

“Reading the Signs: Chad Harbach’s *Art of Fielding*, Baseball, and the Graphic Imagination”

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Abstract: Although not a graphic novel, graphics are integrated into the fabric of Chad Harbach’s *The Art Of Fielding* (2011). By graphics, I mean the juxtaposing and mixing of alphabetical and pictographic designs, and I argue that the novel engages with the graphic imagination by including graphic dynamics to convey complex meanings through the conjunction of difference and identity in inscription and visual form. In a keyboard character or a letter there are, for instance, complicated dimensions in the relationship between the printed letter and its meaning, thus revealing a rhetoric whose graphic and textual nature allows meaning to emerge in ways that move beyond the utterances of speech and reflect the visual baseball sign system.

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A blurb for Chad Harbach’s college baseball novel *The Art of Fielding* (2011) might go something like this. Henry Skrimshander, Westish College’s dazzling shortstop, seems destined for big league stardom. But when Henry’s error on a routine throw injures his teammate and friend, Owen Dunne, he becomes plagued by self-doubt. At the same time, the lives of the other characters are thrown into turmoil. College president, Guert Affenlight, falls hopelessly in love with Owen, embarking on a dangerous affair with the student. Mike Schwartz, the Harpooners’ team captain and Henry’s baseball mentor, self-sabotages his law school ambitions, and has a tumultuous romantic relationship with Pella Affenlight, Guert’s daughter, who returns to Westish after escaping an ill-fated marriage.

This gloss reveals how the drama of interpersonal relationships in the novel unfolds through and against a backdrop of baseball terminology. The outs, errors and home runs that characterize and determine the outcome of the play on the field similarly define the lives of Harbach's characters. Guert is forced 'out' because of his love for Owen; Pella 'runs home' after having committed an error by marrying David, something she worries she will repeat in future relationships; and Mike is described as frequently 'scoring' with college juniors. As the plot develops, the link between baseball and relationships is further highlighted through its triangulation of desire and homosocial bonds in a series of 'double plays'. Henry becomes involved in Guert and Owen's romance, and Mike's connection to Guert transforms when he begins dating the college president's daughter. More important, though, is the erotic triangle that develops when Henry sleeps with Pella during her romantic involvement with Mike.¹ The relaying of desire in these scenarios – regardless of whether the triangle involves two-timing a lover or not – echoes the double play in baseball wherein the ball moves through the touches of three players to describe a triangular formation across the diamond from, for instance, catcher to first baseman to second baseman in the 2 => 3 => 4 double play. Participating in several triangular constellations at once, each

¹ Harbach's novel playfully reflects the triangular forms that make up the baseball diamond in the triangular relationships theorized by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick as asymmetrical gender triangles (21-5). Here, Pella becomes the interchangeable link between the two main baseball players: Henry and Mike are entangled with the woman who gives them a desired status with the other man. By schematizing the erotic relationship into a triangular struggle, the two men are juxtaposed rivals in a competitive relationship. Pella recognises how this erotic triangle is about imposing control over power structures and meanings through homosocial bonds. 'Christ, you could have done it yourself', Pella says when she confronts Mike and Henry about this, 'I don't have to be the middleman. Mike, Henry. Henry, Mike' (358).

character/player in Harbach's field of play interacts with the other members of the 'team' to produce a story where life world merges with the world of baseball through interpersonal relationships, plot structure and, above all, language.

In this article, I explore how the geometric shapes that move between the figures on the baseball diamond and the triangular relationships of the characters are foregrounded in the graphic inscriptions of letters and punctuation marks. *The Art of Fielding* is not a graphic novel. There is no sign in the novel that is not either a letter or form of punctuation; however, it integrates graphics into the fabric of its text by mixing and juxtaposing alphabetical and pictorial designs using the materiality of letters to visually convey meaning. For instance, the graphic image 'O' represents the letter 'o', the numerical sign for nothingness, zero, as well as the spherical form of a baseball. In the dazzling play of the letter, I argue, Harbach's novel marks the signs of baseball over the surface of its printed discourse. The text of *The Art of Fielding* reveals dimensions of meaning in the form, movement, shape and placement of its typographical characters. They shunt to and fro between lexical and emblematic functions that call attention to the visual baseball sign system as a language that is relayed between coaches and players during the game. Reading beyond the plot, the meanings and effects are conveyed by visual means, using patterns of letters, words and other typographical devices. Within this multifunctional style, we recognise the paragrammatical dimension of the text that joins typographic characters to things or graphic images that offer meaning outside of a closed grammatical system of language.

The graphic practice of the letter in the novel, I suggest, responds to the style and tenor of the language of baseball, a visual sign system that is communicated across the field of play.

The Graphic Imagination

The Art of Fielding is partly about the processes of reading texts and signs. For the ball is not the only thing being passed between teammates on the baseball field. Uniquely amongst sports, the game of baseball relies heavily on visual signs that are relayed between, for example, bat-catchers and pitchers or coaches and batters. A catcher typically calls for pitches using hand signals and a coach might rub his chest, touch his elbow or raise his arm to indicate how a batter should approach a pitch. If a baseball player misses a sign or misreads a sign, then it could cost his team the game, the series, the championship. Silent codes and strategic gestures make up the machinery that drive each game, and Harbach taps into this logic of visual signs by engaging his reader in a complex reading process that moves beyond the mere exercise of deriving meaning from words on a page. The graphic use of letters, symbols and punctuation marks illuminates the text in such a way that the content of this baseball novel is reflected in its form through the typography of the characters on the printed page.

Graphics are integrated into the fabric of the novel. By graphics, I mean juxtaposing and mixing alphabetical and pictographic designs, and *The Art of Fielding* engages with the graphic imagination as it includes graphic dynamics to convey

complex meanings through the conjunction of difference and identity in inscription and visual form. Meanings arise in both discourse and picture through shared innovations but offer different interpretive possibilities. In a keyboard character or a letter there are, for instance, complicated dimensions in the relationship between the printed letter and its meaning, thus revealing a rhetoric whose graphic and textual nature allows meaning to emerge in ways that move beyond the utterances of speech. When Pella, who is attempting to clean up her life, begins washing dishes in the Westish College kitchen, the movements of dish washing are graphically conveyed through an arrow: 'Dirty => Clean' (180). Not only does this image repeat the one-way, arrow-like trajectory of the baseball as it moves across the diamond as well as the reading process in cultures where this moves from left to right, it also draws the words on either side of it together in a pictogram illustrating Pella's activity in a humorously helpful and pedagogical simplification of the dish washing procedure. The sign of the arrow visually resembles the object of an actual arrow that it represents and so adds a pictorial dimension to the semantic content of the little schema which opens up the linguistic and semiotic field of play at work in the text to various systems of signification. For the hieroglyphics invoked through the picture of the arrow in the diagram informs the wider textual elements that make up the novel: the lower case letter 'i' is of course the printed equivalent of a phoneme, but in a baseball novel that employs the graphic imagination it is also the pictorial image of the ball leaving the end of the bat. In this example, the letter conflates *pictura* and *poesis*: 'writing makes a picture of what it describes, and

pictures become the writing they had originally foregrounded as either images or referents' (Conley 73).

An example of this arises early in *The Art of Fielding*. At a crucial moment in the ninth inning, the Westish Harpooners are tied with the Lions of Vermont State. Henry's teammate, Jim Toover, steps up to the plate and gets ahead in the count: 'Ball one. Ball two [...] Ball three'. The narrator describes the scene:

Henry looked toward third base to see if Coach Cox would put on the take sign. 'Letting him swing away', he reported.

'Really?' Rick said. 'That doesn't sound like a good i—', but his words were interrupted by an earsplitting *ping* of ball against aluminium bat. The ball became a speck in the pale-blue sky and carried deep, deep into the parking lot. Henry thought he heard a windshield shatter, but he wasn't sure. (41)

At a glance, the eye is drawn to the italicized *ping*, which visually interrupts the rest of the sentence by being set apart from the regular font. The angular and pointed italics highlight the jarring movement of the sound that cuts into and disrupts Rick's sentence. But more graphically significant is that the ping interrupts Rick at the very moment that he utters the phoneme 'i' in 'idea', which, when combined with the movement of the dash, employs a letter and character to visually convey the homerun blast that is hit off

the end of Jim's bat. A visual representation of what is happening on the baseball diamond.

As in shaped verse, the meaning or effect is conveyed partly by visual means, using the patterns of a letter and typographical form. This kind of visual presentation of graphic shapes or patterns on the printed page produces meaning by physical arrangement that, throughout the novel, complement the use of traditional language structure. This relationship between picture and conventional language is made explicit when Henry discovers Aparicio's 'baseball bible' on Owen's bookshelf; as he flips through it the narrator describes the significance of the patterns and graphic images on the page: 'the shapes of the short, numbered paragraphs were enough to trigger his memory. His lips murmured the words as his eyes, unfocused, scanned the page' (16).

In *The Complete Book of Baseball Signs*, Harold S. Southworth runs through the numerous signs that can be relayed from coaches to players. Examples include the drag bunt sign wherein the 'coach puts one hand on one knee' and signals to his right or left, the delayed steal sign when the 'coach waves arms in front of him horizontally as if indicating to the runners "No, no"', and the double steal sign that is invoked when the 'coach puts a hand to his face or neck area' and motions to the first base runner. Signs can be put on, swept off, altered or used to puzzle the opposition. This form of manual communication encrypts meaning through a sign language that simultaneously combines hand shapes, orientation and movement of the arms or legs to produce a code that is transparent for one team and opaque for the other. Baseball signs depend on

unravelling an inner (hidden) meaning from an outer (visible) shape by means of a logical (if obscure) convention that involves a system of correspondences between sign and body movement. But this inner meaning must also be hidden (a code) in plain sight. To confront them is necessarily to involve oneself in a process of interpretation whereby the surface is penetrated and the inner meaning is revealed. Within this system, the individual sign is part of an alphabet where the smallest unit in the language is the word (ie., the visual sign equals the word 'bunt') so that the baseball alphabet operates through a semiotics of sign-as-word.

In Harbach's novel, the characters often relay baseball signs: the bat-catcher, Mike Schwartz, feeds signs to the ace pitcher, Adam Starblind; the manager of the Harpooners, Coach Cox, uses signs to put on hit-and-run plays and steals. At a crucial moment in a game, Owen, who is on deck, asks 'What's the bunt sign?' and is told 'two tugs on the left earlobe [...] but first he [Coach Cox] has to give the indicator, which is a squeeze of the belt. But if he goes to his cap with either hand or says your name, that's the wipe off, and then you have to wait and see whether—'. Owen's response is dismissive: 'forget it', he says, 'I'll just bunt' (42). Even when Henry Skrimshander, Westish College's star player and MLB prospect, is struggling to find his form he goes through a ritual of movements before batting that the narrator describes as physical signs that might convey meaning: 'He went through his age-old routine – touch the far black of the plate with the bat head, tap the Harpooner on his

breast three times, make a single, level pass of the bat through the zone – but it had a different meaning now, a counterfeit meaning, or no meaning at all’ (474).

Which sign has meaning? Which signs are meaningless? These questions are crucial. For in the baseball sign system, the language and the code cannot be conflated. This is because the baseball sign – the individual unit – is a shared language (the signs are the same for all baseball teams) but the code – the way the units are combined – is specific to the team. Another way of thinking about this is to conceptualize a link between signifier and signified that is stable and fixed, not fluid or variable, so that when, for instance, a coach puts a hand to his knee he is always signalling a suicide squeeze. The sign is static. But what obscures it for the opposition is the combination of surrounding signs, which bury the message being communicated in the sign language equivalent of white noise. Because the language of the sign is shared across both teams, it is this ‘white noise’ that is produced by the meaningless signs that makes the relaying of any given sequence of signs obscure to the opposition. The superfluous signs that surround the relevant sign obscure the message and are the principle upon which the code is based: stable sign, unstable sequence. Reading the signs on the field of play thus entails a comprehensive knowledge of the ‘grammar’ as well as the alphabet of the baseball language. From the universally shared letter or word-alphabet as the smallest unit in the language to the larger linguistic structure of the specific ‘sentence’ that is being communicated from coach to player, each transmission of signs contains its embedded message in strict accordance with the unique rules of grammar that each

individual team has constructed. If grammar is a code that governs the sequential ordering of syntax, then it is precisely this syntactical arrangement of the various sentence segments which serves to determine where the meaning of the silent utterance lies and which sentence elements should be disregarded.

The characters in *The Art of Fielding* are eagerly deciphering literary and written texts as well as baseball signs. Although the physical signs of baseball are at the centre of the field of play, these focal points also gesture to other sign systems and interpretive practices. Westish's President, Guert Affenlight, is an American literature professor, celebrated for his interpretation of Herman Melville's novels in his book *Sperm-Squeezers*, which deciphers the homosocial codes in works such as *Moby-Dick*. Likewise, Henry Skrimshander memorizes passages from *The Art of Fielding*, a fictional book by the semi-fictional star shortstop Aparicio Rodriguez² whom Henry idolizes and attempts to emulate in everything he does. Aparicio's text is a collection of numbered items of practical advice, epigrams, aphorisms and cryptic koans that Henry tries to decode and translate to his infield play (16). These zen-like musings on the ideal mind/body states of the baseball player are relayed from Aparicio, the author, to Henry, the reader, through the linguistic signs on the printed page, and Henry imbibes rather than reads the words in order to integrate Aparicio's unrivalled physical prowess into his own body movements on the field. The mythological Aparicio Rodriguez of

² This character is based on Luis Aparicio, the all-star shortstop from Venezuela who between 1956 and 1973 played for the Chicago White Sox, Baltimore Orioles and Boston Red Sox. His many awards include Rookie of the Year (1956), Most Valuable Player (1959) runner-up, as

Harbach's invention holds the shortstop record for most consecutive errorless games – an important statistic in baseball – and Henry's all-consuming goal of overtaking his hero's record is abruptly thwarted when his own errorless streak ends with the throw that injures Owen. Stuck in a tie where he can only equal but not move beyond the record holder to claim the pole position for himself, Henry's subsequent paralysis and inability to play reflects his now debilitating relationship with Aparicio. The shadow of the 'original' shortstop envelops Henry and converts him into a mere copy of the 'real' record-breaking player whom Henry can now neither pursue nor supersede. Here the plot highlights the novel's play with the link between a sign and its referent, for the title *The Art of Fielding* as well as the name Aparicio carries a double referent in Harbach's book. Supposedly named after the non-existent Aparicio Rodriguez's non-existent text, the novel we are reading continually refers back to the 'original' piece of writing just as 'Aparicio' ambiguously points both to Harbach's fictional player/author and to the real Luis Aparicio who never held the record for consecutive errorless games. As joint record holder with the fictitious Aparicio Rodriguez, moreover, Henry is reduced to a double of the novel's unreal referent for successful short stop play, competing with and losing to his ghostly precursor. In Harbach's field of play, the phrase *The Art of Fielding* and the name Aparicio are both signs that refer simultaneously to something that exists and to something that does not and so echo the interchangeable nature of meaningful and meaningless signs on the baseball diamond.

well as nine American League Golden Gloves. In 1984, he became the first Venezuelan player to be inducted into the National Baseball Hall of Fame.

Henry reads Aparicio, and writing becomes corporal motion. His body twists and turns, contorts and expands into shapes that his teammates can only marvel at. These postures are not part of the official sign system relaying messages across the field but they do nevertheless point to a strand of semiotics that works alongside the sign-as-word baseball alphabet. As bodies produce visual signs through tummy-rubs, nose-flicks and ear-pulls, these occasionally replicate the graphic images of letters: the arms can be crossed over the chest to form a 'W', the right arm can touch the left shoulder to produce a 'V' and the hand can zigzag across the torso in the shape of a 'Z'. Although letters are not part of the baseball language, the process of communicating through gestures and gesticulations leads to moments when the body accidentally resembles a letter. These do not carry any meaning as letters, but the observer steeped in daily reading and writing practices that involve the Roman alphabet cannot but 'see' the W, the V, the Z within the sequence of body postures. Here, the graphic imagination is activated to identify letters in the visual dynamics of the body 'looking like' a letter even as no such representation is intentionally taking place. In these cases, the baseball sign system joins bodies to letters rather than words so that it is analogous to Peter Flötner's *Menschenalphabet* (1534), co-ordinating the poses of bodies with the shapes of letters. The body-as-letter on the field of play is a meaningless sign, but its ability to signify with reference to the language system outside of the baseball diamond is based on the graphic quality of the letter. For the imaginative move that allows us to see a letter in a body relies on a set of visual correspondences that necessarily involve

perceiving the letter as an image in addition to its function as a written manifestation of a phoneme. As such, the letter emerges as a graphic unit that has the potential to convey a range of possible meanings across several linguistic and semiotic systems at once.

Arguably the most stimulating and influential book on graphics in literature is Tom Conley's *The Graphic Unconscious* (1992). Here, Conley examines the move from manuscript to print in early modern French writing and identifies profound effects wherein letters are read as spatially organised iconographic units. There is of course a massive distinction between early modern and contemporary print culture; however, there are theoretical lessons we can learn from Conley's study. Graphic units, he suggests, can generate meanings independent of grammar and syntax that are outside of authorial control. The apparatus in this method of graphic signification is analogy: the power of language – here the printed type of the letter – reflects images and processes in a visual world that is framed by scopophilic tendencies. For Conley, there are several characteristics that permit the printed letter to function analogically. The letter is a relay, a transmitter of information, but the image of the letter is printed type on paper that also includes a rogue agency and dynamic function that can be separate from the elaboration of meaning (7). The letter is also a picture and, as such, it can reflect the figural sense of the sentence that contains it while also maintaining its ability to signify autonomously. And the letter can be an enigma, a 'signless mark' calling for interpretation that can never be completed but whose unfolding is itself productive of

meaning (13). Conley shows how the letter can act as a free agent to support or betray the referentiality of the text, free to deflect the reader's attention into its own network of meanings and free to express unconscious processes.

Following Conley, the word 'baseball' can be read to include two significant pictorial images that arise out of the letters 'b' and 'l'. The single line of the lowercase letter 'l' graphically conveys the hard bat, whereas the combination of the hard line with the spherical mass of the lowercase letter 'b' conveys the hard line pushing forward into the circular form just as the bat hits the ball. This reduces words to their composite letters and the shape of the letters to *poesie concrete*. Through its pictorial dynamics the letter – which has no semantic content - acquires a semantic content irrespective of the word or sentence it participates in. From this perspective, the hard 'l' pressing against the soft mass of the ball in 'b' is the semantic manifestation of the bat's contact with the ball. For what is a 'b' but 'l' with a ball pushing out of it?³

As a graphic unit, the letter unveils visual forms of syntax adjacent to those pertaining to grammar. Entering into various combinations with other letters in words and sentences, the letter is part of a syntactical ordering based on the relationship between shapes that focusses attention on both the visual and referential properties of the characters on the page. The letter conveys meaning and ideas, but its form and shape engender movements that express meanings that are outside the specificities of a

³ The graphic convergence of pictures and letters is featured in one of the logos for the MLB Milwaukee Brewers. The graphic image is a ball entering a player's glove. Upon closer inspection, we see the image of the baseball glove is made out of an 'm' for Milwaukee and the ball combines with the thumb to form a 'b' for Brewers.

language system. In this sense, the image of the letter is not simply reduced to its sound, its phoneme, but also expresses visual imagery that exists outside the semantic order of the language. As an individual graphic unit, the letter moves in its own directions, distinguishing itself as a sole image – an independent sign – that is not merely consumed by the linguistic context in which it appears. A letter's form, in other words, does not merely submit to the unilateral regulations of meaning within the rules of a contained language system: 'The printed letter comprises an element crucial to pictorial and lexical dimensions' (Conley 1-2).

In Conley's analysis of graphics, this process is unconscious: the writer composes a sentence by combining words but he is not conscious of the potential pictorial images relayed through the letter. 'Those who develop unconscious writing', Conley asserts, 'create texts that do not transcribe speech in print, but use the virtues of the letter to multiply, betray, and redirect avenues of meaning' (15). This argument is tied to the early modern context but raises an important question when reading twenty-first-century fiction – specifically, what happens when the multi-directional meanings of the letter are conscious? In an historical moment when keyboard emoticons and texting smileys are widely used, the contemporary writer is conscious of the ways in which letters and punctuation marks can be used to convey visual meaning. Language technology is in flux and in dialogue with other sign systems and, in the early 21st century, the presence of hypertext, online chat and cell phone messaging call into question the formatting, dissemination and mediation of text and images so there are

new and complex interactions of spatial and textual elements – new dynamics – to produce composite forms of text and, by extension, literature.

Harbach is conscious of this change. *The Art of Fielding* illustrates how new writing technologies change our relationship to letters, opening up the possibility of conveying the sign language system in baseball: the graphics on the page are made possible by new technologies of writing. After Henry has intentionally allowed himself to be hit by a pitch, he awakes in the hospital after being unconscious for some time. He does not recall the events that led to his hospitalization (which also include malnutrition and dehydration) so Mike tells him why he is lying in a hospital bed:

“According to your blood work you’ve run out of pretty much every mineral and nutrient necessary for life. Even salt. It’s not easy to run out of salt. I think you’re going to be here for a while.”

“ — ”

“*Tried to drown himself from the inside* was how one of the doctors put it.” (478)

Here, the use of italics graphically highlights the reported speech, visually distinguishing the words of the doctor from those of Mike. But this is preceded by another graphic image: the combination of an underscore line inserted between quotation marks. An underscore is generally used to emphasize a word (similar to

italics). However, in this case, because the underscore does not lie beneath a word, it is employed to signal Henry's lack of expression and absence of linguistic response, emphasising a gap – a blankness – when he is told about his medical condition. This combination of characters calls for interpretation: we are invited to fill in the blank. Does the blank response tell us something about Henry's physical state? His depression? His lack of understanding? Perhaps all of the above. More interesting, though, is the facial expression that is formed by the combination of the keyboard characters to convey Henry's blank feeling: the quotation marks (eyes) and the underscore (mouth) lack movement to represent his blank facial expression.

Blankness is related to nothingness, a theme that is repeatedly invoked throughout the novel. Pella points out that Mike is 'nothing' without Henry's success (241). But this is a co-dependent relationship, so without Mike as a mentor Henry will also be 'nothing'. Likewise, when Henry loses his confidence, Mike tells Pella: 'He's creating this problem out of nothing. Nothing' (236). And Aparicio's zen-like aphorisms advocate a thoughtlessness that embraces no-mind, nothingness: the shortstop 'never thinks', Henry quotes as he takes to the infield, 'be the ball', be nothing that is part of the 'human condition' (305). This is significant because Henry's infield play is about achieving no errors – a zero in the error column – that equates nothingness with something extraordinary. It is here that the graphic imagination emerges in Harbach's field of play and combines to form a chain of signification. Henry names his treasured baseball glove 'zero' and the last letter of this word

graphically conveys the '0' number of errors in his defensive streak which then mirrors the letter 'O' that is Guert's affectionate name for Owen, the character who is injured by Henry's first error.⁴ In this semantic and graphic relay, the number zero and the letter 'o' are circles that become pictographs of the baseball ('be the ball'), for as John T. Irwin reminds us in *American Hieroglyphics* (1980) the letter 'o' does not always correspond to sound and sense, but also to shape and sense: 'The letter "o" is described as the "sign of roundness" rather than its sound [...] a Platonic ideograph of the original form – the circle' (18). Or, in this case, the sign of roundness is the nothingness of the number zero and the spherical object of the ball that is pitched, hit, caught and thrown.

Reading the Signs

The letter or character draws attention to itself. For there are spatial, figural and iconographic values to printed figures that have values in and of themselves; that is, they are independent of voice or transcriptive functions or the larger scheme of the language system in which the letter is placed. 'Printed writings represent ideas', writes Conley, 'but they also produce *other* meanings in their physical shape and in their movement on the page. When casually scanned, letters can leave impressions of motion. Forms appear, gain momentary retinal hold, and vanish.... Despite what surrounding words may do to limit a context of meaning, letters can acquire horizons of

⁴ The 'O' playfully shifts meanings throughout the novel: Café Oo is the campus coffee shop (19), Owen wears the number 0 on his jersey and his team bag has 'the number 0 stenciled on the side' (311, 73). Guert's Whitmanesque love for Owen, 'O me, O life' (68), is also echoed in his response to seeing Owen play baseball, 'Oh' (66).

their own and a syntax that is not explained in the context of grammar or logic' (Conley 4).

Harbach invokes this aspect of the graphic imagination in the Westish Harpooners' team name and logo, which is described as a 'harpoon-skewered W' (503).⁵ The team name – Harpooners – is a blunt reference to *Moby-Dick* and Melville's other sea novels (a lost Melville manuscript is discovered in the Westish library and a statue of Melville stands on campus). But the italicised *W* also includes contours that move up and down, left and right, graphically representing the spear-like instrument of the harpoon, which is often used when hunting large fish and whales. A whaling harpoon not only has the sharp point at the triangular tip of the spear but also has jagged points at the other sides of the polygon and, in some cases, additional points jutting out of the spear. The combination of the jagged edges moves it from the sharply pointed V of the regular arrow to the multi-pointed W of the instrument. In the logo, the italicization of the *W* visually enhances the jagged points and reflects the movement of a harpoon as it is thrust through the air or water. As a result, the retinal character of the image flows over the letter and turns away from uttered speech toward silence, not phoneme. This discourse traces the line of the path over its peaks and troughs –the ocular experience of the text – opening and closing its operational field.

The visual thrust of the letter/logo draws the eye to an object that is tied to the idiolect of the text, and which is part of the graphic imagination of the distribution of

shapes seen over the surface of the novel. From this perspective, the *W* is a pictorial form: the picture of the letter resembles a hieroglyph, a logographic script that is pictographic in form. Once again, writing and pictorial form converge. The letter possesses a visual virtue that is projected onto three-dimensional space. For this highlights the presense of at least two visual traditions in the letter, communicating a figural wealth through the mix of systems so that a letter initiates a visual relation to the baseball world of the text and sparks a graphic imagination that leads to a labyrinth of forms. Within this logic, the harpoon-skewered *W* is relayed into the spear-like errant throw that causes O's injury.

A similar graphic system arises through the absence of the letter. When Henry returns home after meeting Mike Schwartz, he finds a note on the kitchen table in his sister 'Sophie's girlish handwriting: Call Mike Shorts' (11). The note is amusing. It is easy to see how a young girl could phonetically confuse the two words/names. The two words are phonetically linked but when written down they look nothing like one another. This calls attention to the relationship between text and meaning, furthering the playful dynamic since the word 'shorts' is related to sports wear – gym shorts – that are central to Mike's sense of self. Difference and the deferral of meaning emphasize to the systematic play of *differance*, of the traces of differences, of the spacing by means of which elements are related to each other. This is partly highlighted through the space of the missing *W*, the basis of the Westish team logo, a space that is extended through

⁵ The Westish team name and logo is visually linked to the official emblem of Westish College,

the missing C. Both absent letters draw out the relationship between the visual dynamics of the written word and spoken language; moreover, Sophie's transcription of Mike's surname changes the vowel A to O, which further emphasises the graphic significance of the circle (as ball) and the number zero (errorlessness and nothingness). But she also converts the letter Z (the first letter of the word 'zero') into an S. This 'error' calls attention to the relation between Z and S as inverted graphic figures, near mirror images, and of course in the English language the Z is often replaced by S. If Z is superfluous and signals nothingness – zero – then we are also reminded of the centrality of S: it appears throughout the batting line-up (Starblind, Skimshander, Schwartz). S is necessary; without S there is no team.

The graphic consequence of the absent letter is played out on the baseball diamond. Throughout the novel, the broken electronic scoreboard by the bleachers in Westish Field reads 'VI ITORS' (327). The faulty display highlights what is not there – the first S in VISITORS – and reminds us that the S is not just an important letter in Skrimshander but is also repeated in Henry's position, *shortstop*. On baseball scorecards, this position appears as SS and many of Henry's offensive plays are scored using the letter S: S is a single base hit, SB is a stolen base, SH is a sacrifice hit and SAC is a sacrifice putout. Unlike in other sports, the scoring system combines letters and numbers so, for instance, a player who hits a double is scored 2BH and the scoreboard tallies runs and hits through numbers while simultaneously displaying the

a 'diagonally arranged series of tiny ecru men [...] each standing in the prow of a tiny boat'. Each holds 'a harpoon cocked beside his head, ready to fly at a pod of unseen whales' (62).

number of errors under the letter E.⁶ This combination is reflected in VI ITORS. When scanning the word on the page, the deleted S visually moves the word ‘visitors’ into a numerical system wherein the letters V and I converge to form the roman numeral for the number six. The same graphic images (V and I) communicate letters and numbers, further highlighting fluid movements between the sign systems: letters are easily converted to numbers through the spaces on the page. But this slippage also returns us to the missing letter S, for the VI (the number 6) is an important part of the baseball numbering system wherein each fielding position has an associated number that is used to score outputs. The number 6 happens to be the numerical equivalent of the shortstop.⁷

Toward the end of the novel, there is another missing S on a sign. This is displayed by Amherst fans during the Westish v Amherst final of the NCAA World Series. The narrator describes the sign:

Behind the Amherst dugout stood a row of six female students, purple decals painted on their cheeks, wearing oversize purple T-shirts that spelled out A-M-H-E-R-T in white letters. Four of the girls were stout and blocky and more or less butch. The fifth – letter *E* – stood six-foot-something and swayed in the wind, hair pulled back in a ponytail. The sixth letter – letter *A* – was petite and

⁶ This unique aspect of baseball is vocalized through Mike: ‘What other sport not only kept a stat as cruel as the error but posted it on the scoreboard for everyone to see’ (259).

blond [...]. Their *S* was probably back at the motel, passed out after a too-hard day of partying. A, despite being half the size of her teammates, was the ringleader. (460)

Again, we are reminded of the *Menschenalphabet*, anthropomorphized letters that are constructed by human bodies that bend and twist, stretching and angling their extremities to imitate the shape of A, B or C. But letters on bodies also echo the conception of the body as a textual construct, which speaks to a notion that assumes there is nothing external which is not a sign of the internal. Thomas Browne, for instance, asserts that a divine signature is present in every being, and which denotes individual character and determines a place in the world (141).⁸ I am not suggesting that Browne's onology informs Harbach's novel but I do want to suggest that this passage graphically conveys the connection between human and written characters. As a group, the letters inscribed on the bodies of these fans signal their internal affiliation with their team, their university, and they are characterological imprints so that, for instance, A is the alpha, the ringleader, the alpha-female. The letter A spells out her character.

⁷ There are nine fielding positions in baseball and each is allocated a number: 1 (pitcher), 2 (catcher), 3 (first baseman), 4 (second baseman), 5 (third baseman), 6 (shortstop), 7 (left fielder), 8 (centre fielder), and 9 (right fielder).

⁸ For Browne, 'there are mystically in our faces certain characters which carry in them the motto of our souls, wherein he that cannot read A. B. C. may read our natures [...] and there is a phytognomy, or physiognomy, not only of men but of plants and vegetables; and in every one of them some outward figures, which hang as signs or bushes of their inward forms' (141).

In this case, the missing S does not just call attention to its significance through absence. It also moves the place name into a phonetic representation of pain. The S is suffering from the self-induced pain of too much partying. But more importantly the phonemes of the incomplete sign are translated into the sound ‘am hurt’ or ‘I’m hurt’. Because their focus is on Henry (the A-M-H-E-R-T girls taunt him for being reduced to coaching first base), they underscore the pain and suffering that has led to his being out of the line up: am hurt, I’m hurt, Henry’s hurt. This sign of Henry’s pain – his inability to play – is advanced when he is forced to pinch hit in the ninth inning. Knowing he cannot hit the ball, Henry puts himself in front of a pitch, knocking him to the ground, hurting him, taking a hit for the team: ‘I’m hurt’ becomes ‘I’m hit’. Henry does not stike out; he is struck down. This chain of meaning is traced back to the missing S, which is significant because it comprises a set of signs that is an inversion of the baseball sign system wherein the sign is buried in the ‘white noise’ of the signs that surround it. In A-M-H-E-R-T, there are no superfluous signs that envelop the pertinent sign to conceal the message being transmitted. Rather, the order of the letters is such that we can read the word regardless of the absent letter. We know an S is missing because of the letters surrounding the gap so we fill in the blank space. Another way of thinking about this is to read this sign as including an arbitrariness that is inherent to the letters on the bodies, for if the girls change seats or move around then we would not necessarily understand the word they seek to convey. The word then becomes an anagram so that the original word – its subject – changes as the letters of the word are

rearranged. In various combinations this sign could form the words ‘heart’, ‘heat’, ‘harm’, ‘hear’, ‘hate’, ‘math’ or ‘term’, depending which letters are present and how they are arranged.

Harbach’s *Art of Fielding* thus foregrounds how the visual forms of letters, punctuation marks, numbers, spaces and other figures have spatial and iconographical values that are not simply the extension of verbal communication. Rather, one sign system fluidly moves into another through a graphic imagination of characters on the page that are not anchored in one voice or a single transcriptive function. The novel employs graphic images so that characters and figures produce multiple meanings across sign systems: letters become numerals, punctuation marks visually depict facial expressions, the letter (or combination of letters) can form a picture – a hieroglyph – and the printed letter is an enigma, an obscure entity challenging the reader to make meaning from its location in the text.

Form and content merge. In a baseball novel, this develops a typographical form that comprises a highly visual and tactile sense of writing that appears to work in relation to the visual sign system of baseball. Letters thus mediate the signs that are conveyed between players and coaches so that typography serves a functional role as a ground and shape that moves between one idiom and another. The figural shapes mediate between our experience of language while reading the novel and the visual sign language system that is conveyed throughout the game. The printed letters on the page are forms of mediation between a ‘vernacular’ language of baseball signs and the

formal system of the English language. When common units are mixed together or folded into one another, then the letter includes hidden analogies so that readings are aligned based on the logic of resemblance. The letter and the baseball sign are both figures of relay but the two are aligned in Harbach's novel through the plastic dimensions of the letter: the text draws the eye to the shape and play of the letter's form, moving away from communication within the linguistic system as the reader's focus is guided to the graphic configurations independent of meaning. The figure, flow and movement of the letter lead to a baseball sign imaginary by which the two sign systems are momentarily superimposed upon one another: the letter bridges the two systems. In this process, the visual dynamics of the letter, character or space engage the reader's graphic imagination and assign tasks to the figures that do not simply relay a meaning. Rather, the figures inscribe as they mean and this underlines an action bearing force that goes beyond the limits of the reader's understanding of the letter as transmitting one meaning. Inscription can thus be alien to or removed from what it produces.

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