

THE CIRCULATION OF THE SIGN

At first they seem to rotate through the crystalline atmosphere like so many weightless facets, the glinting light of an invisible gem. Now one of the fragments appears aqueous, like water beading the side of a bottle; now it dries to the shimmer of dust motes struck by a ray of sunlight...

... But then there arises the sound of voices. They speak of a political meeting, of market shares. Someone tells of a woman who poisoned her lover. "A chauffeur kills his wife," says another. Who says ? Whose voice ?

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At first they seem to cycle through the crystal space like so many radiant facets of an absent jewel. Each newsprint fragment forms the sign for a visual meaning; then, as it butts against another, the sign re-forms and the meaning shifts.

From the buzz of tiny letters, black flecks on white, which in imitating the look of scumbled paint conjure the effect of air, to the crisply cut edge of an adjoining (or even of the same) sheet, which now hardens to the solid of a porcelain dish, each

little paper piece submits itself to meaning, but never enduringly so. For the same piece, in another location, constellates another sign ...

... But then, and from the very site of these signs, comes the sound of voices (Fig. 5), "Before long I saw the first corpse still grimacing with suffering; its face was nearly black," he says. "Then I saw two, four, ten, twenty; then I saw a hundred corpses, "As he tells of the dead piled high on convoys and lying in ditches, he asks, "How many cholera victims did I come upon like this? Two thousand? Three thousand? ... But I had seen nothing yet," Who tells this story and in what tone ? Is this tragedy or melodrama; is it empathy or exploitation ? Is it war reporting or news blending imperceptibly into *fait-divers* ? Is it joined to the battle reports the way the story about the soldier spitting out a bullet lodged in his head for twenty-six years abuts the news, a week or so later, of the peace ("Les Alliés signent l'Armistice. La Grèce s'abstient" December 4, 1912) ? Is it in the same tone as "In Fontainebleau, a tramp turns himself in for murder" (Fig. 10) - something straight out of Fénelon's "News in Three Lines" ?

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At first they circulate through the crystalline space, its whiteness their "medium," both a real place and the abstraction of a system. In one of the collages (Fig. D), the circulatory movement is given physical form, since one of the fragments is the other's twin - having originally been scissored from the same sheet, so that, as in a jigsaw puzzle, both match along their common edge - only now flipped relative to the other, back to front. A pair, but nonidentical, unlike.

One of them, the lower, exploits the scrollwork of its left-hand edge to assume the profile of a violin. Or rather half a violin, since it depends on Picasso's drawn additions of bridge and neck and right-hand side to elaborate the musical instrument. All by itself, however, notched as it is into the whiteness of the sheet, a flattened shape set foursquare upon the page, it declares itself allied with the support on which it lies: like the sheet, it is physical, material, opaque; like the sheet, it is resolutely frontal, facing its viewer. This is how the little fragment, in itself indeterminable, for it might be almost anything - bubbles of soda, stripes of shadow, rays of sun -

hardens and solidifies, its lines of writing now posturing as the graining of wood. Thus the piece becomes the support, or signifier, for a visual signified. Together they produce a meaning: the *density*, the *opacity* of a physical object, here, a violin .

The circulation of the sign, however, is a rule of relativity. And Picasso, here as elsewhere, abides by this rule. The second newspaper fragment, placed above the violin 's shoulders, deploys its own notches and curves to cup the pegs and scroll of the instrument, becoming thus their "background." In this position, the newsprint's lines of type now assume the look of stippled flecks of graphite, the painter's visual shorthand for atmospheric surround. A new place then summons forth a different sign. *Light* it declares, or *atmosphere*.

But the magic of the whole collage, indeed the brilliance of the game it plays, is that the two opposite meanings - *light* on the one hand and *opacity* on the other - are generated from the "identical" scrap of paper, the "same" physical shape. Like Saussure's phonetic substance, this support is seen to take on meaning only within the set of oppositions that pits one against

another, the implosive *p* of *up* against the explosive *p* of *put*. Picasso's sheet, sliced in two, is thus a paradigm, a binary couple married in opposition, each taking on a meaning insofar as it is *not* the other. *Figure* and *ground* become this kind of contrary here, joined and redoubled by *opaque* and *transparent* or *solid* and *luminous*, so that just as one fragment is, literally speaking, the back side of the material from which the other was cut, the circulation of the sign produces this very same condition, but semiologically, at the level of the sign: *front, solid, shape; behind, transparent, surround*.

Does Picasso need to state any more clearly the sense in which the sign here, like the linguist's tokens, has no natural relation to a referent, no real-world model that gives it a meaning or secures its identity? Does he need to declare any more forcefully that here, in the fall of 1912, with his new medium of collage, he has entered a space in which the sign has slipped away from the fixity of what the semiologist would call an iconic condition - that of resemblance - to assume an ceaseless play of meaning open to the symbol, which is to say, language's unmotivated, conventional sign? I like to think his

answer to this comes in the form of the f-holes - the fortuitous lettering offered up to him by the real - since he writes with them, again and again, always placing one very large f in opposition to the other, very small. Penning them half on, half off the element that makes up the front face of the instrument, he inscribes them onto a surface that is resolutely flat, stolidly facing forward. It is their unequal size that then acts on this frontality, as it produces the sign for foreshortening, for the swiveling of the object into depth, like a dorr that is slowly swinging open. Scripting the fs onto the face of the violin, where manifestly there is nothing but flatness, Picasso writes *depth* onto an object set squarely before us and only as deep as a sheet of paper. "Depth," he says . . .

. . . But another depth speaks as well from the very surface of the newsprint fragment, the one onto which the fs are appended. This is the "depth" - historical, imaginative , political - of a place to which the word *Tchataldja* refers , the name of the battle site in the Balkans from which this dispatch was sent to *Le Journal*, Picasso's main source of newsprint - and, some would argue of news. It might have been *Podgoritza*,

of course, or *Saint-Nicolas*, the datelines of accounts of the Balkan wars for articles that appeared at just this moment in the avant-garde magazine *Les Soirées de Paris*, signed by one of its editors, André Tudesq, a pal of Apollinaire's, and by Jérôme Tharaud.

To listen Tharaud is to picture the majestic isolation of the Montenegrin fighter, tall, gnarled, and armed to the teeth, perched on his mountain redoubt. This is the honor of the fighting clans never submitted to the refinement of the modern army but nonetheless ravaged, now, by Turkish guns.

To listen to Tudesq is to hear strategy talked, a mapping of relations in space, to understand the way in which the battle for Saint-Jean de Medua is really a fight for Scutari, the prize the Montenegrins most covet and from which they will be excluded if the peace, about to be concluded, comes too soon. This is what King Nicolas fears: to be merely an onlooker when the Serbs and the Bulgarians share the spoils. The Montenegrin king began the adventure, writes Tudesq, as though he were watching an amusing film, with his son Prince Danilo gaily igniting the first canon. It's turned out badly. But

not for the Serbs. Tudesq tells the story of a battle in which the Turks were routed. A pursuing Serb, obeying the rules of combat, asks a wounded soldier: "Christian or Muslim?" Receiving no answer he lops off the soldier's head. Of course, Tudesq adds wryly, he had "inconsiderately asked his question in Serbian: why didn't the Turk know the victor's language?"

They are there, in Montenegro, some of them Picasso's friends. Indeed, an international brigade of volunteers has collected, from Milan, Paris, Vienna, Rome, Saint Petersburg. Their accents join these reports as well.

Whose voice is Picasso flagging when he lets the Tchataldja dateline surge forth from beneath the bridge of his otherwise stately violin? The assumption on the part of the scholars who analyze "what the papers say" is that for Picasso to cut a fragment from a newspaper – particularly when, by respecting the columnar layout, the piece allows itself to be read – is for him to produce a "statement." Even if it is through the voices of others, Picasso is assumed to be speaking here. And if Picasso is speaking, we should listen; for aren't these his beliefs?

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At first they seem to circulate through the crystal air like so many weightless facets, the lights struck off a revolving but invisible chandelier. Their glinting meanings - now this, now that - play in the register of the visible the way Mallarme's notorious homophonies play in the field of the audible: *cygne* or *signe*? *Naître* or *n'être*? *verre* or *vers*? *blanc* (white) or *blanc* (blank)? And even Picasso's fascination with the turned fragment - one the back of the other's front - seems to lead in the direction of Mallarmé's "fold," the sacred cleft of the book's binding, where one page closes over another in sensuous duplicity.

Almost from the very outset of this series of collages, executed so minimally, so sparsely, with just news clippings, charcoal, and the white of the drafting paper, Picasso had evoked Mallarmé (Fig. 4). He had cut a headline from a page of *Le Journal* so as to read "Un coup de thé ...," signaling for his group of poet friends, the innermost circle of the *band à Picasso*, the title of Mallarmé's most notorious work, "Un coup de dés." Sprinkling the lines of type upon the page, some large

but truncated, some a kind of middle voice insistently rising into one's perceptual field, the rest a tiny scatter of type, he could have imagined he was performing the poem's arabesquelike refusal of the regular poetic stanza with its docile block of gray. Just as, in turning the twin of the "Tchataldja" clipping over on its back, he could see himself entering into the logic of the "fold," the logic of the facet, the logic of the binary in which as the sign circulates it constantly reattaches itself to meaning: *cygne/signe*, white/black.

The game of the fold is almost nowhere played more cunningly than in a pair of collages, twinned at the level of the charcoal drawing - which sparsely designates the neck and throat of a bottle, the curve of a supporting table, and a series of other highly schematic lines, some gridlike, some diagonal (Figs. 2 and 3). In both collages the bottle "itself" consists of a vertical axis that terminates in a circle we inevitably read as the disc of the vessel's base. But in the one case, the axis is articulated through a column of newsprint pasted onto the white page, with the circle cut out of its lower flange. In the other, which is executed on a full page of newspaper, the same

verrtical axis-plus-excised-circle has been scissored out of white paper, obliterating the newsprint ground and reminding us of the ultimate backing for the collage in the white of the supporting sheet.

There have been various passes at reading one or another of these collages in ways that slow the circulation of the signifiers to a stop and supply a single signified for the newsprint column. Either understood as standing for the bottle itself or for its liquid contents, this identification then expands to include the textual content of the news clipping and thereby to produce an ideologically expanded interpretation: this is "the stuff on which French culture is temporarily drunk," it concludes. And needless to say, the fact that the support for one member of this pair of collages is the financial page of *Le Journal* reinforces this sense of what Picasso's ideological project must be.

But Picasso's collage piece (in either its positive or its negative – cut – out - guise) is not simply columnar. It is an elongated L from which a circle has been removed. Thus the short arm of the L extends beyond what could be imagined as the perimeter of the object, to suggest itself as the bottle's cast

shadow. Since the vertical axis that defines the long arm of the L's left-hand edge extends up into the object's throat, this axial line further proposes itself as a center around which the fin of paper might rotate in order to describe the cylindrical volume of the object. (This suggestion of a rotating fin is even stronger in the collage executed on the financial page, since a second fin, in black, its upper edge cut on a slant, abuts the first, hinting at foreshortening.) Like the paired fs that inscribed *depth* or *turning* onto a frontal plane, this extremely economic shape - an L from which a circular notch has been cut - becomes the signifier of an axis slicing into the sheet itself to open its bidimensionality to the experience of a page turning. Front to back, around a central spine. The impossible fold it writes onto the collage sheet inscribes both something like the memory of the volume of a bottle and something like the feeling of the space that would contain it. And if the fold is something like a page turning, it is a page - and this is to be explained presently - taken out of Mallarmé...

... But then the voices begin. The one that speaks from the very ground of this work pronounces *Le Journal's* weekly

roundup of financial news: "La semaine économique & financière." It gives the stock exchange report under the rubric "Coulisse." It speaks about the upcoming London conference to negotiate the armistice in the Balkans. In these last weeks of November and throughout December, the period in which Picasso is making this first great series of collages, it is indeed of the armistice that most of the voices telling Balkan stories speak, whether or not from the point of view of Montenegro 's King Nicolas.

For of course the problem is, who is speaking? And on whose behalf?

The most ardent reader / interpreter of these newspaper