

REVIEW

JAMIE HILDER. **Designed Words for a Designed World: The International Concrete Poetry Movement, 1955-1971.** Pp. xvi + 280. Montreal & Kingston, London and Chicago: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2016. Paper, £27.99.

Jamie Hilder shows admirable restraint in leaving it until the fourth chapter of this excellent, ground-breaking book to embark on *the list*: that compilation of vague, ill-informed disparagements which any engaged critic of concrete poetry must feel an irresistible compulsion to document and expose in their attempts to wrest the movement free from literary-historical limbo. There are regional variations on the list: Hilder's consists mainly of remarks by North-American critics of conceptual art, who interpret concrete poetry as a naive or unscrupulous resurrection of early-twentieth-century visual-linguistic vanguardism, reduced in the process to various forms of depoliticized typographical frippery; this is counterweighted with some equally leaden criticisms of conceptual art by concrete poets. But in Britain the list might commence with Hugh MacDiarmid's puritanical denunciations, across the 1960s, of the concrete forms being employed by a younger generation of Scottish writers and artists including Ian Hamilton Finlay and Edwin Morgan, mainly in response to the poets of the Brazilian Noigandres group. For MacDiarmid concrete meant cosmopolitan formal decadence, a betrayal of the Scottish Renaissance's aims of Marxist-inflected cultural nationalism. These geographically determined nuances in the reception of concrete poetry reflect similar nuances in the terms of its practice: a problem for Hilder's transnational approach which I will return to. But for now the salient point is that the critical tide has been turning for some time, and Hilder's book arrives at a perfect moment to consolidate an emerging consensus: that concrete poetry was far more responsive to its cultural, social and political moment than has generally been acknowledged.

As Hilder points out in his introductory chapter, the development of such a consensus has been hindered even by the positive attention which concrete poetry has received, often curtailed by national frames of reference inadequately responsive to the global networks of post-war cultural exchange which facilitated the movement's growth. Paraphrasing Eric Hobsbawm in his next chapter, in a passage typical of his historical-materialist approach, Hilder links these networks to the development of 'infrastructure for war production [which] was then integrated into a global market that produced and consumed increasing amounts of goods in a modernization project unprecedented in world history in its scale and rapidity' (p. 75). Equally unhelpful, Hilder suggests, is the trans-historical approach, which presents concrete poetry as the latest contribution to an immemorial tradition of pictographic and visual-linguistic sign-making, ignoring the social and economic conditions of its era of production. The other angles of approach which Hilder carefully but decisively shuts down—his tone is bracingly critical at time—are the 'theoretical mode', which 'read[s] backwards on to the poetry the linguistic theory . . . of the 1970s and 1980s', in spite of concrete poetry's clearer debt to fields of knowledge such as cybernetics and information theory (p. 28), and the overlapping 'disciplinary mode', which approaches it from the blinkered perspectives of literary criticism, ignoring its cross-disciplinary status (p. 31).

Viable responses could be developed to all of these critical-rhetorical manoeuvres, but it is one of the inevitable shortcomings of a text as ambitious as Hilder's that it cannot get too bogged down in exceptions and qualifications, and at this stage of the debate the breadth of

his focus is entirely appropriate. Moreover, his second chapter makes a virtuosic case for interpreting concrete poetry along the global, contextually rooted lines he proposes, while acknowledging some of the pitfalls of an entirely transnational rubric. The argument hinges on two interrelated themes: ‘the relationship between concrete poetry and the technological developments of the period’ and the ‘emerging feeling of the global’ (p. 41). In the first case, Hilder evokes not just the bomb—which engendered ‘a disturbing but eminently modern global community’ (p. 49)—but also the Bombe, Alan Turing’s Enigma code-breaking machine, whose invention adumbrated the development of computer coding, and thus a new sense of the possibility of de-individuated language generation which updated modernist propositions of trans-subjective composition: ‘[t]he poets were interested in subjectivities beyond those created by national language, and machines and their maths seemed to be nationless’ (p. 53). Ideas around the interplay of human and mechanical language were borne out through developments in information theory and cybernetics, which proposed models of communication that removed qualitative content—and therefore human subjectivity—as a determinant of information value, and promised the possibility of pre-emptively engineering language to make it comprehensible to as many receivers as possible. These theories provided models for a global poetic style whose communicability would be staked on its very lack of authorially determined thematic diversity (enter the carping literary critics).

After moving through the more familiar terrain of McLuhanite communication theory, Hilder defines the compulsion and capacity to define such a global style in economic terms—referencing the homogenizing cultural effects of world markets, and especially of the Marshall Plan—and considers several methods for interpreting concrete poetry through the wider lens these factors necessitate. Immanuel Wallerstein’s idea of the world system, and various theories of ‘cosmopolitanism’ and ‘internationalism’ borrowed from globalization studies—simply put, the former, unlike the latter, envisages a *post*-national space, in necessarily biased terms (pp. 78–9)—are all addressed, as is Franco Moretti’s concept of ‘distant reading’ (pp. 80–2). All of these theories come encumbered with prejudices, but they indicate the possibility of a more reactive than prescriptive globally focused stance on concrete, one ‘open to the possibility of entering a field of investigation without a determined outcome set in the critic’s mind’ (p. 84). This admirably sensitive approach is tested against a few readings of pictographic and poly-linguistic concrete poems—see the Noigandres’s ‘semiotic’ and ‘popcrete’ poems and Eugen Gomringer’s ‘Wind’, for example—though another arguable pitfall of Hilder’s own version of distant reading is that the book is not always saturated with examples of the categories of work he identifies.

The argument is carried far further across the remainder of the book. Hilder’s third, equally incisive chapter deals with concrete poetry’s affinities with architectural modernism—the Noigandres’s response to the construction of Brasília—but also post-modernism, taking Las Vegas as an alternative analogue for the style. The move from modernist to post-modernist compositional modes within concrete poetics is associated with the different approaches to town planning, relationships between architect and inhabitant, and processes of socio-economic development, indexed by the respective spaces of the cities. In short, modernist uniformity gives way to post-modern multiplicity, the architect-as-auteur gives way to the architect-as-businessman, and the modernist labourer gives way to the post-modern consumer. The chapter closes, however, on a wonderfully inventive account of concrete poetry’s receptiveness to the transnational, trans-human foci implied by extra-terrestrial exploration and photography, a potential—and potentially problematic—form of resolution to those competing compositional modes.

Chapter 4 pays perhaps lopsided attention to the relationship between concrete poetry and conceptual art: though Hilder discusses British and South-American conceptual art alongside Carl Andre et al., I wonder if this relationship seems uniquely significant from a North-American perspective—Hilder is based in Vancouver—particularly in the wake of Conceptual Poetry. Chapter 5 assesses the new systems of distribution and information transmission to which concrete poetry responded, closing on an account of its vexed relationship with Gutenberg-era technology, specifically the mass-produced anthologies which made it famous. Towards the end of that chapter and across a brief conclusion, Hilder also traces the development of a post-structuralist concrete poetics in Canada in the early 1970s—an endnote acknowledges that post-structuralist approaches to concrete are not therefore entirely irrelevant—and its legacies within some recent North-American poetry (again, these sections arguably let the global focus slip). In summing up, Hilder asserts that concrete poetry ought to be read ‘spatially. By this I mean that by striving to understand the way the concrete poems signify across forms, nations, languages, and disciplines, readers come up against aesthetic characteristics that cannot be subsumed into a particular formalist or disciplinary discourse, and which require them to shift their critical terrain’ (p. 236).

The enormous value and erudition of this book is obvious. It should be required reading for anyone attempting a serious critical intervention on concrete poetry in future, and should also open up that subject to a larger audience. Part of the work that follows, however, might involve a more modestly ambitious kind of criticism, which elucidates the blind-spots of this text from the very localized perspectives which it seeks to transcend. In particular, I am not convinced that national or regionally oriented approaches to concrete poetry can be entirely discarded. Apart from the mistake—which Hilder is alert to—of adopting the naive cosmopolitanism of some concrete poets, in many cases the very practice of the style outside established centres of modernist practice, made possible by its new global networks, provided the grounds for new forms of cultural-nationalist or regionalist projection. This is particularly obvious in Scotland, where concrete became something of a talisman for assertions of an independent innovative literary and artistic tradition, one whose internationalism was staked on a prior sense of national identity. I sense there are also ways of talking about concrete poetry from a literary-critical perspective which do not, to paraphrase Hilder, simply leave methodological gaps in which the movement is mired. Indeed, concrete poets were generally deeply concerned with asserting the literary credentials of their work, acknowledging which does not necessarily mean reducing it to a position of kitsch belatedness: as Hilder’s references to recent work on the idea of the *arrière-garde* acknowledge.

This book entirely achieves its aim of redefining the critical grounds on which concrete poetry should be judged. The next step, rather than moving from the limbo of critical rejection to the limbo of endless critical equivocation, might be to explore the implications of Hilder’s brilliant global overview of concrete poetry from the narrower but more scrupulous perspectives of literary, artistic, and geographically oriented analysis.

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