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Antenna

The origins of the word 'antenna' can be traced back to an intricate set of myths and etymologies, none of which has been proved to be entirely documented, or fully verifiable. It is thought that the word can be related to the name of a hamlet in ancient Rome, Antemnae, built on the site where river Aniene flows into the Tiber: 'Ante amnem' in Latin means 'in front of the river'. Pliny the Elder mentioned Antemnae as one of the lost towns of ancient Roman times. Apparently the village was surrounded by trees, whose wood was used to make poles for the ships: those poles were called 'antemnae'.

Young Guglielmo Marconi - whose father dreamt of a career for him in the navy - called 'antenna' the pole that made long-distance radio transmission possible.

The fact that the word 'antenna' originally derived from a river, and ended up denoting the main device for transmission and reception – among humans and insects - is puzzling, and at the same time thought-provoking. How to connect the idea of transmission with that of water flow? A possible answer could be found in poetry. And in the ocean-letter: a communication system developed in the early 20th century, as a service to allow passengers on ships to send messages to friends and relatives on the mainland. The passenger would write a message and give it to the radio officer on board, who in turn would transmit it by radio to another ship going in the opposite direction. The second ship would transcribe the message on a form, put it in an envelope and post it to destination when the ship reached land. In 1914 Guillaume Apollinaire published his first *calligramme*, entitled *Lettre-océan (Ocean letter)*. Arranging words on the page in concentric circles and along irradiating axes, the poem relates a letter – a medium of transmission in itself – to water (the ocean) and to its flows that would bring the message to destination. The concentric circles referred to the Tour Eiffel, at that time an antenna for broadcasting, to send wireless telegraphic messages to ships and stations.

Apollinaire looked keenly at the developments of wireless telegraph, which at the time would transmit messages from boat to shore using radio. *Lettre-océan* arranges words in the pattern of a transmission diagram and like the band of radio transmission, which disrupts the circular/linear movement by opening up to a myriad voices interrupting one another, there is no specific way in which this poem is to be read. You can access it any time; it does not have a focus or a climax. It embodies a rhythm, at the same time epitomises one of the avant-garde's favourite ideas: *simultaneity*.

Simultaneity, and transmission as a carrier of poetry: in 1934 the Italian Futurist artist Fortunato Depero published a collection of *Radiophonic Poems (Liriche Radiofoniche)*.