriage," would, in Millington's opinion, "sufficiently account for much of the nervous malaise felt by some habitual travellers on these lines." Those are "lines" of rails and not of writing, but while dizzying textual effects may not be responsible for the stress of commuting, they do seem to be commensurate with the experience of communicating when that communication disappears into the textual sublime. De Luca notes that the prototypically sublime moment is "usually described as vertigo or blockage or bafflement," and Steve McCaffery accordingly explains that de Saussure, in his investigations of the paragrammes, "hit upon the vertiginous nature of textuality"—echoing Starobinski's description of de Saussure's "vertige de erreur [vertigo of error]," as well as de Man's characterization of the paragrammatic project as "vertiginously speculative" and Baudrillard's repeated description of the "vertige [giddiness]" of de Saussure's anagrammatic texts. "Il y a," Baudrillard announces, "un état propre de fascination et de vertige lié à ce délire de la communication. Une forme de plaisir singulier peut-être, mais aléatoire et vertigineux. [There is a state of fascination and giddiness which attends that delirium of communication. A singular form of pleasure perhaps, but aleatory and vertiginous.]" This is the pleasure of the illegible. Le délière de lire.

Once again, as we saw with all those theories which consider writing as a "general economy," the particular details of the material text, when engaged with the attention and patience of a truly radical formalism, figure the most abstract theoretical constructs. At the fundamental level of concrete, physiological response to specific textual demands, works like Veil and Camp Printing produce equivalents to theoretical positions even before any given "message about" such theories might be conveyed. However, any such "content"—no matter how comfortably familiar or easy it would seem when compared with the demands of an "obstinate physicality"—would have been redundant, if not paradoxically contradictory. Which is
to refuse to posit these works as mere illustrations; they enact the very condition of the theoretical claims which might be made on their behalf. For this reason, it is perhaps no coincidence that the designers of the journal Visible Language chose overprint as the emblematic typographic technique with which to represent "instant theory." As Blake understood in his own profound attention to bibliographic detail, "Minute Discrimination is Not Accidental," because "Singular & particular Detail is the foundation of the Sublime."

Figure 10. Rosmarie Waldrop, Camp Printing (1970)