

**Concrete and Tantra: A Conversation with Stephen Nelson about *Toys for Telepaths* (Dugort, Co. Mayo: Red Fox, 2023)**

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*The visual poet Stephen Nelson, who lives in a burn in central Scotland with a cat called Amma, has been quietly amassing a singular body of asemic writing, visual poetry, and language-game exercises over the past few decades. His semantic work distils a gentle humour and conceptual ingenuity that reflects the influence of the Scottish concrete poetry tradition. His visual work, meanwhile, brings to mind figures such as Geoff Huth and Derek Beaulieu. But there is a particular subtlety of logographic gesture in Nelson's asemic and visual poetry that marks a more meditative compositional space. You can find his work in 3am Magazine, Otoliths, Jacket2, Xexoxial, and elsewhere. Nelson's new collection Toys for Telepaths (2023), part of the marvellous C'est Mon Dada series put out by Ireland's Red Fox Press, uses Roman, Greek, and Tibetan characters to create lithely enmeshed language-structures. This is digital work, but without the excessive effects of distortion or glitchiness that can mark out vispo in this medium. Characters are, for the most part, black, but with little planes of bright colour filling the holes in certain letters. Each piece expresses the delight of instinctive creation, with a sense of lightness and mobility to individual elements. But there is an overall visual integrity to each page that belies the swiftness of composition.*

*In a foreword to the collection, Nelson writes: "I'm interested in creating visual poems which can simply rest in the reader's awareness and open their mind naturally and freely." A grounding in Tantric thought is central to Nelson's conception of visual poetics, as it was for dom sylvester houédard—the Buddhism of d.a.levy is another touchstone. But I wanted to get under the skin of Nelson's thinking on these matters to fully engage with his new collection. The following conversation was conducted first on Instagram and then via email with the author during April 2023:*

**GT [Insta]:** Hey Stephen, I'm really enjoying your book. Could you tell me if there is a particular set of alphabets you're using here? It looks like mostly Greek and Roman ... Also, is there particular relevance to the use of grammatical symbols: the wee flowers, triangles, etcetera?

**SN:** Thanks Greg. Yes, Roman, Greek, and Tibetan alphabets. Quite a bit of Tibetan. And a lot of the Tibetan characters work alongside the flowers or stars or asterisks as offerings. So offerings to the poetry gods or whatever. I use commas as thorns quite a lot, piercing, and enlarged full stops and other grammatical symbols as endings, offerings, things carried over from one impulse to another. A cessation or offering of felt energy.

I see something very playful in the Tibetan alphabet, and it's where the "toys" of the title came from. I think there's also a suggestion of seeds and embryos in the punctuation. From my perspective these might be karmic seeds, the seeds we sow with words and actions.

**GT:** Thanks so much Stephen. We should sit down to talk about all this some time. Are you versed in Buddhism, then?

**SN:** Yeah, I've quite a strong (but informal) connection to Vajrayana Buddhism, Tantric Buddhism. I remember [concrete poetry scholar and tantric Buddhism practitioner] Nicola Simpson talking about it on discussion about dom sylvester houédard on Radio Three a while back there, and it very much resonated with me.

**GT:** This is all so interesting. If you wanted to tell me any more I'd love to hear from you over email ...

**SN:** That'd be great. Just for starters, the spiritual element to the concrete and visual poetry movement in the 60s is a big draw for me. I really love d.a.levy's *Tibetan Stroboscope*. levy is a huge favourite of mine. I'll be in touch with more soon hopefully.

**SN: [Email]** Hi Greg. Further to our chat on Instagram, I have a few thoughts on the Tantric/Concrete connection in my work.

It involves the use of visualisation of seed mantras in Tantra. Mantras are usually thought of as sound, but more accurately they're vibration. So in Tantra, a seed syllable or mantra is visualised, in Tibetan or Sanskrit letters, during meditation, and placed at a point in the body, or subtle body (chakras etc). So, for example, *Om* at the crown, *Ab* at the throat, *Hum* at the heart. The seed mantra has the vibration of a deity, which might be thought of as an archetypal aspect of enlightened mind. It gets very detailed and intricate, but the energy of the syllable, as sound or image installed in the subtle body, potentially has the power to shift blocked psychological or emotional patterns and free up space in the mind.

So really much of the concrete work I'm doing is about the power of letters to affect the body, or subtle body, and the emotions that are stored there, via the imaginative faculties. I really want this to be a poetic thing though, not necessarily spiritual or therapeutic or healing. Looking at a letter composition placed on a page might have a similar effect to a visualised seed mantra placed in the body. It's like a transmission of energy which can calm or enliven the mind through the eye via the body, but in an altogether more playful way in *Toys for Telepaths*. It's about letter shapes sparking something internally, an imaginative response that opens up and expands certain areas of consciousness.

I work very fast, almost in a trance, pulling these shapes and compositions from an unconscious place, and I'm often blown away by the results. They have a cohesion I couldn't plan, very much a deep intuitive exploration. The only intention is to create an energetic flow from form to form, which is felt in the body. Some of this undoubtedly comes from a subconscious storehouse of

letter shapes, vispoetic forms etcetera, but some of it feels quite primal or childlike or archetypal, even cosmic at times, and beyond that, it expresses the experience of shunyata, or emptiness.

Personally, I've worked with tantric deities and their mantras in both the Buddhist and Hindu traditions (Shiva/Shakti) as a way of integrating a spontaneous kundalini awakening. I've done that since my twenties, and the marriage of that practise and concrete poetry seems very natural and easy. Tibetan has a very playful feel to me, but I'd also like to explore Sanskrit. The Greek and Roman alphabets are obviously more familiar here, but have similar potential. And the whole idea of placing "power letters" on the body by way of visualisations is paralleled in so many mystical traditions across the world. Kabbalah, working with Hebrew letters, is possibly the most well-known in the West.

A few of the poems also have semi-abstract figurative or narrative qualities. I think these reveal themselves organically in composition when the mind has some space or freedom. Again, they're primitive, archetypal patterns but also playful. For me, they come from a space that's shared with the ancient formulation of tantric or magick symbology and ritual, deeply rooted in the imagination. Visualised deities, ritualised movement or activity. All designed to reveal, then integrate more archetypal energies, or even more innocent or childlike qualities.

Ok, I'm rattling on a bit. It's a very exciting subject for me ...

**GT:** This is so fascinating Stephen. When you talk about the visualisation of a syllable and its placement on the body, could you talk me through that a bit more?

**SN:** Of course, yeah. The visualisation technique is something that's generally only learned at advanced stages of practice, after a solid grounding in more basic meditation techniques...

In meditation, the practitioners will place their awareness into the heart space, for example. Not the physical heart *per se*, but the energy centre in the chest, the chakra, visualised as a lotus. They'll begin to visualise the shape of the syllable inside the lotus: let's say TAM, which is the seed syllable of the goddess Tara, whom I've worked with ...

When there's a strong feeling for, or imagined awareness of, the syllable in that space, the practitioner then begins to visualise it filling with light or colour, expanding it, empowering it, lighting it up in the mind, in the heart, until it fills the whole chest. At some point, the syllable becomes the deity, felt or imagined, or actually seen, depending on the visualisation powers of the meditator. The syllable then fills with the deity's energy until it blazes. It can feel like heat. There's a practice called Tummo, where a HUM syllable is

imagined at the navel, which can generate a huge amount of heat when the practitioner visualises it catching fire (you can watch YouTube videos of people meditating semi-naked in the snowy mountains).

It's very much about the imagination, the mind's eye placed in the body, and that mysterious realm between imagination, creation and actual manifestation in the body or world at large. It's advanced practise though, with obvious pitfalls if there's no solid grounding in more basic spiritual ideas and principles. Proper breath control is an important factor too.

Obviously, something slightly different is happening with a visual poem, but it's that imaginative connection with a piece, and the energy it holds, that can light a spark in the reader's heart or mind.

Hope this is helpful.

**GT:** I'm amazed by these connections Stephen, thanks so much. Just one more thing to round it off. Could you tell me a bit more about how you got into concrete or visual poetry? And, if people wanted a good introduction to your practice, where should they start?

**SN:** I'm really pleased you're interested, Greg! I was aware of concrete poetry at school but my passion really ignited when I discovered Ian Hamilton Finlay. I was around 30 and it coincided with the internet becoming a major venue for furthering our interests. There was plenty of stuff online that excited me, and plenty of poets I was learning from. But IHF was big, then d.a. levy. The connections that the older Scottish concrete poets had internationally was really interesting to me. Especially with South America. I've been lucky enough to connect with a few poets from Brazil and Argentina, which feels really nice. It's still a great concrete scene down there.

I had an early piece of photo-vispo published in *The Last Vispo Anthology* (2012), edited by Nico Vassilakis and Crag Hill. Another important early-ish piece was *Dance of Past Lives*, selections from which appeared with commentary from Gary Barwin and others in *Jacket2* in 2013. In 2015 I published *Arcturian Punctuation* through Xexoxial Editions. The publisher of that was mIEKAL aND, a really amazing poet. And I've a few more recent pieces which I would say move from a visual poetry grounded in concrete towards asemic writing and other things. You can check out the article "Stephen Nelson's Asemic Writing," on *Atticus Review* from December 2020, which includes some examples, as does "PoemBrut #34: Three Asemic Poems," which appeared on *3ammagazine.com* in 2018. I published *subt* through *Otoliths* in 2022. (I'm mildly embarrassed that I called myself a "galactic wizard" in my author blurb.) I also have a recent written piece called "Tara's Playground," in *Mercurius* magazine, about the set of three bridges over the Cadzow Burn in Hamilton, which goes into some of my experiences of manifesting the Goddess Tara.