

DRAWN STATES OF MIND

Giuseppe Steiner

*Translated from the Italian
and with an Introduction by
Guy Bennett*

GIUSEPPE STEINER joined the ranks of the Italian Futurist movement during World War I, and contributed freeword poetry to a variety of Futurist journals. His first book, *La Chitarra del fante* ("The Infantryman's Guitar"), was published in 1920. But in the years following Steiner abandoned the Marinettian project of "words-in-freedom" because he felt that verbal poetry was inherently limited, due to the inadequate expressive potential of words. Pushing Marinetti's work, Steiner first experimented with "syllables-in-freedom"; and when these also seemed unmanageable he turned away from verbal expression altogether.

In *Drawn States of Mind* Steiner presented twenty of his visual poems. Including his original essay and an introduction by translator Guy Bennett, this publication documents one of the most radical positions taken in Italian Futurist literature, revealing what a poetry beyond language might look like.

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INTRODUCTION

GIUSEPPE STEINER'S *Stati d'animo disegnati* ["Drawn States of Mind"] is representative of a fascinating but little explored area of early avant-garde literature—that of non-verbal poetry. The Italian futurist movement, best known for its experimental *parole in libertà* or freeword poems, also produced a number of visual poets: Oswaldo Bot, Ginna, Pietro Illari, Arturo Martini, and Steiner, to name but a few.¹ While their work is, in a sense, typical of Italian futurism in its attempt to fix or transcribe the experience of diverse feelings and sensations, of various "states of mind," it is unique in that it seeks to do so through abstraction, that is, without relying on the overtly mimetic strategies operative in much futurist painting and poetry.

The "Drawn States of Mind" first appeared in *Roma Futurista* in 1920. The following year, the manifesto "Stati d'animo disegnati o precipitati psichici" ["Drawn States of Mind or Psychic Precipitates"] was published in *Simun*, another futurist journal. This significant text not only described the origins of the "Drawn States of Mind"; more importantly, it presented the theoretical formulation of

Steiner's method, situating it within the broader context of Italian futurist poetics as defined by Marinetti in a number of seminal manifestoes.² As certain passages were highly critical of the form and purpose of words-in-freedom, the manifesto was edited by the futurist leader upon its inclusion as the introduction to the only collection of Steiner's visual poetry that was ever to appear and which was published by Poesia, the official futurist press, in 1923.³

A freeword poet himself, Steiner nevertheless objected to the complexity of freeword poetry, a defect, he argued, that stemmed in great part from its unusual typographical treatment. As he noted, the concept of words-in-freedom called for a variety of "lines, colors, letters, numbers, mathematical and chemical formulae, and distorted typographical characters in picturesque combinations" to be integrated into the otherwise uniform fabric of the poetic text. Steiner acknowledged that such features did in fact enrich the principally verbal palette of traditional poetic language, claiming, for example, that they provided the means to render a "synthetic, dynamic and essential representation of states of mind, feelings, and sensations...." This notwithstanding, he was not blind to their potential negative impact. Intended by Marinetti to give rise to a dynamic, vital lyricism that would accelerate the experience of the poem by conveying information on more than just the verbal level, the most salient features of words-in-freedom, Steiner argued, actually slowed down poetic language by creating a dense verbal and visual polyphony that required a greater effort on the part of the reader, who had not only to read, but also to decode

the poetic text. It is no coincidence that manifestoes explaining the technicalities of words-in-freedom were often included in collections of futurist poetry (as in the present volume). Like the legend on a map or chart, they were meant to guide us in the reading of futurist literature by defining the linguistic and typographical peculiarities of the freeword text. For Steiner, the fact that this was necessary at all represented a serious flaw in the concept of words-in-freedom, for if lengthy and detailed explanations were required to read a poem designed to communicate concisely and directly with the reader, then, he argued, the system was working against itself. The "overly complex and dense structure [of words-in-freedom]," he complained, "does not allow itself to be grasped immediately by the reader with the intuitive speed necessary and indispensable to their purpose."

The "purpose" of freeword poetry was also unacceptable to Steiner, who tended to see the Marinettian project as an attempt to realize a more efficient form of verbal communication, a task he considered to be "superfluous, vain and useless." Like many other avant-garde experimentalists, Steiner believed that verbal poetry was inherently limited, due to the inadequate expressive potential of words. "We must admit and remember," he cautioned, in a passage that was censored by Marinetti, "that words-in-freedom, however free, are still words, that is, worn-out, overused instruments incapable of conveying anything new." Moving beyond the word, Steiner claimed to have invented syllables-in-freedom, but when these, too, became unmanageable, he abandoned language altogether, retaining only the fragmented curves and lines of

letter-forms, which he combined into basic graphic shapes. Describing the development of these "Drawn States of Mind," as they came to be called, Steiner drew on a passage from Marinetti's "Destruction of Syntax—Wireless Imagination—Words-in-Freedom" in which the latter declared that the evolution of poetry was marked by three successive stages, going from traditional versification to free verse, then from free verse to words-in-freedom.⁴ Steiner carried this thought one step further in a line, once again, eliminated by Marinetti as it implied the obsolescence of words-in-freedom and in which he declared the "Drawn States of Mind" to be the successors of freeword poetry: "Ever driven by the growing need to find a natural, i.e., synthetic and complete expression of our sensations, we went from free verse to words-in-freedom, and from the latter we have now arrived at drawn states of mind, or psychic precipitates."

Thus the "Drawn States of Mind" were presented as the natural, if not logical end of verbal poetry. For if, as Marinetti had argued, the history of poetry was the history of its liberation from a succession of extraneous aesthetic and linguistic constraints (i.e., the rigors of traditional versification and conventional grammar), then the "Drawn States of Mind" represented poetry freed from perhaps the greatest set of constraints—those of language itself. They defined the point at which futurist poetry finally dispensed with words altogether to fuse directly with its object: in this case, the graphic depiction of human thought and emotional states. It was no longer necessary, indeed, it was no longer possible to read such poems, which had been liberated at last from the unwieldy

linguistic and intellectual conventions that, according to the futurists, had stifled poetry in the first place. "The psychic precipitates cannot be explained verbally," Steiner boldly declared, "precisely because of the inadequate expression of words to whose aid they have come: they cannot and *must not be understood*, rather, they must *be experienced*, naturally according all rights to the intuitive and divining imagination."

The appeal to "the intuitive and divining imagination," a direct reference to Marinetti,⁵ brings to mind the work of the surrealist poets, whose obsession with intuition and the imagination lead them to experiment with various forms of verbal automatism. It is perhaps merely a coincidence that the "Psychic Precipitates" were published the same year as Breton and Soupault's *Les Champs magnétiques* ["The Magnetic Fields"], the first example of surrealist *écriture automatique* and the "first purely surrealist work," as Breton would later write.⁶ More coincidental still was the original title of the latter work: *Les Précipités* ["The Precipitates"], for, as in the case of Steiner's "Drawn States of Mind," these automatic texts were considered to be the unadulterated products of the unconscious mind, presenting, Breton claimed, "the indifferent unfolding of resonant images all too rarely perceptible under the present conditions of thought, but perceptible in daydreams, in half-sleep...."⁷ Although the two works are fundamentally different, the one being verbal, the other visual, they share a common aim and point of departure—the suspension of the conscious mind at the moment of artistic creation through the use of non-intellectual, "automatic" activity. Steiner described this

activity in a passage that could have been written by the surrealist leader:

This is a very delicate and difficult point: hovering in the free field of creation, when the hand seems detached from the brain which, looking down from above, surveys, guides and dictates, when lucid will has ceded to the intuitive and divining imagination, it is incredibly difficult to restrain one's self when unconscious inspiration ceases, giving way to an artificial and optimistic inspiration that soon follows and that attempts to corrupt our creative mind by inviting it to continue in a work that should be arbitrary, unconscious and of very little value.⁸

Drawn States of Mind remains an interesting and problematic work, for it calls into question the very nature of poetry and the specificity of the poetic text. In creating a series of poems composed uniquely of graphic elements, Steiner and his colleagues effectively blurred the line separating literature from the visual arts. While other avant-garde poets, among them Marinetti, Kručenyč, Schwitters, and Apollinaire, often crossed that line, frequently distorting and reshaping words and letters, they never actually abandoned language altogether. In Steiner's case, the opposite is true: but for the titles, the poems contain no vestige of words, the language has been removed and all that remains is a sort of alinguistic silence. Giovanni Lista has noted the mute quality of Steiner's

unusual work, writing that "its most radical innovation is undoubtedly that of being a sort of silent book in which the abstract graphic sign has filled in the void left by the word."⁹ If one agrees with Steiner's rather extreme conclusion that the end of poetry lies somewhere beyond language, then one must see in *Drawn States of Mind* an important early step in that direction.

Guy Bennett
Los Angeles, 1994

NOTES

- 1 Giovanni Lista provides an informative discussion of these and other futurist visual poets in *Le livre futuriste: de la libération du mot au poème tactile* (Modena: Editions Panini, 1984), 27–39.
- 2 Namely, the "Manifesto tecnico della letteratura futurista" ["Technical Manifesto of Futurist Literature"]—1912, "Distruzione della sintassi—Immaginazione senza fili—Parole in libertà" ["Destruction of Syntax—Wireless Imagination—Words-in-Freedom"]—1913, and "Lo splendore geometrico e meccanico e la sensibilità numerica" ["Geometrical and Mechanical Splendor and Numerical Sensibility"]—1914.
- 3 The present edition includes a translation of the complete manifesto text (i.e., as it appeared in *Simun*). I have worked from a reprint appearing in Luciano Caruso and Stelio Maria Martini's anthology *Tavole parolibere futuriste: 1912–1944* (Naples: Ligouri, 1977), 2: 462–465.
- 4 See Marinetti, *Teoria e invenzione futurista* (Milan: Mondadori, 1968), 79–80.
- 5 It was, in fact, a direct quote from the first point of the appendix to the "Technical Manifesto." See Marinetti, *op. cit.*, 55.
- 6 Breton, *Œuvres complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1988), 1: 336. All translations are my own.

- 7 Breton, *op. cit.*, 1: 1128.
- 8 These lines also strongly recall a section of the Appendix to the “Technical Manifesto” in which Marinetti writes that “the creative mind suddenly frees itself from the weight of all obstacles, and somehow becomes prey to a strange spontaneity of conception and execution. *The hand that writes seems to become detached from the body and wanders far from the brain, which, somehow detached from the body itself, has taken flight, and looks down from above with terrifying lucidity on the unexpected sentences that flow from the pen. Does this brain contemplate impassively or actually direct the leaps of fancy that move the hand? It is impossible to say*” (Marinetti, *op. cit.*, 56—my italics).
- 9 Lista, *op. cit.*, 31.

DRAWN STATES OF MIND

DRAWN STATES OF MIND or Psychic Precipitates

EVER DRIVEN by the growing need to find a natural, i.e., synthetic and complete expression of our sensations, we went from free verse to words-in-freedom, and from the latter we have now arrived at drawn states of mind, or psychic precipitates.

Any sensation, should it be genuine, and our soul delicate and sensitive enough to receive it, however complex, is always something that has its own personality and which presents itself to the mind as a unique and complete thing. If we want to express, or rather transmit it to others we must above all be honest and render it exactly as we have truly and sincerely experienced it. Not by analyzing it, i.e., by tearing it apart and then recombining its various elements in an arbitrary arrangement, giving them an order that they did not previously have, and which, under the more or less persuasive appearance of logical opportunism, always seems false or improbable.

Chopping up the creature that we carry in our wombs: giving birth to it piece by piece so as to reassemble it later in its primitive form, preserving its life and beauty with-

out losing a single bit of it—this would be the ideal of accurate, genuine, effortless, artistic expression.

But what obstetrician has ever succeeded in such a difficult and wonderful operation? And how absurd and vain the hundreds and hundreds of past and *passéist* artists who have been striving and who continue to strive, with exceptional ardor and tenacity, to analyze and synthesize, wasting excellent materials and precious energy and succeeding, more often than not, in forming from the mangled limbs of an extremely beautiful and perfect creature only horrible monsters and obscene abortions.

We were the first to courageously condemn these criminal infanticides and have shown how to give birth without chopping up and reassembling the fetus: ours is a difficult and painful delivery, but we have finally seen our creatures, our sensations, images, and concepts, throb with life before our very eyes. Since the delivery is successful, it is with greater facility and confidence that we eliminate all that is superfluous and useless—it is the core that must remain intact: we are solely preoccupied with the simultaneous expression of our profound, dynamic, fast-paced universe, and to express the logical current of our inspiration we use all possible verbal, phonic, pictorial and mechanical means.

Thus words-in-freedom, released from the rules imposed by logic, syntax, and grammar, triumphed in the synthetic, dynamic and essential representation of states of mind, feelings, and sensations by deforming the materials of language with lines, colors, letters, numbers, mathematical and chemical formulæ, and distorted typographical characters in picturesque combinations.

But many and grave are the defects of words-in-freedom, their greatest deficiency being their overly complex and dense structure which does not allow itself to be grasped immediately by the reader with the intuitive speed necessary and indispensable to their purpose. Furthermore, we must admit and remember that words-in-freedom, however free, are still words, that is, worn-out, over-used instruments incapable of conveying anything new.

To liberate them from their excessive complexity, to loosen up lyric poetry further still, I broke words down into syllables in freedom, but they, too, soon proved to be quite cumbersome and unmanageable.

So I threw out words altogether and had words-in-freedom without words: the material that had until then eluded myself and others, that I had sought, wrought, and shaped—with this I was able to compose my *psychic precipitates*, or drawn states of mind.

Within me is my psyche, a transparent, pink liquid. It contains all external and internal impressions, all possible and imaginable concepts—the entire perceptible world is fused within my psyche. I am not aware of this, nor do I even sense it for the solution is perfect and maintains the entire substance in a state of magnificent suspension. Should a reagent come into contact with this exceptionally pure solution, disturbing the state of one of the dissolved substances, then this substance completely precipitates to the bottom, and, according to its nature, takes a particular design which constitutes the exact psychic precipitate of that given feeling, released from the solution and which we can finally know.

The reagent can be of different natures: it can be iden-

tical, analogous, or, according to the law of contrast, even contrary to that which precipitates: for example *melancholy* could precipitate, or in other words we could experience melancholy not only when we are sad, but even in moments of pure and intense joy.

In this field where the subjective and the arbitrary could reign supreme, we have succeeded, by restraining and tempering our hypersensitivity, in rendering highly complicated sensations which could present themselves to the minds of most people.

This is a very delicate and difficult point: hovering in the free field of creation, when the hand seems detached from the brain which, looking down from above, surveys, guides and dictates, when lucid will has ceded to the intuitive and divining imagination, it is incredibly difficult to restrain one's self when unconscious inspiration ceases, giving way to an artificial and optimistic inspiration that soon follows and that attempts to corrupt our creative mind by inviting it to continue in a work that should be arbitrary, unconscious and of very little value.

With constant, patient work, with confidence and will we have finally succeeded in expressing precisely, exactly and faithfully the exceedingly delicate nuances of complicated states of mind.

See for example our "Just Off the Train After a Long Voyage," where with but two simple spirals we have given a perfectly marvelous representation of that particular impression of contrast and calm that one experiences after a long voyage during which speed and motion have been absorbed, having just stepped off the train in a big station where one becomes suddenly engrossed in the con-

vulsive and nervous movement of the people, of the coming and going, descending, leaving, porters, windows, baggage, shouting, newspapers... etc.!

The psychic precipitates cannot be explained verbally precisely because of the inadequate expression of words to whose aid they have come: they cannot and *must not be understood*, rather, they must *be experienced*, naturally according all rights to the intuitive and divining imagination.

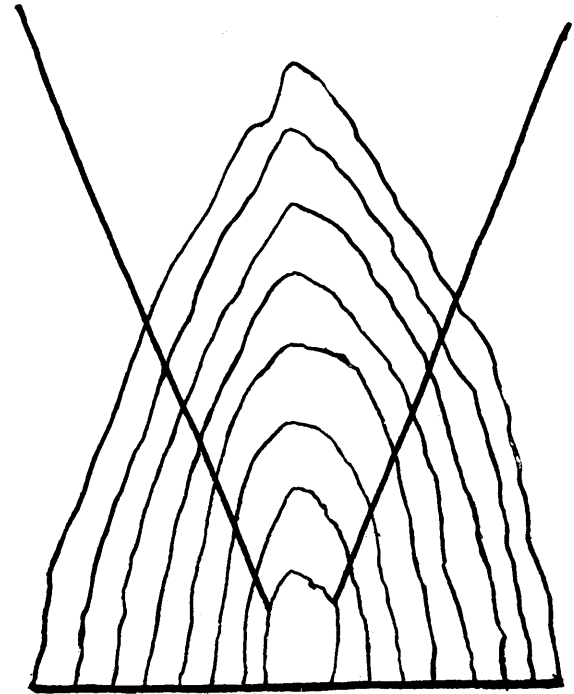
They are not the fruit of presumptuous attempts to express more effectively and with greater fidelity that which was already expressed with words. Their purpose would be superfluous, vain and useless.

Rather, they seek to express that which until now has remained unexpressed, because it was considered to be inexpressible.

Giuseppe Steiner

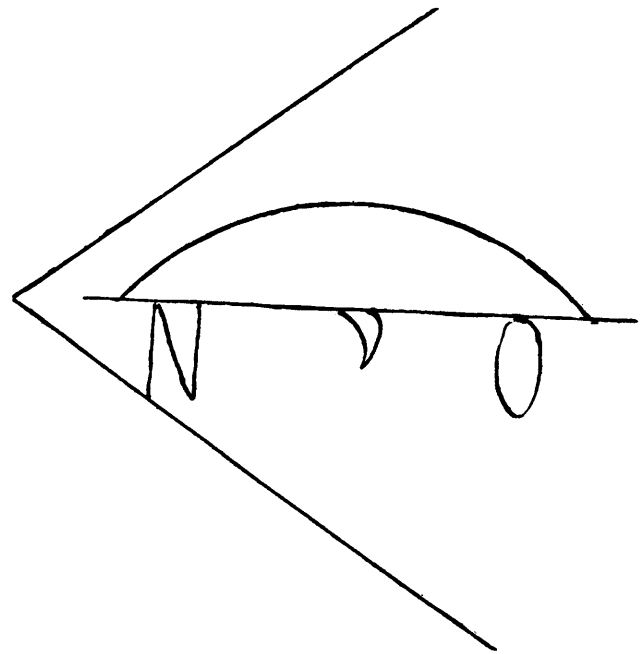
Meraviglia

Wonder



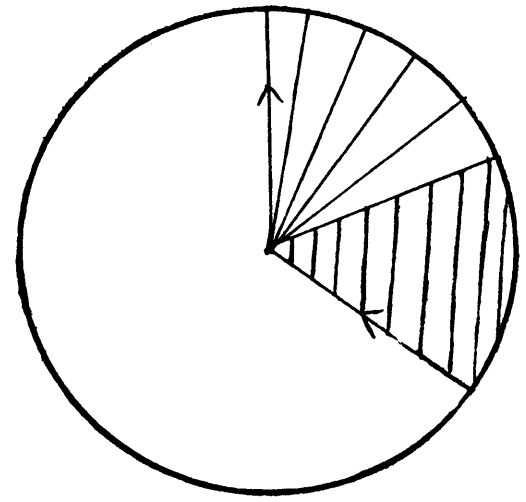
Napoleone

Napoleon



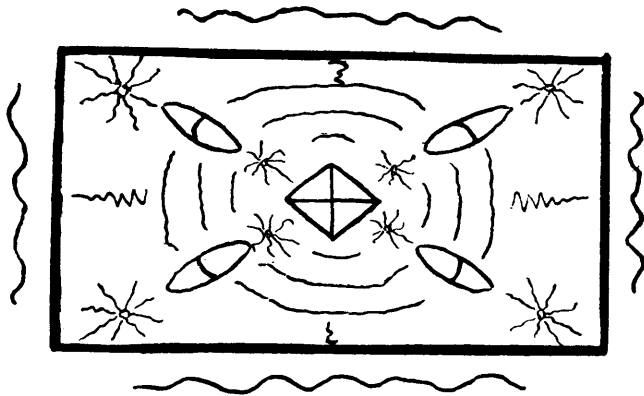
Altruismo ed egoismo

Altruism and Egoism



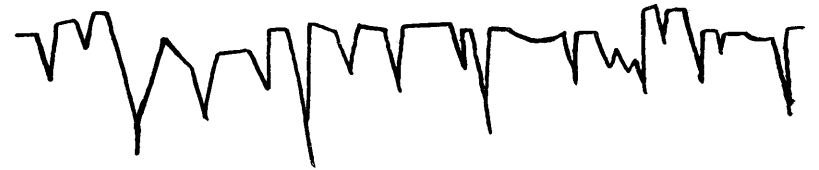
Caffè dopo mezzanotte

Coffee After Midnight



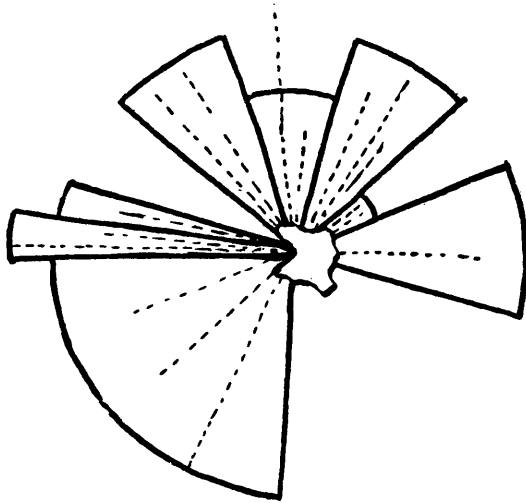
Dolore fisico acuto

Acute Physical Pain



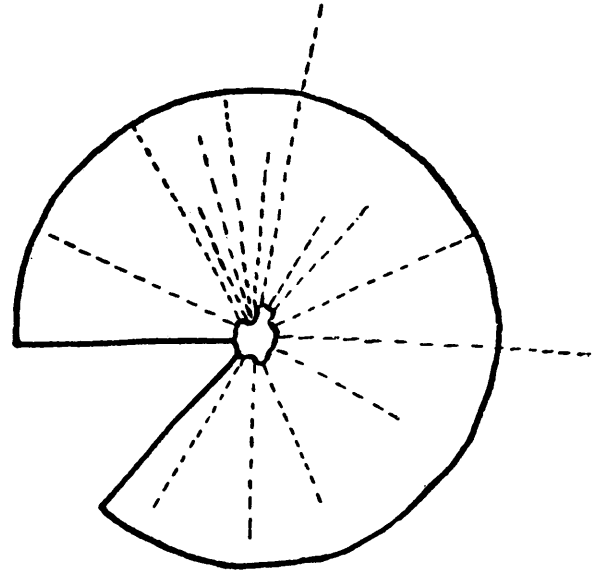
Pazzia

Madness



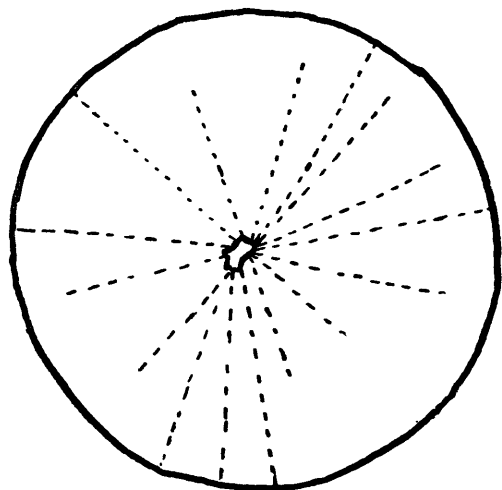
Genio

Genius



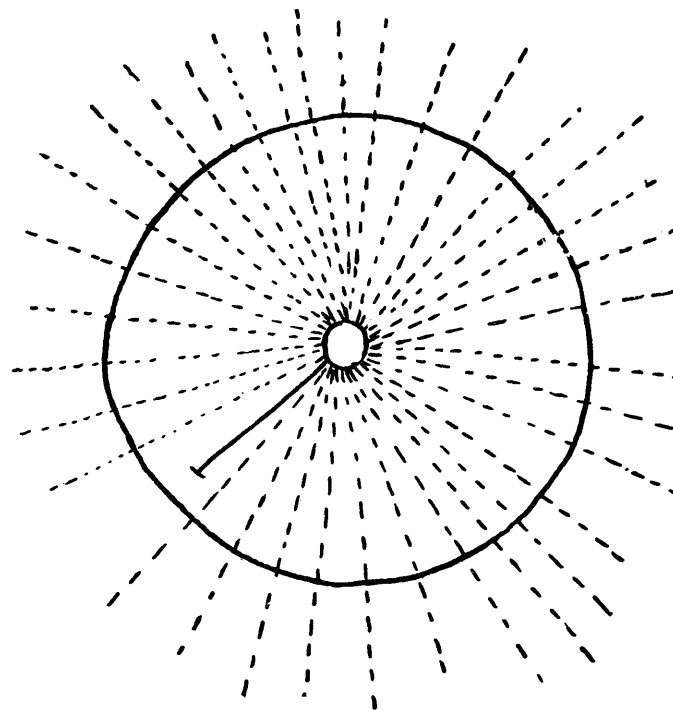
Mente umana

Human Intelligence



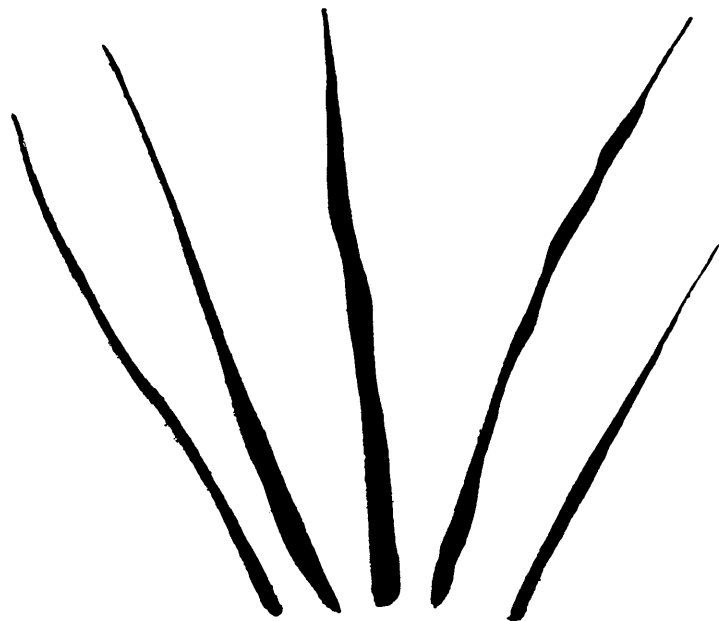
Mente divina

Divine Intelligence



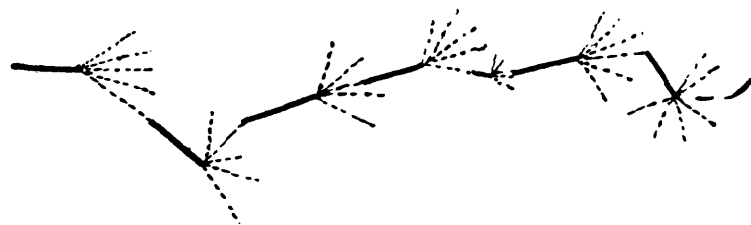
Allegria

Gaity



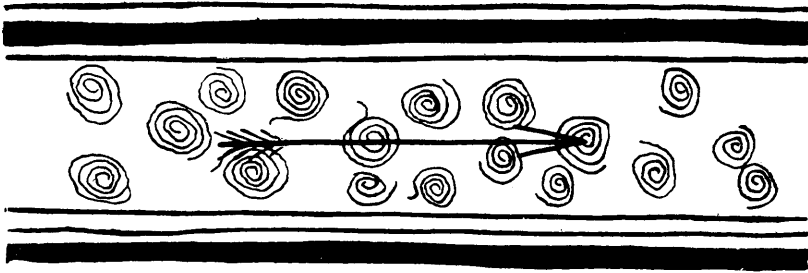
Nevrestenia

Neurasthenia



Imbroglío

Confusion



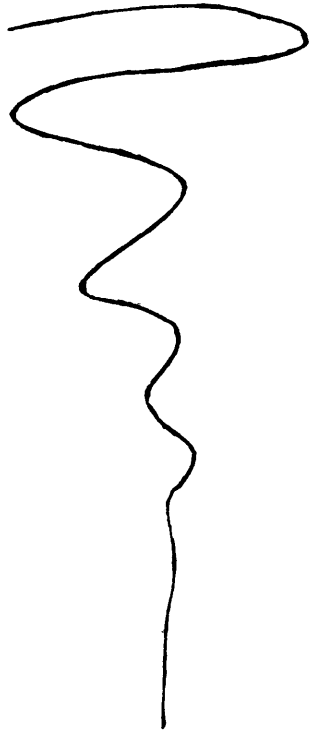
Domenica

Sunday



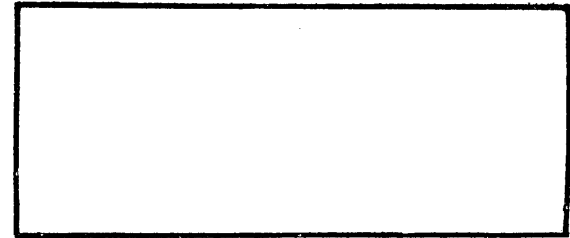
Lunedì

Monday



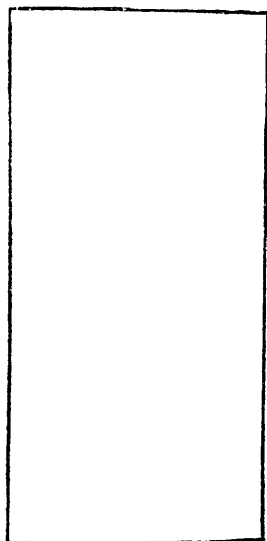
Martedì

Tuesday



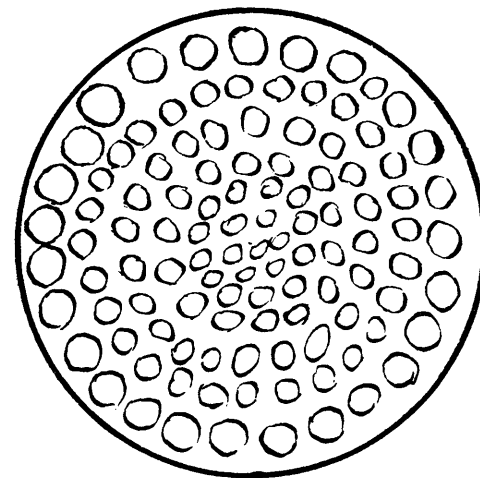
Mercoledì

Wednesday



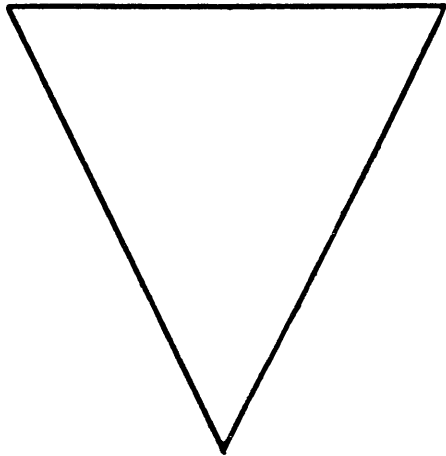
Giovedì

Thursday



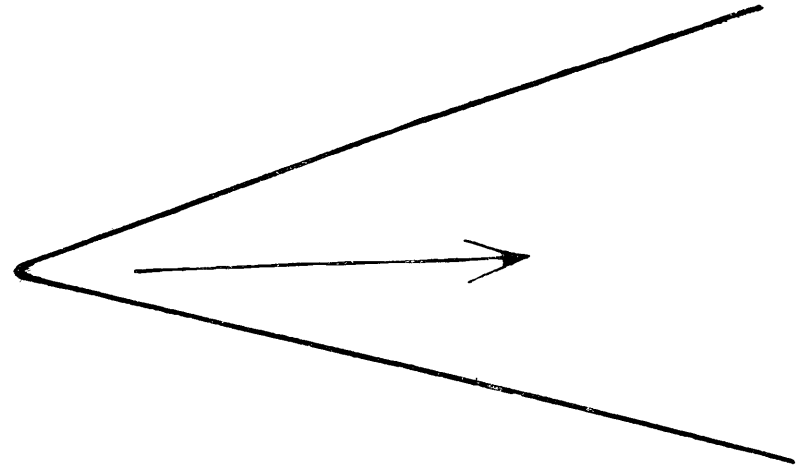
Venerdì

Friday



Sabato

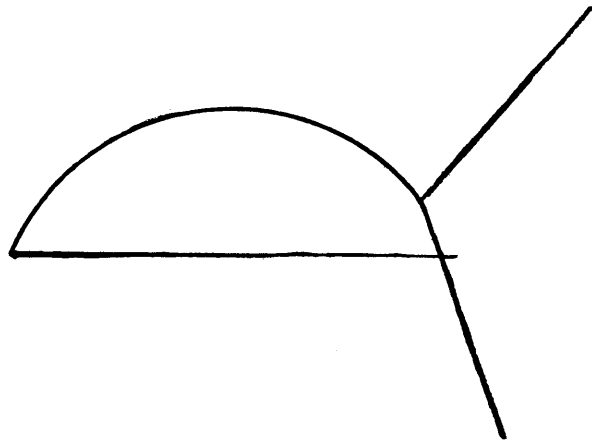
Saturday



Domenica invernale - serena - polverosa alle 5 del pomeriggio

Serene and Dusty Winter's Sunday

at 5 in the Afternoon



Giuseppe Steiner

BORN IN URBINO on August 4, 1898, Giuseppe Steiner joined the ranks of the futurist movement during the First World War. A lawyer and journalist by profession, Steiner (who also wrote under the pseudonym *Palombaro* ["Diver"]) contributed freeword poetry to a variety of futurist journals. His first book, *La Chitarra del fante* ["The Infantryman's Guitar"], was published in 1920. The following year, he abandoned words-in-freedom, devoting himself to the creation of non-verbal poetry, which he heralded in the manifesto "Stati d'animo disegnati, o Precipitati psichici" ["Drawn States of Mind, or Psychic Precipitates"]. Steiner's visual poems appeared intermittently over the next two years, before being collected in a single volume, *Stati d'animo disegnati*, which was published by Marinetti in 1923. Shortly thereafter, Steiner turned his back on futurism and literature, and became active in Italian politics. *Cultura fascista* ["Fascist Culture"], a testament to his political involvement, was written in 1931. Steiner died in Turin on November 26, 1964.