

BOOK REVIEW

Border Blurs: Concrete Poetry in England and Scotland. By Greg Thomas.
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Border Blurs, Greg Thomas's account of British concrete poetry from the 1950s to the 1970s, gives much-needed definition and clarity to what has remained a misunderstood yet determinative moment in the mid- to late-twentieth-century poetry. Drawing on a wealth of fugitive publications and archival material, Thomas gives authoritative and insightful expositions of the divergent practices of four of the most prominent figures associated with British concrete poetry: Ian Hamilton Finlay (Scotland), Edwin Morgan (Scotland), Dom Sylvester Houédard (Channel Islands/England), and Bob Cobbing (England). One might question the conspicuous gender imbalance here, but as Thomas readily acknowledges, this lack of diversity 'presents an undeniably accurate portrait of the gender of [British] concrete poetry during the 1950s–1970s' (p. 12).

Thomas precedes his chapters on Finlay, Morgan, Houédard, and Cobbing with an informative overview of the 1950s International Concrete Poetry Movement and its pursuit of viable 'transnational systems of linguistic communication' (p. 14). Of particular significance within such a global project is what Thomas calls 'the science of the concrete', which draws extensively on a range of discourses that includes semiology, information theory, information aesthetics, and cybernetics (p. 41). These sciences are, Thomas argues, crucial for comprehending the early, pioneering efforts of Eugen Gomringer and the 'Noigandres' poets (Décio Pignatari, and Augustus and Haroldo de Campos) and their aspirations for a universal poetry free of global borders. One slight misgiving about Thomas's emphasis on 'the science of the concrete' is the way, at times, it colours his own writing. Discussing the 'meta-linguistic' nature of Gomringer's 1952 poem 'Ping Pong', for example, Thomas notes how it forgoes 'semantic language entirely in order to relay the universal, differential structures of linguistic cognition from which specific statements take shape' (p. 32). Thomas's rather abstruse summary of the poem's objective status begs further questions about Gomringer's choice of subject in 'Ping Pong'. Is it, for example, going too far to consider the back-and-forth dynamics of table tennis as a metaphor for the communication models and systems that the early concrete poets embraced?

That the ‘Noigandres’ poets took their name from an obscure reference in Ezra Pound’s *Cantos* gives Thomas the opportunity to address how modernist poetry – particularly Imagism and Ernest Fenollosa’s work on the Chinese written character – also informs the first wave of concrete poetry. Discussing Pignatari’s use of the ideogram in his poem ‘LIFE’, Thomas shows the poem ‘reverses the dominance of semantic meaning over visual appearance as a determinant of linguistic value’ (38). Yet, what Thomas omits in his reading is perhaps one of the most visually striking aspects of ‘LIFE’: the way in which the poem’s *ming* ideogram (an allusion perhaps to Pound’s use of the same calligraphic symbol for the sun in ‘Canto LXXXIV’) visually consolidates all of the letters – or rather their crossbars and stems – which comprise the word ‘LIFE’. A small detail perhaps, but nevertheless, it does indicate how concrete poetry redirects attention onto the visual qualities of words rather than the extralinguistic things they refer to. Thomas also notes how Pignatari’s poem appropriates the distinctive sans serif type of the North American lifestyle magazine, *Life*. Yet, as much as this pastiche might, as Thomas suggests, be read as a ‘reaction against US cultural imperialism’ it seems to also ask questions about Pound’s tacit presence in ‘LIFE’ and whether these appropriations of Chinese literature might also constitute further instances of imperialism (p. 39).

As much as Thomas considers the global aspirations of concrete, he also invariably returns to more nuanced questions of national identity and culture. In this respect, *Border Blurs* addresses a key aspect of concrete poetry, which Jamie Hilder in his book, *Designed Words for a Designed World: The International Concrete Poetry Movement, 1955–1971* (2017), largely bypasses. As Thomas stresses, ‘a commitment to international cultural identity does not rule out the simultaneous expression of national or regional character’ (p. 13). Thus, as much as Thomas emphasizes distinctive regional pockets of concrete activity and significance – from Finlay’s formative years in Orkney to Houédard’s animating presence in the ‘Gloup’ of concrete poets situated in the South West of England – he shows how they constitute ‘configured local responses to [...] transnational contexts’ (p. 253). By thinking globally and acting locally, concrete poetry, one might say, foresees the concept of ‘the glocal’.

Concrete poetry may have suffered from either ‘critical apathy’ or, indeed, outright derision, but, as Thomas makes evidently clear, among its participants, practitioners, and proselytizers, concrete poetry was a fiercely debated topic (pp. 1, 7). Indeed, considering how contested concrete would become in the following decade, it is striking that, with the exception of Cobbing, the other three poets discussed by Thomas all owe their discovery of concrete to a letter, published in the TLS in 1962, by the Portuguese poet E. M. de Melo e Castro. That this letter on *poesia concreta* led to such widely different

conceptions of concrete indicates how malleable the form proved to be for poets who were seeking ways to build on the achievements of the century's earlier avant-garde art, literature, and architecture. Thomas not only presents a compact summary of the two vying critical positions of concrete poetry that emerged in the 1960s but he also fulfils his own objective to 'contend with the partialities and blind-spots of those few engaged accounts of concrete poetry that have appeared' since that period (p. 4). Without privileging one position over the other, Thomas deftly situates concrete poetry at the fruitful intersection where the precedents of the century's earlier avant-garde and modernist innovators forbears meet a nascent 'intermedia' milieu.

The first school of thought outlined by Thomas advocated a 'classical concrete poetry' that adhered closely to the basic 'tenets of the style as conceived in mid-century Brazil and Germany' by the Noigandres Poets and Gomringer (p. 7). This classical mode put less emphasis on 'sound and performance' and prioritized instead 'the visual qualities of language' (p. 7). Thus, 'early concrete poems were generally objects for silent contemplation', which 'rarely intended to undermine semantic sense' (p. 26). 'This necessitated a certain linguistic minimalism', Thomas writes, 'and a neatness or iconicity of visual appearance', which displayed 'language in an apparent state of streamlined semantic functionality' with an 'object-like presence' (p. 26). This classical model, according to Thomas, was epitomized in the work of Finlay and expounded most rigorously in the critical writings and editorial activities of Stephen Bann, Mike Weaver, and Philip Steadman.

Finlay also epitomizes Marjorie Perloff's notion of the 'arrière-garde', a term that Thomas applies to the broader classical mode of concrete poetry. The 'rational quantification and re-application of early twentieth-century avant-garde techniques' in classical concrete poetry makes it, Thomas contends, 'the literary arrière-garde *par excellence*' (p. 27). A prime example of this quantification and re-application can be found in an early statement of Finlay's (not mentioned by Thomas): 'I am not interested in "experiment" but in avant-garde work which can take the creative step backwards to join with the past'.¹

As well being creative, the backwards step of classical 'arrière-garde' was, Thomas argues, also apolitical. Considering the political dimensions of the Noigandres poets, one might challenge this perception of classical concrete expressing 'less politicized applications of inherited approaches' (p. 27). Nevertheless, as Thomas notes, 'the irreverence and radical political connotations of avant-garde aesthetics took hold again in later variants of the style', which held certain 'counter-cultural affiliations' (pp. 27, 9). Reacting to the

¹ Ian Hamilton Finlay, *Selections*, ed. By Alec Finlay (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 2012), p. 20.

restraint, rationality, and purity of ‘classical’ concrete, this later variant of concrete, exemplified in the work of Bob Cobbing, seized on the form’s ‘capacity to occupy the spaces between media, often endorsing improvisation and spontaneity in composition or performance’ (p. 9). Poets such as Cobbing and sympathetic critics like Eric Mottram challenged the classical definition of concrete by ‘tracing its origins back prior to the 1950s—to the work of the Dadaists and Futurists’ and connected it to ‘contemporaneous movements—such as Lettrism, sound and cut-up poetry, and Fluxus-related intermedia practices’ (p. 9).

Whereas Steven McCaffrey approvingly called the later style ‘dirty’ concrete, Finlay, as Thomas notes, dismissed it as ‘neo-dada’ (p. 65). Nevertheless, as Thomas argues in his chapter on Finlay, Finlay’s work ‘bears complexities of form and theme that cannot be accounted for by earlier models of concrete practice’ (p. 65). In Chapter 3, Thomas presents a comprehensive and illuminating overview of Finlay’s work, charting its course from his early prose and poetry in the late 1950s to the concrete poetry he pioneered throughout the best part of the 1960s. Thomas’s reading of Finlay’s work during this period is astute and informed, although at times the nuances of Finlay’s idiom – particularly the distinct lyric sensibilities that Finlay carries over from his earliest writing, and its distinctive blend of humour and pathos – is sometimes missed. By focusing on the formal properties and processes of Finlay’s work, the emotive and ‘imaginative world[s]’ that it conjures seem to be overlooked (p. 98). Again, it is the small details, such as Finlay’s allusion to Alphonse Daudet’s collection of short stories, *Lettres de Mon Moulin* (*Letters from My Windmill*) in his 1964 booklet *Telegrams from My Windmill*, which might reveal the complexities of form and theme as they manifest in the disarming whimsy of Finlay’s poetics.

Thomas’s chapter on Finlay is followed by an equally illuminating account of fellow Scots, Edwin Morgan and his ‘off-concrete oeuvre’ (p. 153). Morgan, Thomas claims, showed ambivalence towards concrete poetry and was particularly sceptical of ‘concrete poetry’s founding principles’ and the classical, ‘puritanical view’ purported by critics such as Weaver (pp. 129, 153). Morgan may have considered his own forays into concrete as a ‘side-line’ of his broader poetic concerns; nevertheless, the form was for Morgan (as it was Finlay) particularly effective for challenging the provincialism of the Scottish Renaissance and moving ‘Scottish poetry out – back out – into the light of the modern world’ (pp. 129, 128). Thomas also depicts Morgan as a poet responsive to the communicative possibilities of the electronic age of new media and makes some salient connections between Morgan and the ‘post-visual oral age’ that Marshall McLuhan proposes in his 1962 book *The Gutenberg Galaxy* (p. 136). One cannot help but wonder why Thomas stops at *The Gutenberg Galaxy* when other books of McLuhan’s – particularly

Verbi-Voco-Visual Explorations (published by Dick Higgins's Something Else Press in 1967) – seem to speak more explicitly to the contemporaneous concerns of concrete. Indeed, 'Verbi-Voco-Visual' (the word considered as sound and sight) is a neologism that the Noigandres' had previously used in their 1958 manifesto 'Pilot Plan for Concrete Poetry'.

'Verbi-Voco-Visual' is the type of neologism that Dom Sylvester Houédard, the subjects of Thomas's fifth chapter, might have coined if the Noigandres had not already done so. As one of the most 'galvanizing' advocates of 'neo-dada' concrete, Houédard's poetry is attentive to the non-semantic properties of language, especially how it appears graphically on the page (p. 191). The political, counter-cultural aspect of 'neo-dada' that sets it apart from 'classical' concrete, according to Thomas, is evident in the way Houédard's poetry addresses the 'geopolitical turmoil' of the period by way of his interest in non-Christian religions and spiritual practices such as Zen Buddhism (pp. 190–91). Above all, however, it is Houédard's own spiritual vocation as a Benedictine monk that frames Thomas's assessment of the poetry. Making pertinent connections between Houédard's theology and his poetics, Thomas identifies his work with a long-standing tradition of apophatic or negative theology. Thus, according to Thomas, Houédard's poetry represents 'an attempt to express what he called a state of union with God' by means which 'involved abandoning linguistic sense' (p. 160). This 'negative representation', as Thomas terms it, occurs primarily through the 'conversion of language into abstract visual design', which is typified in the 'typestracts' Houédard pioneered in the early 1960s (p. 160). At the same time, however, Thomas is quick to relate the theology of Houédard's poetics to what he calls 'a broader set of cultural and social paradigms' prominent during the mid-1960s (p. 182).

Thomas considers the non-semantic and non-representational quality of Houédard's poetry to be especially influential on the "'abstract" character of Cobbing's work between the early 1960s and early 1970s' as it evolved 'from a page-bound, language-based poetry to a visual and sonic poetry rooted in a paradigm of improvisatory performance' (p. 207). As it does in his discussion of Houédard, the countercultural milieu of Jeff Nuttall's *Bomb Culture*, along with the social-political theory of the Frankfurt School philosopher Herbert Marcuse, provides the context for Thomas's consideration of Cobbing's politicized poetics and its connections with 'the dynamics of intermedia art' (p. 234). Thomas also lists the Beats and their British equivalents, along with the cut-up techniques of William Burroughs and Brion Gysin as important reference points for Cobbing's poetry (p. 213). The capaciousness of Cobbing's sensibilities and the energy he had for making connections are also intimated by the active role he played in the British Poetry Revival as manager of London's Better Books, publisher of Writers Forum, and co-founder

of the Association of Little Presses. Thomas only touches on the first two of these activities but all three might be considered as significant components of (rather than simply appendices to) Cobbing's poetics. Thus, as much it was 'Cobbing's wild improvisatory rites in pubs and performance spaces across London and beyond', these additional activities of Cobbing's also ensured 'that the effects of concrete poetry on British literature and art continued to be felt across the remainder of the twentieth century' (p. 245).

The considerable ground that concrete poetry, in little more than a decade, covered between the classical phase of Finlay and the neo-dada idiom of Cobbing is, as Thomas shows, quite remarkable. It is perhaps worth stressing how *Border Blurs*, as Thomas explains, is a phrase of equivocal provenance, attributable to either Houédard or Cobbing. Thomas chose it as his title because it reflects 'not only the interplay of literature and other media' but also the 'interaction of two distinct national literary cultures during the 1960s and 1970s' (p. 17). Although Thomas is referring to the national cultures of Scotland and England, his comment also recalls just how blurred the two opposing concrete positions of this period were: 'classical' and 'neo-dada'. These opposing schools not only blurred into each other, but, as Thomas repeatedly shows, their borders merged with those of the British Poetry Revival, the New American Poetry, Fluxus, and Auto-Destructive Art. One has only to look at one of the many anthologies that Thomas refers to in *Border Blurs* – from Emmett Williams's *An Anthology of Concrete Poetry* (1967) and Mary Ellen Solt's *Concrete Poetry: A World View* (1968) to John Sharkey's *Mindplay* (1971) – to see just how blurred, how *un-set*, concrete poetry remained. Thomas draws attention to this point in his conclusion by way of a recent anthology (which, incidentally, includes Thomas's own contributions): Victoria Bean's and Chris McCabe's *The New Concrete: Visual Poetry in the 21st Century* (2015). The anthology may, as its subtitle implies, downplay the sonic aspect of concrete, but it does, nevertheless, convey the enduring legacies of the form. As well as including canonical concrete poets – Finlay, Cobbing, Morgan, Gomringer, Pignatari, among others – it also includes contributions from a variety of poets, including Susan Howe, Jen Bervin, mIEKAL aND, and Johanna Drucker, all of whom have disregarded the narrow dichotomies that defined and divided concrete in the 1960s (pp. 257–58). It is for similar reasons why *Border Blurs* will remain a definitive resource and touchstone for subsequent studies of concrete poetry. Thomas has successfully stepped back from the factions and divisions to make a plausible case for the broader, continuing significance of the form. Consequently, Thomas's book is a provocative reminder that 'concrete' (from the Latin *con-creſcere*) has, at root, always been about 'growing together' by assimilation.

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