

Concrete Poetry and Scottish Women's Writing: The Case of Veronica Forrest-Thomson

GREG THOMAS

Abstract

This article explores the relationship between concrete poetry and women's writing, focusing especially on the concrete-influenced work of the Scottish poet and literary critic Veronica Forrest-Thomson. I initially acknowledge the male-dominated nature of the concrete poetry movement, consider some sociological reasons for the exclusion of women from the movement, and bring to light some examples of women creatively involved with concrete poetry. I then explore Forrest-Thomson's early concrete-influenced verse and argue that Forrest-Thomson's willingness and ability to experiment with concrete and other late-modernist literary styles reflected an exceptional degree of intellectual and economic independence. Finally, I consider the possibility that the term "Scottish women's poetry" sometimes indicates a resistance to intellectually adventurous work such as Forrest-Thomson's.

Introduction: The Concrete Fraternity

In his excellent biography of Edwin Morgan *Beyond the Last Dragon* (2010), James McGonigal refers in passing to the homosocial nature of the international concrete poetry movement which provided one of Morgan's key creative contexts during the 1960s. For the only-child Morgan, McGonigal speculates, "the concrete poets were a set of surrogate brothers (I've seen no sisters) . . ." (166). It is easy to see how the conclusion implied in parenthesis might have been reached. Though unqualified quantitative assessment might seem glib, it is worth noting the scant attention paid

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to women in the genre-defining anthologies of concrete poetry which appeared in the late 1960s. Emmett Williams's *Anthology of Concrete Poetry* (1967) featured seventy-three poets, of whom three were women, while Mary Ellen Solt's *Concrete Poetry: A World View* (1968) featured eighty, of whom five were women, three of them – the German Ilse Garnier, Czech Bohumila Grögerová, and Solt herself, from the USA – the same poets included by Williams.¹ (The other women poets included were the Portuguese Salette Tavares and North American Louise Bogan.)

At the same time, McGonigal's statement begs the question of how we might alter this picture, as it follows a perceptive account of Morgan's friendship and correspondence with Veronica Forrest-Thomson (1947–75). Forrest-Thomson was a young Glaswegian poet and critic whose extraordinary creative and intellectual trajectory incorporated a brief engagement with concrete forms in the mid-to-late-1960s, compelled partly by the wit, erudition, and irreverence of Morgan's forays into the genre. Arguably then, there was at least one sister, though Forrest-Thomson's concrete work represents an early and quickly abandoned poetic strategy and has generally been overlooked in favor of her later, densely allusive, ironic, and critically informed lyric verse. Nonetheless, in this period of renewed critical focus on concrete poetry, there is an opportunity to revise the history of the movement with a greater focus on women's involvement.² Moreover, as concrete poetry has been central to narratives of Scottish literary modernism since the Second World War, this revisionary task should have a significant bearing on that broader subject.

I attempt this task below with specific reference to Forrest-Thomson's early poetry, before moving on to the related theme of "Scottish women's poetry," considering how that term, like "concrete poetry," might usefully be qualified by paying closer attention to her work. Initially, however, I consider some sociological factors that might explain the dearth of women concrete poets and bring to light some of the few examples of women who were creatively involved with the movement.

A Dorm of One's Own: Women, Higher Education, and Concrete Poetry in Britain

Simply speaking, one might posit two barriers to women's engagement with concrete poetry (which, in accordance with my book *Border Blurs*, I am associating with the period 1955–72). On the one hand, there is what we might call a sociological barrier: those practical obstacles, in particular women's lack of access to higher education and central role in domestic labor, which deterred them from accessing poetic communities, especially those associated with modernist styles, during the period in question. On the other hand, some critics have argued that there are particular ways in which women tend to write poetry and particular ways in which men tend to: or rather, that there were during the period in question. By this account, concrete poetry sits squarely within the latter category. Such distinctions are contingent on sociological factors but are seen as discontinuous

¹ Since this article was written in 2017, the global critical picture of women's involvement in concrete poetry has shifted considerably. Most notably, Alex Balgiu and Mónica de la Torre's *Women in Concrete Poetry: 1959–1979* (2020) features fifty women writers and artists working in various forms of visual poetry and text art overlapping with concrete poetry as defined in this article. The editors note in their introduction that the writers and artists they feature "may not have identified themselves as concrete poets," as "the label could have seemed narrow given the myriad approaches to the word-image question" (12).

² On critical reappraisal see, for example, Hilder. The recent republication of period anthologies such as Emmett Williams's *An Anthology of Concrete Poetry* (1967) – reprinted by Primary Information press in 2013 – also indicates renewed critical interest.

³ Since the 1970s this argument has often been established on psychoanalytic terms influenced by writers such as Julia Kristeva, Hélène Cixous, and Jacques Lacan. For an early example of such an argument, see Cora Kaplan's keynote address to the 1976 Patriarchy Conference in London.

with them to the extent that such creative differences are held to manifest innate distinctions between male and female subjectivity and relationships with language.³

Without dismissing the latter argument out of hand, my pragmatic assumption is that the creative divisions just alluded to reflect relative conditions of social empowerment and disempowerment and the different ways in which men and women have, therefore, engaged with linguistic modes expressive of such power. As such, I am primarily interested in examining the terms of that power balance in the concrete epoch. This means, in the first instance, offering a brief history of concrete poetry in relation to the social institutions of the postwar West.

Concrete poetry was an international poetic style which grew simultaneously out of Latin America and Northern Europe from the early 1950s onwards, reaching Britain by the early 1960s, where it became particularly associated with Scottish poets, such as Morgan and Ian Hamilton Finlay. In its initial manifestations, concrete was typically a semantically minimalist, visually oriented literature, wherein small groups of words, detached from sentences, were arranged in visually arresting, often phonetically repetitive patterns. The visual – and to some extent the sonic – form of the poem was intended to secure and stabilize the meanings of the words contained in the graphic-phonetic grid, generating a sort of modernist Esperanto: a global meta-language forged through the vanguard endeavors of poets which would be coherent in the same way to any given interpreter. It was partly preceded by those strains of early-twentieth-century modernist literature, from Mallarmé's *Un Coup de Des* (1897) onwards, which had explored the overlaps between literature and visual and musical media. But a more fundamental influence was the Constructivist idea – transmitted to the concrete poets via concrete artists such as Theo Van Doesburg, Max Bill, and Josef Albers – that the work of art could be reduced to an absolute minimum of compositional elements, shearing away any traces of the expressive ego to communicate from a space of absolute representational accuracy. This idea was updated with insights from information theory and cybernetics, which seemed to propose a set of mathematical theorems for preemptively calculating the intelligibility of verbal messages.

This was a fundamentally optimistic poetics, negatively shaped by the recent effects of global war and ethnic genocide, which sought to generate a global literary artform capable of uniting national cultures. But the concrete poets' activities were contained within specific social echelons of the cultures they sought to unite. The birthplace of concrete poetry within Europe was the Hochschule für Gestaltung in Ulm, West Germany, a design school cofounded in 1953 which inherited the Bauhaus's legacy of Constructivist pedagogy, and where the Swiss poet Eugen Gomringer, the "father" of concrete poetry, worked as secretary to Max Bill, the school's first rector, during the early 1950s. Other early European bases included the Technischen Hochschule in Stuttgart, home to the information theorist and concrete poet Max Bense, whose mathematically based writings on the nature of aesthetic experience provided much of the movement's theoretical bedrock. Within

Britain, the hubs of the concrete movement, putting aside autodidacts such as Finlay, were universities and art colleges, from Glasgow to Cambridge.

On the one hand, then, concrete poetry was a literary modernism based to an unprecedented extent within and between institutions of higher education. On the other hand, it involved a poetics which, based partly on the kinds of creative and intellectual discourses prevalent in those contexts, proposed the idea of *transcending authorship*: discarding the contingencies of the subjective poetic voice for a transsubjective, transnational, transcultural voice of absolute objectivity. For both those reasons, it was likely to exclude women: certainly, though not necessarily uniquely, in Britain.

Before expanding on this point, it is worth noting that, even had these facts not applied to concrete poetry, it might still have excluded women within Britain. According to the social historian Carol Dyhouse, the two-and-a-half decades following 1945 saw a stagnation in the gradual historical realignment of women's socially configured labor roles. In *Students: A Gendered History*, Dyhouse notes that "the trend for women to marry younger, which had set in before the war, . . . became even more dramatic thereafter. The median age for women to marry reached its lowest point (around 21 years) in 1966–7. Women were also becoming mothers earlier than before. In each year of the 1950s around 27 per cent of all teenage brides were pregnant at their weddings" (92).⁴ The exigencies of familial duty were likely to exclude women from poetic communities whether or not the community in question was located beyond the university walls and also to debar the solitary creative routines typical of some writers. Nonetheless, Dyhouse describes a related lack of development in women's access to higher education between 1945 and around 1970, which would have compounded this exclusion:

In 1930 the proportion of women in the student population of Britain was around 27 per cent. . . . These proportions shrank slightly to an average of c.23–24 per cent in the late 1930s, "stagnating" at this level until the late 1960s. Even with the "Robbins" expansion of higher education in this latter decade, the proportion rose slowly at first: to 28 per cent in 1968, 38 per cent in 1980. (82)

The reasons Dyhouse proposes for this period of stasis – which lasted until several years after the Robbins Report (1963) proposed increasing women's access to higher education, and the resulting establishment of the "plate-glass universities" (including Sussex, Kent, and York), which admitted more women than older institutions – are various and interrelated. Besides early marriage and childbirth, Dyhouse posits an ambivalence among women about higher education given sexual divisions in labor markets and at home; discrimination in universities against female admissions; the policing of female students' behavior and sexuality; and the high numbers of women choosing teacher training, which seemed to provide access to one of few viable career paths.

⁴ Dyhouse presents this partly as a pushback against the effects of the Second World War, which "free[d] jobs for educated women" (89).

Bearing all this in mind, the number of women published in British poetry anthologies per se during 1955–72 was, proportionally, roughly as low as in Williams’s and Solt’s books. Al Alvarez’s *The New Poetry* (1962), which defined a new confessional lyric style in Britain and the USA, was entirely male in composition, though the revised 1966 edition included Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton. Robert Conquest’s *New Lines* (1956), associated with the Movement orthodoxy against which Alvarez pitched his “new poetry,” featured eight men and one woman, Elizabeth Jennings. Michael Horovitz’s *Children of Albion* (1969), a selection of beat-influenced poetry, printed sixty-three poets including five women: Frances Horovitz, Libby Houston, Anna Lovell, Tina Morris, and Carlyle Reedy.

Despite these relatively uniform figures, the kind of poetic model which concrete poetry proposed – predicated on the abandonment or attenuation of individual authorial identity – has been seen as particularly rebarbative to women during this period of British social history. This is partly because the willingness to cultivate modernist poetic styles associated with the symbolic transcendence of authorial identity has traditionally seemed to depend on access to higher education; partly, and relatedly, because that gesture seemed contingent on a sense that one’s identity was socially validated in the first place: on the safe possibility of returning to it. Contributing to a 2007 Cross-Atlantic Forum on the lack of institutional recognition of contemporary British women modernists, the poet Emily Critchley argued that:

The need to be explicitly feminist, expressive or defensive, to counter past exclusions, and/or investigate the experience, identity or cultural “place” of women in an accessible language, has been a pull away from experimentalism. . . . [M]ale avant-garde writers rarely feel the need to shore up their gender with positive perspectives, comprehensible by the culture at large, because it has never been regarded as a disability by that culture. (qtd. in Wagner para. 54)

Summing up such arguments in their 2013 book *Women’s Experimental Poetry in Britain 1970–2010* – partly in response to the modernist poet Wendy Mulford’s comment that “[b]y and large, poets in Britain do not . . . resign the authority of the individual poetic voice” – David Kennedy and Christine Kennedy acknowledge that “for women poets, the assumption of such authority is an important act of reclamation after centuries of denial” (40).⁵

Certainly, when women poets began collectively to claim such authority during the 1970s, through women’s poetry anthologies such as Lilian Mohin’s *One Foot on the Mountain* (1979), the “dominant voice,” as Claire Buck notes of that volume, was “first-person, and the subject matter women’s day-to-day lives and experiences” (87). Buck adds that the “self-proclaimed allegiance” of feminist poets such as Mulford and Denise Riley “to a modernist concentration on formal and linguistic experiment, together with a very explicit use of

⁵ Mulford’s Street Editions published Forrest-Thomson’s posthumous *On the Periphery* (1976).

poststructuralist theory, set their work somewhat at odds” with this general paradigm (84).

The potential self-exclusions of writing by, or about, self-identified women poets, are a subject returned to in the final section of this article. For now, I want briefly to turn to those few women who were recognized as concrete poets during 1955–72, partly because these exceptional cases tend to support rather than undermine the arguments given for women’s general exclusion. However, as almost all of the concrete-influenced poetry and art produced by women in Britain appeared after the era focused on, we are forced to look abroad for examples.

In many cases, it was seemingly a matter of chance or contingency that women established the institutional and cultural footholds which allowed them to develop concrete-poetic practices: in many cases, we can speculate that access was granted via a male partner. Of the three poets printed in both Williams’s and Solt’s anthologies, Ilse Garnier and Bohumila Grögerová appeared only in collaboration with men, the French Spatialist poet Pierre Garnier and Czech Josef Hiršal. A special 2010 issue of the journal *OEI* dedicated to the poetry and criticism of Mary Ellen Solt, meanwhile, reveals that her connection to concrete poetry depended in practical terms on her husband Leo’s history lectureship at Indiana University, Bloomington from 1955 onwards.

The case of Solt is particularly instructive. After her arrival in Bloomington, according to Marjorie Perloff, Solt “considered herself, as women did in those days, primarily . . . the faculty wife, mother of Susan and Cathy” (31). Solt’s “lucky break,” Perloff adds, came in 1958, when she took courses at the School of Letters, a prestigious summer institute based in Bloomington, establishing a correspondence through her tutor R. P. Blackmur with William Carlos Williams (32–33). Solt became an important confidante for Williams, producing several significant essays on his work, including “William Carlos Williams: The American Idiom” (1983). As that essay reveals, Solt’s interest in Williams’s attempts at a graphic representation of the North American demotic precipitated her involvement with concrete poetry, following a meeting in Edinburgh with Ian Hamilton Finlay in Summer 1962 (155). This ultimately led to her editing *Concrete Poetry: A World View* as a special issue of the Indiana University journal *Artes Hispanicas*; she also published a collection of her own concrete poems, *Flowers in Concrete* (1966), through the university’s Fine Art Department, and various articles interpreting concrete poetry through Peircean semiotics, arising from discussions with the Indiana University-based semiotician Thomas Sebeok (Bessa, Foreword 20).⁶ “Given the still sexist climate of the early 1960s,” Perloff states, “it is remarkable that Solt found her way as fully as she did” (34). But her achievements were, in a practical sense, contingent on an indirect institutional connection. It is also interesting to speculate what Solt might have achieved had domestic labor occupied less of her time. Recalling conversations leading to the *OEI* issue with an ailing Solt in 2004, guest editor Sergio Antonio Bessa offers a pithily symbolic image of the

⁶ See Solt, “The Concrete Poem as a Sign”, parts I and 2.

housewife-poet: “[a]mong all these recollections, an image of Mary Ellen printing her poem ‘Zig Zag’ on the ironing board . . . stayed with me” (21).

Such examples do, if nothing else, suggest the level of detail which can be uncovered regarding women’s involvement in the concrete poetry movement through dedicated excavation work. More evidence of women’s creative involvement with the movement in Britain can be found by focusing on those creative roles whose outward presentation was as administrative or facilitative, which perhaps seemed more conventionally appropriate to women. We might note Jasia Reichardt’s curation of the largest and most significant exhibition of concrete poetry in Britain, the ICA’s *Between Poetry and Painting* (1965), and Jessie McGuffie’s role as cofounder with Ian Hamilton Finlay of the most significant British publisher of concrete poetry, Wild Hawthorn Press, in 1962.

Focusing on these behind-the-scenes roles is one way of revealing some of the hidden creative labor undertaken by women in concrete poetry.⁷ But Veronica Forrest-Thomson’s status as a poet, rather than curator, editor, or administrator, in the context of the various barriers to women’s engagement with the movement in Britain, makes her exceptional.

An Exaggerated Respect for Impersonality: Veronica Forrest-Thomson’s (Almost) Concrete Poetry

The Edwin Morgan Papers at the University of Glasgow include a neatly handwritten note received by the then forty-four-year-old poet on February 16, 1965, from a seventeen-year-old girl living a couple of miles away in Glasgow’s west end:

Dear Mr Morgan,

Some time ago on the Third Programme I heard your talk on Concrete Poetry about which I have since been thinking and have come to the conclusion that it is the first healthy development in poetry since the war. Though didn’t Apollinaire try something similar? It was a pleasant surprise to hear some intelligent poetry which showed responsibility towards the exploration of language instead of the usual egotistical watered down angst-dichten which seems to monopolise the Third Programme poetry readings.⁸

This letter, already exhibiting the forthright eloquence which would characterize Forrest-Thomson’s literary criticism, was followed up by another on June 12:

Dear Mr Morgan,

It was I who asked you, at the poetry reading yesterday, about the possibilities of publication at the Wild Hawthorn Press. On second thoughts I would prefer to have your opinion on my work before bothering Mr

⁷ Some recent research on concrete poetry has taken such an approach. Bronáć Ferran’s exhibition *Graphic Constellations: Visual Poetry & The Properties of Space* (Anglia Ruskin University, Cambridge, 2015) featured the work of graphic designers such as Ann Noël, partner of Emmett Williams, who created well-known typesettings of concrete poems.

⁸ All of Forrest-Thomson and Morgan’s correspondence referred to is from the Edwin Morgan Papers at Glasgow University Library, MS Morgan DT/7, file 1.

⁹ Morgan gives his own account of what is probably this meeting in a 1991 review: "I remember giving a talk on concrete poetry in 1964 [sic.], and noticing a girl of about seventeen in the front row, by herself, listening intently; then she asked more searching questions than I had so far had about that movement, and her intense yet not unfriendly demeanour stuck in my mind" (*Collected Poems and Translations* 46).

Hamilton Finlay . . . from the little I have read of both, your poems seem, being more cerebral and satirical than visual descriptive, to have more in common with my own approach, than Mr. Hamilton Finlay's.⁹

"Although I agree with the movement's basic principles," Forrest-Thomson continued, "I would be apprehensive of committing [sic.] myself to any one label . . . and am not even sure if the 'Concrete' label would be appropriate to my own poems."

This aside indicates some of Forrest-Thomson's preemptive doubts about the style to which Morgan had introduced her. In *Veronica Forrest-Thomson*, Gareth Farmer notes that "sceptically concrete, or critically concrete, or (almost) concrete might be other ways of describing Forrest-Thomson's practices during this time" (33). She enclosed several concrete poems with her second letter, including "Sea Scene from a Train," "A Propos Life," "Antic," and "Violence/Clash." Morgan responded carefully and precisely to these pieces, suggesting that the former "would appeal most to Ian Finlay," and that "[a]nother magazine to try sometime is TLALOC, edited by Cavan McCarthy" (July 1, 1965). Though Forrest-Thomson seemingly never contacted Finlay, there followed a period of concerted engagement with concrete poetry lasting until at least the end of her undergraduate studies at the University of Liverpool (1965–68), sustained by a close friendship with McCarthy.

Forrest-Thomson's writing about her practice from the mid-to-late 1960s presents concrete as a significant *modus operandi*. Her teenage statement "My Attitudes and Beliefs," stored with her personal papers at Girton College, Cambridge, is punctuated with references to concrete poetics. Under "WORK GUIDES," Forrest-Thomson includes "[c]oncrete technique – break up of individual wordscapes and almost cubistic technique of welding a special image expressing more than one facet at once." In a biographical statement published for a reading with McCarthy at the Bristol Arts Centre in 1967, Forrest-Thomson stated that her "interest in concrete poetry" reflected "a, perhaps exaggerated, respect for impersonality and formal values in art" ("An Impersonal Statement"). Concrete is described there as "the first real re-exploration of language-form since the Eliot-Pound revolution," "an antidote to the formlessness and academicism of the Movement writers and the introversion of the so-called 'confessional' poets."

Notwithstanding such appraisals, the broad and understandable consensus on Forrest-Thomson's poetry and criticism – which exist in awkward symbiosis – is that they only began to fulfill their potential after she took up postgraduate study at the University of Cambridge in 1968. Her work is thus primarily interpreted in relation to the poets, critics, and theorists whom she encountered there – either in print or in person – and the products of her concrete phase, seen to end around the same time, are sometimes written off as juvenilia. Introducing Forrest-Thomson's *Collected Poems and Translations* (1990), Anthony Barnett speculated that Forrest-Thomson, "had she lived, might not have wished to reprint the majority of

her poems from [before the publication of *Language-Games* in 1971]" (12). Alison Mark, even in the process of arguing, contra Barnett, that Forrest-Thomson's early poems "merit consideration as foundational to [her] poetics and later poetry," makes an exception for the "*longueurs* of some experiments with concrete or sound poetry" (25). Farmer, whose treatment of Forrest-Thomson's concrete poetry is detailed and perceptive, nonetheless writes that "[i]n hindsight, Forrest-Thomson's move to Cambridge seems inevitable and she was all set to inherit the mantle of challenging and developing literary criticism from the great Cambridge alumni [sic], William Empson" (56). In a 1991 article, James Keery describes Forrest-Thomson's posthumous critical text *Poetic Artifice* (1978) as "a product of seventies Cambridge," adding that "[a]ny attempt to separate Forrest-Thomson from this intellectual milieu . . . would be misguided and bound to fail" (109).

Certainly, the milieu that Forrest-Thomson discovered in Cambridge left an indelible mark. The influences underpinning both *Poetic Artifice* and her most distinctive poetry, from *Language-Games* to *On the Periphery* – Wittgenstein, the poststructuralist critics of *Tel Quel*, J. H. Prynne, the Empsonian tradition of practical criticism – were all transmitted via the intellectual context of the university. Critics including Drew Milne and Gardner have also noted the amount of mise-en-scène style detail of the city which permeates Forrest-Thomson's writing, perhaps compounding a tendency to take Cambridge's intellectual life as a frame for interpretation.

Forrest-Thomson's Cambridge-centric influences and techniques are evident in her later poetry in the parodic adaptation of multiple literary styles and the integration of quotes and insights from linguistic and semiotic theory. The various expressive modes and empirical systems thus invoked are held at arm's length, as it were, by a composition process influenced by Wittgenstein and poststructuralism, which seems to suspend them alongside one another, preventing entirely earnest engagement with any and creating a densely allusive collage effect, while simultaneously implying the ability of poetic form to encode a kind of meta-empirical intelligence:

Hail to thee, blithe horse, bird thou never wert!
 And, breaking into a canter, I set off on the long road south
 Which was to take me to so many strange places
 That room in Cambridge, that room in Cambridge, that room in
 Cambridge,
 That room in Cambridge, this room in Cambridge,
 The top of a castle in Provence and an aeroplane in mid-Atlantic.
 (Collected 84)

These opening lines from "Strike," from *On the Periphery*, send up Shelley's "To a Skylark," bathetically substituting the "blithe spirit" of his bird – its flight so majestic

that it seems no mere bird (“Bird thou never wert!”) – with a “blithe horse,” which is, literally, not a bird. The long lines of the proceeding stanza, Farmer notes, “imitate the grandiosity of epic verse, or rather the style in which such portentousness is achieved”; “Forrest-Thomson is trying out nineteenth-century themes and forms in a new contemporary context” (142).

The resultant self-conscious precocity is tempered, in “Strike” and elsewhere, by the impressions of banality and occasional anguish rendered by biographical detail. If the repeated refrain “That room in Cambridge” enlists banality for pseudo-Epic parody, the anguish is most lucid in the often-quoted final stanzas of “The Garden of Proserpine,” also from *On the Periphery*, which may detail the breakup of Forrest-Thomson’s marriage in 1974:

My dignity dictated
A restrained farewell
But I love you so much
Dignity can go to hell
I went to hell with dignity,
For by then, we were three.
And whatever I feel about you,
I certainly hate she. (*Collected* 90)

“Anyone disposed to find her over-intellectual,” Morgan wrote in a 1991 review, “only has to read [such lines] to be plunged into an ancient ballad starkness” (“*Collected Poems and Translations*” 47).

Besides the influence of Cambridge on Forrest-Thomson’s most characteristic work, we must also acknowledge that by the time she wrote *Poetic Artifice* in 1972–73, Forrest-Thomson was excoriatingly critical of concrete poetry, which has understandably colored critics’ subsequent assessments of her own endeavors in this area. *Poetic Artifice* distinguishes between the process of “suspended naturalisation” invited by effective (or “rationally obscure”) experimental poetry and the “irrational obscurity” of concrete poetry. In rationally obscure poetry, the reader is prevented from assimilating the poem to their preexisting sense of the relationship between language and reality by precisely overlaid patterns of semantic imagery plucked from different linguistic contexts and through denaturalizing formal or “non-meaningful” effects. Irrationally obscure work, by contrast, attempts to prevent such assimilation simply by stripping the poem of meaning altogether. In the case of concrete poetry, this involves reducing language to a material substance: “these ‘poets’ have found it necessary to establish a more radical and spurious continuity with the physical world normally mediated through language. They treat words as physical objects; they try to avoid mediation altogether” (44–45). Ironically, this

lack of meaning forces the reader back into existing interpretive habits to grant the poem any value: “[o]nce all pretence to meaning is abandoned, the artifacts themselves are not obscure – though why someone should have bothered to produce them may be obscure” (47).

As such summary dismissal might lead us to guess, almost none of Forrest-Thomson’s own concrete poetry was published in her lifetime.¹⁰ But as already noted, concrete exerted a more significant influence on her work than this fact might imply. It is worth adding, in this regard, that Forrest-Thomson’s move to Cambridge was a matter of contingency rather than inevitability, and that her postgraduate studies might have returned her to Glasgow. On January 26, 1968 Forrest-Thomson wrote to Morgan, then a lecturer in English Literature at the University of Glasgow, to ask about the department’s postgraduate courses, “especially as you yourself and the English department generally are so actively involved with contemporary poetry. I suppose it would be too much to hope that I should be able to work in some area relating to concrete poetry”. Morgan replied on February 12, suggesting a BPhil course with a paper on “Literature since 1945,” which he would convene, and on February 22 Forrest-Thomson wrote back confirming her application: “[m]y option is, of course, ‘Literature since 1945’ and I am very glad that you will be in charge of it.”

This plan never came to fruition but the fact that Forrest-Thomson contemplated postgraduate study on concrete poetry suggests that the style left a more significant imprint on her work than is generally acknowledged. What is harder to argue is that this contact generated poetry of an equivalent quality to *On the Periphery*, or even the collection of nonconcrete poetry published during her undergraduate years, *Identi-kit* (1967). Nonetheless, we can consider Forrest-Thomson’s engagement with concrete forms, like her responses to visual art in *Identi-kit*, as evidence of a youthful concern with overarching formal systems. At the same time – returning to the broader trajectory of this article – the stylistic range of her concrete experiments suggests that there is no innate reason why a woman poet would respond to the style in any particular way. However, while this point may be so uncontroversial as to be banal, we must also acknowledge that Forrest-Thomson was partly able to engage with concrete and other late-modernist literary styles during the 1960–70s because of her exceptional level of intellectual and economic independence.

Reviewing *Identi-kit* for McCarthy’s *Tlaloc*, Morgan remarked that “[o]ne poem in it speaks of ‘the joy of everything with edges’ and this would seem to be a good motto for the bright, metallic, cutting quality of the book”:

This is partly a matter of word-placing (often neat and sharp), partly of the imagery (much concerned with the optical – perspective, focus, spectrum, photographs, patterns, contours, mirrors, identi-kit, kaleidoscope), and partly of an intellectual, spiky, intermittently Empsonian element

¹⁰ Her *Twelve Academic Questions*, privately published in 1970, opens with the (almost) concrete “Variations on Sappho.”

(references to valency, magnetic field, subatomic particles, gametophytes, etc.). (“*Identi-kit*” 6)

Morgan connects the poetry’s edginess to its ekphrastic concerns: “[s]everal poems deal with art, and in the one called ‘Contours’ Cezanne’s profound feeling for an organising structure is used as an example of how ‘our amorphous liberty’ is given meaning when we learn to harden and simplify” (“*Identi-kit*” 6). In short, Morgan identifies a general concern in *Identi-kit* with overarching formal structures: the imposition of scientific, linguistic, and aesthetic order onto messy external reality. Though already self-reflexive, this concern had not yet developed into the resistance to empirical closure evident in the later poems.

Morgan’s overview provides some context for Forrest-Thomson’s concurrent interest in concrete poetry, which, as Farmer puts it, represented “an exaggerated antidote to contemporary practice; a devil’s advocate of form to reassert its necessity” (34). Concrete poetry, in promising the kind of totalizing metalinguistic system outlined in the first section of this article, seemed to provide exactly the type of objective formal clarity which she sought. One early concrete poem, produced in Forrest-Thomson’s unmistakable, stylish cursive, almost perfectly sums up this concern with aesthetic order as a means of granting closure over a reality which, nonetheless, persistently reasserts its messiness (*Collected* 238).¹¹ A series of phonetic permutations on the word “fine” – perhaps playing on its allusions to endings and closure via the Italian *Fine* and French *Fin* – eventually produce the bathetic phrase “finesse in infinite mess.” (Figure 1).

“Landscape with Yellow Birds,” a literary response to Paul Klee’s eponymous painting, provides a slightly more complex manifestation of a similar principle and represents the convergence of Forrest-Thomson’s concrete poetics with her youthful interest in linguistic recreation of visual art (*Collected* 239). Forrest-Thomson here uses concrete poetry for various of the aims for poetry in general outlined in “My Attitudes and Beliefs”: to respond to “the formal and external aspects of the subject,” to “extend the range of language by translating non-human existence,” and to eschew emotive or abstract intellectual content. This is attempted graphically through skittish horizontal and vertical lines mimicking both the composition and tonal rhythms of Klee’s painting and the shapes and movements of the imaginary birds which play hide-and-seek across its surface. Words such as “bird,” “eye,” “weed,” and “blades,” in combination with the loosely bird-like visual shapes, simultaneously recreate the subject matter graphically and linguistically. But the running together of words, and the creation of allusive nonwords and nonce words – “leafly,” “yellnoww” – seems to generate several possible iterations of the overall visual-linguistic form, given the reader’s tendency to infer semantic constructions that are not there, as Farmer notes (36–37). This, in turn, implies that the restless movements of the birds somehow disrupt or resist the representative systems imposed on them (Figure 2).

¹¹ All the concrete poems discussed first appeared in Forrest-Thomson’s *Collected Poems and Translations* (1990).

FORREST

fine
finite
finesse
in fine, finities
infinitess
in finiteness
infinitesimal
finesse in
infinite mess

Fig. 1. Typescript of "Fine" from *Tlaloc*, Little Magazines, UCL Library Services, Special Collections.

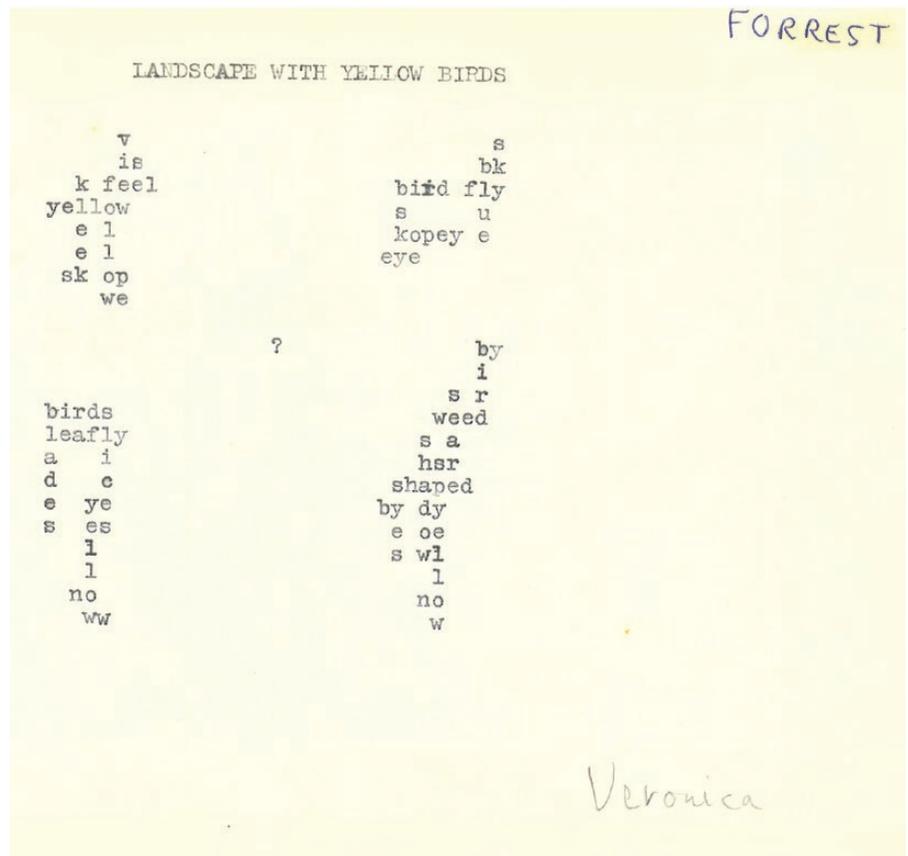


Fig. 2. Typescript of “Landscape with Yellow Birds” from *Tlaloc*, Little Magazines, UCL Library Services, Special Collections.

In generating a quality of dynamic energy true to its subject matter through symbiotic visual and linguistic effects, “Landscape with Yellow Birds” is a successful concrete poem. But Farmer argues that it also represents Forrest-Thomson’s reticence about committing to the concrete “label,” codifying her unwillingness to relinquish language’s logico-discursive functions. The poem seems, that is, to describe the visual effects and ocular processes which it creates or solicits and thus to keep one foot in a purely semantic-descriptive realm: “[i]n the top right shape, for example, we might read ‘s / kopeye’ as ‘scope eye,’ which may refer to the eye’s propensity to ‘scope’ the painting” (Farmer 36). Farmer adds that “the ‘no / ww’ and ‘no / w’ of the bottom two shapes become imperative ‘nows,’ drawing attention to the conflict being created between an instantaneous view of the poem and a temporal reading”: dramatizing the conflict between the concrete and the nonconcrete, as it were (36–37).

If we accept this reading, then the poem crystallizes Forrest-Thomson's broader skepticism of concrete poetry's attempts to generate a poetic meta-language grounded in visual form. For Farmer, "[s]he could not give herself fully to the concrete camp as to do so would be to relinquish the possibility of poetic discursivity" (33). He adds that Forrest-Thomson's interest in concrete was quickly surpassed, not just because of the dialectical scrutiny to which she subjected all poetic styles but also because of a suspicion that concrete represented a doomed attempt to forego poetic artifice entirely.

While broadly endorsing this narrative, it is worth emphasizing the surprising stylistic range of Forrest-Thomson's work in response to concrete, which, taken as a whole, troubles unilinear narratives of development. Take the seemingly uncharacteristic poem "Atomic Disintegration" (*Collected* 240). If much of Forrest-Thomson's concrete poetry suggests affinities with Morgan's semantically oriented "off-concrete" approach, this piece has more in common with the performance-based sound poetry of Bob Cobbing, for example. The disintegrating graphemes of the first section are reminiscent of Cobbing's contemporaneous exercises in breaking up the printed word, while Forrest-Thomson's second and third variations, like Cobbing's performance scores, present the written poem as cue to potentially endless individual live iterations rather than as a finished work. Forrest-Thomson would almost certainly have known of the sound and performance-oriented wing of the British concrete poetry movement, through either Morgan – who reviewed Cobbing's *Sound Poems* in 1965 – or McCarthy, who was connected to such poets through *Tlaloc*. This poem might, therefore, constitute a direct creative homage (Figure 3).

What Forrest-Thomson's slim portfolio of concrete poetry suggests, overall, is not just a self-reflexive concern with totalizing formal structures but also that the style provided a testing ground for a whole range of poetic approaches, some of them dead ends or cul-de-sacs which are hard to incorporate into the overall map of her oeuvre. If this suggests, as already noted, that there is no reason why a woman poet would respond to concrete poetics in any particular way, it is also clear that Forrest-Thomson's capacity and willingness to engage with concrete and other late-modernist literary styles were contingent on her exceptional access to higher education, freedom from domestic labor, and involvement with poetic communities largely populated by men. When she joined Girton College in 1968, for example, Cambridge was not only one of the centers of the British concrete movement – the first concrete exhibition in Britain was held at St. Catherine's College in 1964 – but also an almost exclusively male environment. As Dyhouse notes, the University was intransigent in its response to calls for increased women's access post-1945, combining "'public' concession of the need to make more provision . . . with 'private' discouragement of any attempt to actually do so" (86).¹² With the exception of a few women-only colleges, Cambridge only began to admit female students in 1972; Girton was thus one of only four colleges to which Forrest-Thomson could apply in 1968.

¹² Dyhouse notes, admittedly, that resistance to coeducation at men's colleges at Cambridge came primarily from the heads of women's colleges, "horrified at the possibility of losing their best candidates to men's college" (168).

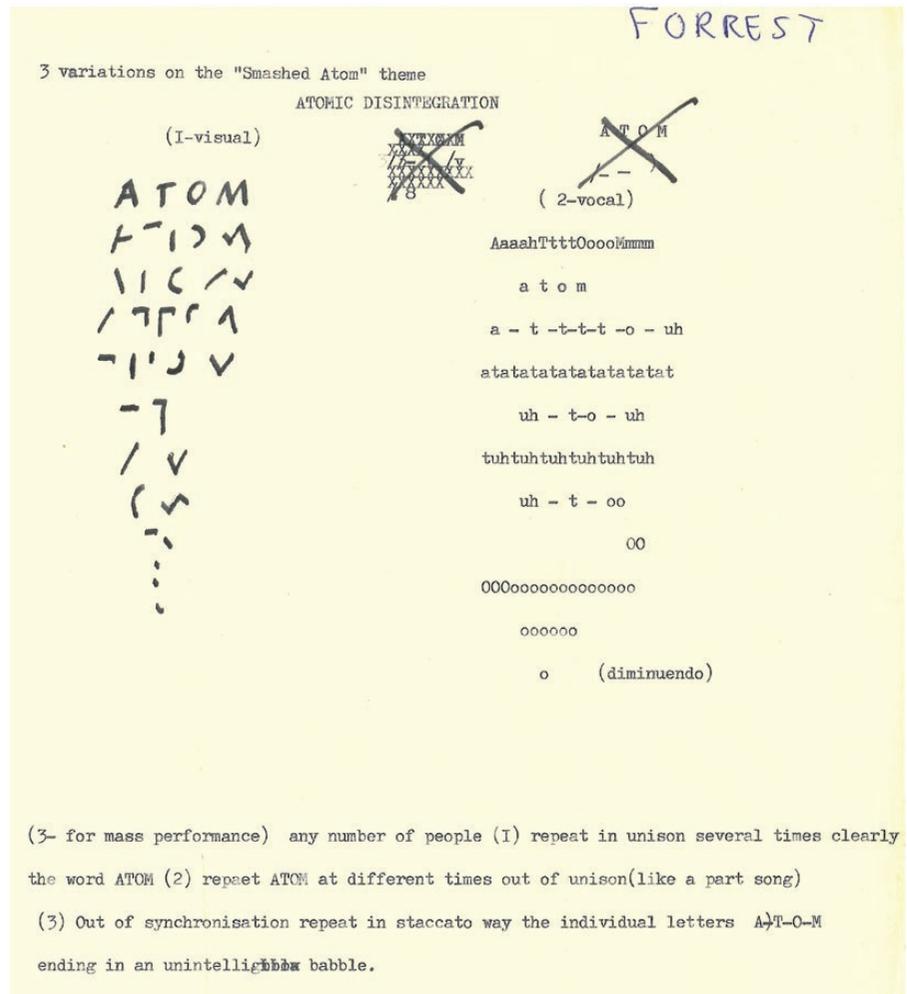


Fig. 3. Typescript of "Atomic Disintegration" from *Tlaloc*, Little Magazines, UCL Library Services, Special Collections.

Forrest-Thomson's liminal relationship to the academic spheres in which she moved must also be acknowledged. It is notable, for example, how often her poems provide satirical commentaries on the sociology of the Cambridge poetry scene, of a type absent from her male counterparts' work (Milne 173). And if this suggests some position of whimsical critical detachment, friends recall a pugnacity borne of insecurity when remembering Forrest-Thomson, a character trait reflecting "her very real struggle to establish her voice in an intellectual time and context – sixties and seventies Cambridge and other universities – dominated by men" (Farmer 148). Writing shortly after Forrest-Thomson's death in a 1975 issue of *Adam: International Review*, the Scottish poet G. S. Fraser, Forrest-Thomson's sometime colleague at the

University of Leicester, described her as “no respecter of persons”; “[y]et she was so alone that one feared, and rightly as it turned out, for her delicate balance” (45). A former student, F. Q. Lawson, described Forrest-Thomson as “rude and ill-mannered,” but “within this formidable wall, I for one, felt that here was a person who was very fragile and precious, with as many aspects as a freshly woven spider’s web, shimmering in the breeze” (52). Though both accounts adopt a stereotypically feminizing set of terms and images, they exemplify how, in Farmer’s words, “descriptions of Forrest-Thomson’s abruptness and intellectual prowess also highlight her vulnerability” (7). Her vulnerability was confirmed for many when she died of asphyxiation on the night of April 25, 1975; whether this was suicide or a tragic accident has never been agreed (Farmer 2–3).

Veronica Forrest-Thomson and Scottish Women’s Poetry

In his 1975 tribute, Fraser wrote of Forrest-Thomson that “if she lived, she might have transformed English [sic.] poetry and thinking about poetry” (45). Such a conviction has not faded. In 2010, the critic Geoff Ward described Forrest-Thomson’s death as “probably the greatest loss to poetry and the discipline of English in the last half century” (qtd. in Farmer 5). Forrest-Thomson’s poetry is now the subject of two dedicated monographs, Alison Mark’s *Veronica Forrest-Thomson and Language Poetry* (2001) and Gareth Farmer’s *Veronica Forrest-Thomson: Poet on the Periphery* (2017).

It is notable how much less attention is paid to Forrest-Thomson’s work when the frame of reference is shifted from poetry in general – or even British poetry – to Scottish poetry: or, still more localizing, Scottish women’s poetry. Edwin Morgan provides a predictable exception to this rule, commenting in the prolog to his memorial poems for Forrest-Thomson in *The New Divan* (1977) that she had contributed “in her own strange and oblique way – to the revival of poetry that has taken place in Glasgow during the last decade or so” (110). An article on Forrest-Thomson by Wendy Mulford also appeared in a special 1994 issue of the Scottish literary journal *Gairfish* on Scottish women’s poetry, while Forrest-Thomson’s “Variations on Sappho” turn up in Ken Cockburn and Alec Finlay’s 2001 anthology of Scottish concrete poetry *The Order of Things* (152–53). However, engaged references in other texts with similar foci are hard to come by. Alan Riach’s article “Scottish Poetry, 1945–2010,” in *The Cambridge Companion to British Poetry, 1945–2010* (2016), dedicates a few salutary sentences to Forrest-Thomson in a section on women poets, describing her “forensic intellectualism” as “complementary to [Liz] Lochhead’s warmth and sympathy” (158).

It seems odd that a discursive category such as “Scottish women’s poetry” (or “writing”), intended to draw attention to marginalized voices, should prevent rather than facilitate discussion of a figure to whom it so obviously applies. Riach’s somewhat idiosyncratic comparison between Forrest-Thomson and Liz Lochhead hints at some of the reasons for Forrest-Thomson’s general exclusion (besides the

aforementioned tendency to consider Forrest-Thomson primarily in the intellectual and cultural context of Cambridge). The adjectives “Scottish” and “Women” have, in their modern application to poetry, generally defined work produced by social subgroups seen to be ostracized by poetic communities and critical discourse at large. Both thus seem to will out of silence voices which would consciously define and validate the identities in question. The implication of the term “Scottish women’s poetry” since the 1970s has generally been of an emphatic, empathetic voice of self-expression, as in Lochhead’s ground-breaking *Memo for Spring* (1972).

Forrest-Thomson’s poetry is largely silent on the issue of Scotland, and more subtly responsive to issues of gender than Lochhead’s work, for example.¹³ This may partly explain her frequent absence from canons of Scottish women’s poetry and also Riach’s analysis of her work by recourse to Lochhead’s as a discursive fulcrum. But the late-modernist aesthetic responsible for these real and apparent silences in Forrest-Thomson’s poetry – whereby earnest expressions of self, rooted in such contingencies of identity as gender and nationality, are harder to grasp – may, in and of itself, have deterred engagement. This might indicate that such an aesthetic has historically been cultivated within poetic communities to which women were denied access. But the term “Scottish Women’s Poetry” now seems, on occasion, to connote a *de facto* stylistic proclivity that has outlived the sociological explanations for its development. Certainly – and at the risk of complacency regarding the gendered, class, and race-based stratification of contemporary academic institutions – women in Britain are no longer barred to the same degree from higher-educational contexts in which affinities can be developed with modernist poetics interrogating ideas of subjectivity, for example, or the ideological freighting of language.¹⁴ In short, the fact that Scottish women’s poetry as a critical framework still seems to exclude oeuvres such as Forrest-Thomson’s might suggest not only an understandable preference for thematic engagement with nation and gender but also an inbuilt, unspoken resistance to “difficult” work.

Such an argument begs for proof, of course; and if such a bias seems to exist in discussions of Scottish women’s poetry, does it not simply reflect the scope of work being produced? Dorothy McMillan’s disarmingly candid introduction to the 2003 anthology *Modern Scottish Women Poets* argues the latter:

I could have produced a more radical selection in both method and content than I have done but would it have honestly reflected what the women of its period were writing, and writing honestly? Of course, poetry that is merely servile to received forms and ideas can be of little interest to us and some of the writers that I have included cannot escape such criticism of some of their poems . . . (xxxii-xxxiii)

For McMillan, an apparent aversion to formal experiment in her own presentation of Scottish women’s poetry simply reflects the materials available; her perceptive introductory overview of Forrest-Thomson’s work describes it as “quite exceptional” in its “formal innovation” (xxiv). But the selection of

¹³ On the ways in which Forrest-Thomson’s poetry invites gendered analysis, see, for example, Farmer (146–48), or, for a psychoanalytic feminist reading of Forrest-Thomson’s love poetry, Rait.

¹⁴ Writing in 2006, Dyhouse noted a continuous growth in women’s participation in higher education since the early 1970s: “[w]omen overtook men as a proportion of UK undergraduates in 1996/7 and their share of higher education has continued to increase at a rate higher than that for men” (ix-x).

¹⁵ The poems included are “The Hyphen,” “Sonnet,” “I have a little hour-glass,” and “I have a little nut-tree.” Apart from “The Hyphen”, these are love lyrics comparable to the closing passage of “The Garden of Persephone”: beautiful poems, but without the kind of counterbalancing context provided by the rest of that sequence they hardly convey the scope of Forreest-Thomson’s practice.

Forreest-Thomson’s poetry included in the anthology, as Gardner suggests, largely adapts her oeuvre to the “formally conservative” editorial approach (79).¹⁵ This suggests that even a formal conservatism cultivated in assumed fidelity to the object of study can become a self-fulfilling prophecy, ensuring further exclusion.

The poet Geraldine Monk offers a similar argument in a 2014 conference paper provocatively entitled “To Have Done with Women Only Anthologies”:

What began as an artificial device to highlight the work of significant but neglected women poets and redress the gender imbalance soon evolved into poetry as self-help groups and personal catharsis around specific issues concerning women and their social and biological conditions. . . . Therapeutic poetry began to colour the expectations of what “women only” anthologies contained . . . they were becoming the prosaic mouth-piece of gender-driven issues in short lines and rhyming couplets. (qtd. in Thurston 55–56)

Paraphrasing Monk’s paper, Scott Thurston notes that “Monk argues for the necessity of such anthologies in the 1970s and 80s, but claims that the objective was always for such publications to become obsolete, as women became more fully integrated into society and culture” (55). Discussions and presentations of “Scottish women’s poetry” arguably risk becoming similarly counterproductive if they place performative limits on its thematic and stylistic possibilities.

I would not endorse anything as drastic as Monk’s devil’s-advocate call to abolish women’s poetry anthologies. Banning discussion and presentation of Scottish women’s poetry, for example, would simply quash debates around nation and gender which are far from satisfactorily resolved. Nor is my sense that discussions of Scottish women’s poetry have focused too often on these themes, but that, as a result of related stylistic tendencies developed in a particular period of British social history, they can occasionally be insufficiently open to the range of ways in which such topics can be broached.¹⁶ Expanding discussions to incorporate a wider range of formal approaches might, however, mean acknowledging the contributions made to Scottish women’s poetry by Scottish women poets such as Forreest-Thomson whose work does not seek obvious identification on such terms.

From the 1970s onwards, when the social effects of women’s liberation and higher-educational access began to register in Britain, women’s involvement in concrete-influenced poetries proliferated. The early examples of Paula Claire and Maggie O’Sullivan in Britain support such a claim. The amount of modernist-influenced poetry more generally produced by women in Britain has increased exponentially since around 1970, thanks in part, Kennedy and Kennedy suggest, to women entering the academic establishment:

Writers such as Andrea Brady, Jennifer Cooke, Emily Critchley and Marianne Morris, . . . have drawn inspiration from US Language writers

¹⁶ Recent exceptions to this rule include Eleanor Bell’s “Experiment and Nation in the 1960s” (2012), which explores the complex interactions with, and resistance to, nationalist discourse in the poetry of Naomi Mitchison, Helen Adam, Elspeth Davie, and Margaret Tait.

such as Lyn Hejinian, and many, like their US peers, work in higher education. This mirrors a wider shift in the economics and socialities of the experimental writing scene as well as demonstrating significant changes in women's experience and opportunities. (5)

Perhaps it is time to start defining similar networks more carefully in Scotland – while paying due attention to their potential race and class-based exclusivity – and thus to offer clearer homage to pioneering figures such as Veronica Forrest-Thomson. To quote Forrest-Thomson herself, quoting the Robbins Report in a letter to Edwin Morgan on January 22, 1969, “there is perhaps something in what I’m trying to say; an attempt to really exploit the ‘expansion of higher education’ for poetic purposes!”

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Independent Scholar, UK
gregthomaswrites@gmail.com

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