

Greg Thomas, *Border Blurs: Concrete Poetry in England and Scotland* [*Liverpool English Texts and Studies*, 79]. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2019. Pp. xiv + 299. Hardback, £90.00, ISBN: 978-1-789-62026-9.

—By now, the concrete poetry movement of the 1960s has merged for most critics into broader and less programmatic interest in the relationship between poetic language and its visual presentation, and it is salutary to be reminded how different, and challenging, the claims made for it were in its early years. This book sets out to offer both a history, and a comparative study, not so much of concrete poetry, but of how four poets, two Scots and two English, responded enthusiastically to what was an international movement originating in Brazil. Greg Thomas is himself an enthusiast for poetry of this period, but his opening chapter provides a very useful introduction even for non-enthusiasts to the movement's modernist roots and its contemporary connections with post-War communication theory, McLuhanite mass media theory, and sixties counter-culture. Readers of *SSL* will be most interested in the chapters on Ian Hamilton Finlay and Edwin Morgan, and these seem to me the strongest, because the poets, especially Morgan, increasingly took concrete poetry on their own terms. The two English poets, Dom Sylvester Houédard and Bob Cobbing, seem to have been more programmatic.

The sixties saw an extraordinary outpouring of self-consciously countercultural "publication." In a period of small poetry magazines and broadsheets, production and distribution were radical, as well as the texts/images themselves. Thomas's focus is critical, and he only mentions briefly the bibliographical or book-historical aspects to the concrete poetry phenomenon, how concrete poetry was actually produced. Most small magazines could find purchasers even though they were typed on mimeo stencils, perhaps with an IBM golfball typewriter (introduced in 1961), or pasted up from cut-outs and Letraset stick-ons (also from 1961), for the newly-available technology of offset photolitho. Publications from regular presses often adopted a standard "typewriter font" to signal unconventionality. Much of what was produced was ephemeral, jokey or jokily transgressive, or portentous. Though there were examples of concrete poetry beautifully printed on hand presses, it more often also looked ephemeral, so that in-depth collections tend to be in archives, rather discoverable item by item in regular library catalogues. Thomas notes that for this study he relied heavily on archival research. Much concrete poetry, especially if poorly produced in the first place, is difficult to reproduce well, and a monograph is not a picture book, but I should have welcomed more full-page illustrations.

Thomas's focus on just the two major Scots figures could certainly have been expanded, though with a risk of blurring the picture he gives. Scottish precursors would surely include W.S. Graham's early surrealism, in the

1940s. I remember, also, G.S. Fraser and his Vaughan College students producing a collection of concrete poems ca. 1968 (and I remember Morgan coming to give a talk). I would have gladly dumped Dom Sylvester, prominent though he was in the sixties, for a chapter on the influence of the poet, printer, and typographic designer, Duncan Glen (1933-2008). Despite his admiration for MacDiarmid, Glen seems to have been fascinated by concrete poetry, publishing Morgan's *Gnomes* (1968), and *The Horseman's Word* (1970). A special "Visual issue" of Glen's magazine *Akros* (vol. 6, no. 8, 1972) featured concrete poetry, including not only poems, but essays by Morgan and Stuart Mills. *Akros* publications, and Glen's other imprints, spanning a broad range of print technologies, deserve reconsideration in the history of modern Scottish poetry. The book wisely limits its discussion of concrete poetry in America, or comparison with the striking, if less theorized, typographic elements in Ginsberg and the *City Lights* poets, also relevant to Morgan's work, or more recent American theorizing on visual poetry, as in the work of Joanna Drucker.

Incorporating such connections or expansions would of course have made for a different, and less focused, book, but they do indicate some of the ramifications and continuing interest of the broader concrete poetry movement. Criticism of concrete poetry, like that of the visual in poetry more generally, is still often explanatory or appreciative, by comparison with the complexity of criticism focused on text. The more definite focus on the two Scottish poets of recognized stature deflects scepticism about the poems, and the reliance on narrative also makes critical commentary on individual poems less open to niggling. Thomas writes clearly and well about the two Scottish poets, and about their knowledge of, relation to, and growing differences from, the original Brazilian theorists of the movement. Though I hope it will not be the last book, or Thomas's last book, on this phase of Scottish poetry, this is an important book that breaks new ground, its introductory chapter on the history of the movement will be particularly useful, and it is likely to remain the standard book on its topic for Scottish readers.