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Cool nothing: Dom Sylvester Houédard's coexistentialist concrete poetics

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ABSTRACT

This article concerns the concrete poetics of Dom Sylvester Houédard, which I define using a term from his 1963 article 'Concrete Poetry & Ian Hamilton Finlay', 'coexistentialist'. Houédard's concrete poetry has sometimes been criticized for an anachronistic avant-garde quality, because of its non-semantic use of written language, and its associated air of intermedia experiment. But the term 'coexistentialist' has various connotations which allow us to interpret Houédard's work as highly responsive to its cultural moment, and to the unique theological tradition from which it emerged. These connotations include: the relationship between early and mid-twentieth-century modern art and literature; existentialist philosophy, especially the writing of Jean-Paul Sartre; Marshall McLuhan's theories on modern communication and ecumenical dialogue within the Catholic Church during the Second Vatican Council. After presenting an outline of Houédard's poetics related to these themes, I analyse some of his concrete poems or 'typestracts', produced between 1967 and 1972.

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In 1963 Dom Sylvester Houédard published the article 'Concrete Poetry & Ian Hamilton Finlay' in Herbert Spencer's journal *Typographica*, the first account published in the UK of what had become known as concrete poetry, a kind of poetry in which, simply put, the visual or material elements of language were central to poetic meaning. Finlay, the article's nominal subject, became disillusioned with the interpretation of concrete poetry, and of his work in particular, which it seemed to represent, describing it curtly in a 1970 biographical note as 'less useful' than other accounts (qtd in 'FINLAY, Ian Hamilton', 369).¹ The reason was perhaps that Finlay always held concrete poetry to be a fundamentally linguistic art, enhanced by visual and phonetic devices which served as indications of syntax, or to emphasize or modify a central theme, but always oriented around a nucleus of meaning provided by words. Houédard presented another idea of concrete poetry, more in tune with the artistic spirit of the decade if more removed from the aims of the first, Northern-European and Brazilian concrete poets during the mid-1950s. In a spirit exemplary of the experimental generation, he emphasized concrete poetry's capacity to blur and

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¹Finlay's comment is quoted in the entry on his work in the 1970 reference book *Contemporary Poets of the English Language*. The entry is anonymous but includes a biographical note by Edwin Morgan.

dissolve medium boundaries, bringing the visual and linguistic registers into a kind of relativizing co-existence.

In the introduction to his 1971 concrete poetry anthology *Mindplay*, John Sharkey described Finlay and Houédard as the two ‘seminal personalities’ associated with the style in Britain (14). Indeed, Houédard’s prolific creative and critical output helped to generate an understanding of concrete poetry that stood in illuminating contrast to Finlay’s, and by the close of the 1960s his work was well-known in Britain, and to exponents and critics of concrete poetry worldwide. It would even be possible to argue that by the time Sharkey’s anthology appeared, Finlay’s own sense of what concrete poetry represented had been somewhat submerged, by a wave of creative and critical activity which had redefined it along the lines implied by intermedia art and counter-cultural ideology. On these terms, concrete poetry’s main value lay in evading the constraints of medium, thereby placing metaphorical or literal pressure on broader systems of authority, control and categorization.² But although Houédard was sympathetic to some such set of ideas, his own work cannot be defined on these terms nearly as neatly as Finlay’s disapprobation assumed. In any case, across the intervening decades the situation vis-à-vis critical attention has entirely shifted: while Finlay’s practice is now celebrated as a striking manifestation of late-modernist literary aesthetics, and for its trenchant response to the ideological tenets of modern art, Houédard’s has reverted to something of the status of a niche interest.³ Admittedly, the publication of Nicola Simpson’s *Notes from the Cosmic Typewriter: The Life and Work of Dom Sylvester Houédard* (2013), an engaging and superbly presented collection of critical essays, reminiscences and reproductions, indicates a limited resurgence of interest, in line with the more general critical reevaluation of concrete poetry over the last five years or so. But in many instances Houédard’s work is still written off as an eccentric manifestation of a sixties fascination with phantasmagoria, synaesthesia and new-age spirituality.

That perception is understandable but unfair, or rather, incomplete. As critical interest in concrete poetry continues to grow, it therefore seems worth offering a more nuanced account of Houédard’s poetics than has so far appeared, by reference to a word which resurfaces throughout his *Typographica* article. That word is ‘coexistentialist’, and it is a term in which several layers of meaning can be identified, besides its superficial use to define the co-existence of the visual and linguistic registers already referred to. In this article I wish to focus on four – some, perhaps all, of which were consciously invoked by Houédard –

²The tenets of intermedia practice which I have in mind here, and their ideological and political connotations, are evident in Higgins’s 1966 manifesto ‘Intermedia’:

The concept of the separation between media arose in the renaissance. The idea that a painting is made of paint on canvas or that a sculpture should not be painted seems characteristic of the kind of social thought – categorizing and dividing society into nobility with its various subdivisions, untitled gentry, artisans, serfs and landless workers – which we call the Feudal conception of the Great Chain of Being. This essentially mechanistic approach continued to be relevant throughout the first two industrial revolutions, just concluded, and into the present era of automation ... However, the social problems that characterize our time, as opposed to the political ones, no longer allow a compartmentalized approach. We are approaching the dawn of a classless society, to which separation into rigid categories is absolutely irrelevant. ([1])

³As regards critical consensus on Finlay’s work, the influential critic of literary modernism Marjorie Perloff, for example, has written of it on several occasions, notably in ‘From “Suprematism” to Language Game: The Blue and Brown Poems of Ian Hamilton Finlay’ (2010). The long-standing critical support of Stephen Bann has also been important in ensuring its reputation.

before turning to some examples of his work in which his coexistentialist poetics is borne out. The first involves the relationship between what might be called the first and second-wave Western avant-gardes of the early twentieth century and the 1950–1960s respectively; another involves French existentialism, especially the writing of Jean-Paul Sartre; a third involves Marshall McLuhan's 1962 text *The Gutenberg Galaxy* and a fourth the spirit of ecumenism within the Catholic Church which Houédard served as a monk, priest and theologian during the Second Vatican Council of 1962–1965.

But before running through these ideas, it is worth defining this idea of merging the visual and linguistic registers a little more precisely. I am associating that quality particularly with Houédard's so-called 'typestracts', although it is identifiable to varying degrees in almost all of his work. Typestracts were made by using the linguistic and diacritical marks of the typewriter to build up precise geometrical constructions, generally set in an implied three-dimensional void, sometimes with more fluid or dispersed visual elements floating or swimming around a central edifice. Language and image co-exist in a simple sense because we are presented with a visual image made from pieces of language, using a tool for writing, which thus retains, besides its visible form, what Edwin Morgan called a 'lingering literary hookup' (1975, 729).⁴ More subtly, one might say that the visual and linguistic co-exist because the work appears beyond conventional symbolic frameworks, preceding identification as either visual art or language but potentially identifiable as either or both, that process to be determined by the reader or viewer rather than being pre-emptively configured by the poet.

In short, the typestracts are works which we might see as using linguistic marks to make visual art, or as occupying a space between or beyond language and image. These are, of course, qualities associable with a raft of visual-linguistic experiments conducted by poets and artists across the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, most obviously the Dadaists and Futurists. However, to return to the four affinities mentioned above, the term 'coexistentialist' refers as much to the spirit in which this merging of registers was undertaken as to the process itself, a spirit particular to both the cultural epoch and the theological tradition from which Houédard's work emerged.

His *Typographica* article had, for example, pointedly distinguished between the 'coexistentialist' modern art and literature produced since World War Two and that which came before it, in particular between the Salon des Refusés exhibition of 1863 and World War One, which Houédard describes as either 'constrictive' or 'constructive'. The crux of this distinction is between what he calls 'the largely pre-WW/1 move to the authentic and non-mimetic' and the 'largely post-WW/2 overspill to ... mutual interpretation, rejection of divides & borders, delight in accepting ambiguity/ambivalence: alive blurring of frontiers between art & art, mind & mind, world & world, mind art & world' (1963b, 47). Artworks of construction and constriction, Houédard suggests, were compelled by a kind of urge towards transcendence, the yearning for an expressive or communicative register with an objectivity surpassing all previous ones, potentially staked on a movement beyond signification. This could be attempted 'constructively', by the nominal development of such registers – the quintessential example perhaps being the Zaum language of the Russian Futurists – and/or by 'constriction'. Constriction involved the

⁴This comment appears in Morgan's untitled biographical note on Houédard in the second edition of *Contemporary Poets of the English Language* (1975).

destruction or undermining of existing registers to clear space for the new, what Houédard calls ‘the necessary negative anti-past ... épurations [cleansing or purging] of eg the Dadaists’ (47). By contrast, coexistentialism stood for a certain equalization or levelling out, a combination of expressive registers which accepted and emphasized their mutual non-transcendence or non-objectivity: their containment in symbolic frameworks defined by custom and context rather than mystical affinity with their objects.

Houédard associates coexistentialism specifically with concrete poetry, describing its characteristics under the consecutive headings ‘constricting’ and ‘constructive’ before alighting on the third term as if to offer a conclusive definition. In this sense, coexistentialism set concrete poetry apart from earlier avant-garde art and literature by what Houédard called, in his 1964 lecture ‘Eyear’, a ‘sense of zen-peace found in accepting things for the sake of their hollowness’ (1964a, n.pag.).⁵ It is useful, in this sense, to think of the frequent absence of language in the typestracts as evidence not of some compulsion towards immaculate expression or communication but of a withdrawal from that very urge, a certain silent repose which is both ascetic and whimsical. Another of Houédard’s terms for concrete poetry, ‘Paradada’ – the title of his 1964 *Times Literary Supplement* article – confirms this suggestion: concrete as ‘beyond’ or ‘other than’ Dada; or, as Houédard puts it in that piece, ‘un-un & cool nothing paradada (surdada) outgrowing sticky fears of inner neant’ (6 August 1964b).

However, the appearance of the Sartrean term ‘néant’ here is also instructive. In biographical terms, that is, Houédard’s coexistentialism represented not so much a movement beyond Dada as beyond engagement with a literary and philosophical movement whose title is embedded in the term itself: existentialism. At Sant Anselmo Benedictine College in Rome in the early 1950s, Houédard had completed a licentiate dissertation on Jean-Paul Sartre, a process which he later recalled as pivotal to his poetic development.⁶ Moreover, as a native of the Channel Islands Houédard was bilingual, steeped in a Francophone tradition which encompassed the French existentialist literature of the mid-twentieth century.

Commenting on his dissertation in a 1987 article on Beckett, Houédard remarked that

Beckett’s non-pessimism (say non-non-optimism for greater precision) has here a *place* and *function*, eliminative of what I called in my fifties thesis on *Sartre and Nothingness* the failure of Sartre to (not *revel* in but) feel at home with this Néant *in* which (and *that*) we are. (1987, 53)

The reference to Sartre is fleeting but it must be primarily to his 1943 work *L’Être et le néant* (*Being and Nothingness*), in which Sartre defines the mode of being which characterizes human consciousness (being-for-itself) as an absence or negation of the pure, undifferentiated being of the inanimate universe (being-in-itself) (Sartre [1958] 2003). The prerequisite of human consciousness, in other words, is not any essential quality or function but the negation or nihilation of a prior state. This meant, amongst other things, that human consciousness had to be defined as arbitrary or non-necessary, lacking any pre-determined, metaphysically definable purpose. The idea of such purpose rather emerged from the process by which consciousness perpetually transcended

⁵Houédard’s delivered this lecture in two parts, at the Royal College of Art and the Institute of Contemporary Arts, on March 2 and May 12, 1964. The transcript quoted here is stored with the Edwin Morgan Papers at Glasgow University Library.

⁶See Houédard’s reference to this period in his autobiographical note ‘Chronobiography/ Autozoography’, for example, in which he describes the theme of his dissertation as ‘liberty in Sartre’ (1972a, 26).

and reflected back on itself, by which a sense of the self or ego emerged, and by which meaning was granted in tandem to the external world (ibid.).

For Houédard, the anguish at the core of this existentialist condition seems to have been rooted in some sense of an absent alternative, an imaginable yet uninhabitable mode of being which would possess an essential quality or function of the kind just outlined, expressed through a language or sign system which somehow embodied that same truth. In other words, Houédard defined existentialism as constrictive/constructive, characterized by an underlying dread at the sheer contingency of human consciousness and its systems of communication. Concrete poetry, by contrast, accepted the 'néant' as neutral fact, playfully combining language and image as if to express a cool awareness of the arbitrariness of man-made sign systems, and of the meanings they inscribed onto the self and the world. Making its home in the néant, concrete poetry redefined the existentialist condition along similar lines to Beckett's more anguished quests for neutrality: not existentialism, but coexistentialism.

And yet the word also contains further layers of significance. Houédard's *Typographica* article had also defined coexistentialism as a necessary condition of what he called '[t]he shrinking world: contracted/constricted negatively by bomb & spacefears, positively by jet-communications telstar space-probe. This makes coexistentialism inevitable, international: i.e. all arts merge, barriers crumble, are scrambled' (1963, 50). The idea of a global society entwined and homogenized by mass communication technology and the pervasive threat of nuclear war – amongst other things – partly takes its cue from the concrete poet Eugen Gomringer's 1950s manifestos.⁷ But it also brings to mind the condition of 'the global village' identified by Marshall McLuhan in *The Gutenberg Galaxy* the previous year ([1962] 1971, 31). More generally, Houédard's 1960s critical writing shows a clear awareness and digestion of McLuhan's terminology.⁸ This implies another hookup within the word 'coexistentialism', linking it to a similar term used in the prologue to McLuhan's text, 'co-existence', to indicate the potential ability of the modern mind to hold the information and ideas received through different symbolic systems in a kind of sceptical tension.

The key assumption of *The Gutenberg Galaxy* is that changes in communication technology are not passive markers of societal evolution but active determinants of our cognitive and social conditions at any one point in history, which have the effect of 'outering' or 'extending' one sense, leading to an engagement with reality dominated by that sense. In particular, McLuhan distinguishes between the 'visual' condition brought about by the development of the phonetic alphabet and the printing press and the 'oral' or 'aural' condition of pre- and non-literate societies. The former is defined by, amongst other things, the perception of reality as ordered three-dimensional space, pursuit of linear causal links between objects and events, and the endowment of the individual with rational power and

⁷See for example Gomringer's 1956 statement 'Concrete Poetry', which defines the style as:

International-supra national. It is a significant characteristic of the existential necessity of concrete poetry that creations such as those brought together in this volume began to appear almost simultaneously in Europe and South America and that the attitude which made the creation and defense of such structures possible manifested itself here as it did there. (68)

⁸In his 'Eyear' lecture, for example, Houédard described concrete poetry as emerging 'partly [out of] the planetarisation effect of our global village culture as we move out of the 4th season of the industrial/mechanical age into the 5th season of the electronic & spaceage' (1964a, n.pag).

self-awareness. In oral cultures, three-dimensional space is not recognized in the same way, thought is formed in passive, emotionally configured response to external stimuli, and the individual does not recognize himself so discretely from the social mass. McLuhan felt that the advent of 'electric' communication technology was beckoning in a new oral age for the West, albeit one mediated by, and which would mediate in turn, the extant cognitive modes of the visual age: 'any Western child today grows up in this kind of magical repetitive world as he hears advertisements on radio and TV' ([1962] 1971, 19).⁹

Though hailed, partly correctly, as a proselytiser for new media, McLuhan saw both the visual and oral conditions as problematic. While the technology of the visual age had led to a numbing entrancement by the subject-centred, linear logic of language – through an out-er-er of visual sense – the oral condition reduced human consciousness to a de-individualized, tribal identity, liable to outbursts of mass panic and irrationality. The current post-visual oral age, meanwhile, potentially presented an amalgamation of these threats, with a range of intersecting technologies extending our various senses by ever more pervasive and simultaneous means, such that the subject was increasingly unable to notice or avert their cognitive effects, bringing about a new form of irrational tribalism.¹⁰ It is in defining this predicament that McLuhan offers the word 'co-existence':

[T]he principle of exchange and translation, or metaphor, is in our rational power to translate all of our senses into one another. This we do every instant of our lives. But the price we pay for special technological tools, whether the wheel or the alphabet or the radio, is that these massive *extensions* of sense constitute closed systems . . . , incapable of interplay or collective awareness. Now, in the electric age, the very instantaneous nature of co-existence among our technological instruments has created a crisis quite new in human history. Our extended faculties and senses now constitute a single field of experience which demands that they become collectively conscious. Our technologies, like our private senses, now demand an interplay and ratio that makes *rational* co-existence possible. ([1962] 1971, 5)

Just as our 'private senses' entail an inbuilt capacity for translation or metaphorical exchange, McLuhan suggests, so the extended sensory channels which constitute our new technologies of communication, and which now utterly pervade those private senses, must somehow be placed in a kind of interactive or constellatory relationship. In developing the ability to translate or transliterate between different channels of perception in this way, the subject would identify and demystify their effects, loosening their emotive grip on the mind.

The final section of *The Gutenberg Galaxy*, 'The Galaxy Reconfigured', is partly concerned with how this rational coexistence of technologies or perceptual modes might be established. Interestingly then, it initially takes the form of a potted summary of visually and sonically augmented literature and its associated criticism, from Blake's engravings to Ruskin's writing on gothic manuscripts to the work of Joyce and the French symbolists. Bringing these developments together under Ruskin's term 'the grotesque', McLuhan

⁹The famously gnomic, aphoristic style of *The Gutenberg Galaxy* is partly intended to prevent this kind of theoretical shorthand, which implies the objectivity of its own perspective. Instead, the book's compacted style and 'mosaic'-like structure (265) make the reader highly conscious of their own role in inferring an overall image from the individual units or tiles.

¹⁰This comes across in one of McLuhan's more problematically Eurocentric section headings: '[t]he twentieth century encounter between alphabetic and electronic faces of culture confers on the printed word a crucial role in staying the return to the Africa within' (45).

describes their compositional mode as ‘a collocation, a *parataxis* of components representing insight by carefully established ratios, but without a point of view or lineal connection or sequential order’ (267). If this is ‘coexistentialism’, then the word is partly a clarion call for multi-media art, especially for modes of linguistic expression in which the visual and sensory dimensions of language are granted primary attention. In that respect, of course, it is strikingly similar in implication to Houéard’s ‘coexistentialism’, and given its prominent position in McLuhan’s prologue, it is feasible that Houéard intended a McLuhanite allusion in his own coinage. In any case, like McLuhan’s ‘rational co-existence’, Houéard’s ‘coexistentialism’ evokes a mode of imaginative interplay or interaction between different modes of communication – in this case typewritten language and the conventions of visual representation – which would emphasize their mutual contingency: their lack of divine authority.

Having said all this, perhaps the most important allusion embedded in the term ‘coexistentialism’ is that which links it to the overarching spiritual imperatives of Houéard’s art. ‘Coexistentialism’, that is, expresses a contemporary concern, within the Catholic Church and within Houéard’s own thinking, with the co-existence of belief systems. After all, the object of Houéard’s poetry was always, at some level, God, or union with God: though in his terminology ‘God’ must be re-envisioned as a more nebulous and syncretic force than the term might imply. In his 1963 essay ‘Beat and Afterbeat’, Houéard stated that ‘poetry all art is one of universal worship à l’insu of [unbeknownst to] god the unknown’ (1963a, 140). In this sense, the renunciation of sign systems in Houéard’s work embodied a sense that any formulation of the nature of God in subjective thought necessarily comprised a movement out of or away from God: or rather, away from that inner component of the human mind which was shared with or indivisible from God.

This was an idea which Houéard inherited from the negative and apophatic traditions of a range of world religions.¹¹ His posthumous *Commentaries On Meister Eckhart Sermons* (2000), for example, focus on two paradoxes of consciousness explored through various theological traditions, in particular by the Christian mystic Eckhart (1260–c1327) and the Sufi mystic Ibn’ Arabi (1165–1240). First there is:

[T]he paradox of perpetual creation, that we are continuously receiving being without any interruption, and this being is the self-gift of God. So we have the paradox as to whether we can say it is God’s Being or our being; He gives it to us as ours. (2000, 4)

The most inward aspect of the human mind, Houéard suggests, preceding subjective consciousness, is actually a facet of God, separated from his elementary, indivisible state so that he can recognize and celebrate himself: his ‘self-gift’. The inner core of each human mind can thus be defined as both human and God, or as being shared with God. Secondly there is ‘the paradox of what St. Paul calls epectasy, which is the continuous advance of the mind to God, which goes on through time and through eternity so that we never reach God but we always journey towards him’ (4). The mind in its outer, subjective aspect, that is, can never inhabit this inner state of union, but passes out of it in the very act of reflecting on it, rendering it an other, an object of contemplation rather than a state of being. This is the moment of thought, and of all communication, including poetry.

¹¹Though it also seems to owe something to Sartre’s idea of the relationship between human consciousness and pure being: between being-for-itself and being-in-itself.

Putting aside the finer details of this apophatic schema, the salient point is that Houéard's poetry reflected and defined his faith. In this sense, it is significant that he composed his first typestracts during the Second Vatican Council of 1962–1965, indicative of a new culture of 'aggiornamento' or 'bringing up to date' within the Catholic Church. This culture was partly characterized by increased interaction with other faiths, as Houéard noted in 'Beat and Afterbeat': 'what Vat II is ABOUT is universal need to re-phrase without loss of content so as to communicate with the non-us' (1963a, 140). His own contribution to that culture was an idea he called 'The Wider Ecumenism', which involved interaction with a diverse range of spiritual traditions both within and beyond the confines of organized religion. He outlined the idea in his 1965 article 'The Wider Ecumenism', arguing that 'god has spoken in a variety of ways [to] all humanity' (1965, 118):

[S]o that our basically jewish-greek-northeuropean synthesis feels its limitations as sacred history & feels the need to incorporate the sacred history of the regional insights of african-indian-eastern genius, as well as the nonregional insights of technological mentalities that are today's mental theophanies (1965, 118–19).

The Wider Ecumenism, then, was to entail dialogue not only with a global range of religions but also with various artistic and intellectual communities. Though Houéard perhaps alludes here to the spiritual implications of contemporary 'technological' discourses such as cybernetics, those communities would also include ones associated with the 1960s counter-culture, and with international communist and anarchist movements. In a 1963 letter to his friend Stefan Themerson, Houéard referred approvingly to the expanded ecumenical sensibilities accommodated by VAT II, noting that 'catholic communism, catholic atheism and coexistentialism are becoming household words' ([April 14, 1963c]).¹² In so doing he granted the last of those terms further depth, rendering the co-existence of language and image in the typestracts a metaphor for the co-existence of different systems of faith and belief. This aspect of coexistentialism is evident in the references to Buddhism and Hinduism, particularly Tantric ritual, which permeate the language and symbology of the typestracts.

In short, the layered connotations of the term 'coexistentialism' suggest the need for a more nuanced reading of Houéard's concrete poetry than is perhaps invited by Jamie Hilder's generalizing dismissal, in a largely excellent recent survey of the concrete movement worldwide, of 'concrete poets who sought a spiritual experience via the merging of logos and imago' (2016, 27).¹³ As noted, it is the typestracts which offer the most striking manifestation of Houéard's coexistentialist poetics, and in attempting such a reading over the remainder of this article I want to focus on some examples of that form. But before doing so, let me turn briefly to another definition of the typestracts, provided by Edwin Morgan, who coined the term, in a letter to Robert Burchfield, editor of the Oxford English Dictionary (January 10, 1978). Morgan was attempting, unsuccessfully, to have

¹²Rather than being explicitly dated, this letter is marked 'yom EOstre/Pasques/Pesach', a coded reference to Easter Sunday. 'Yom' is a Biblical Hebrew term often translated as 'day', 'Eostre' a Germanic goddess from whose name the English word 'Easter' derives, and 'Pasques' and 'Pesach' Old French and Jewish terms for Easter and Passover respectively. The letter is also accompanied by poems dated around Easter 1963, and followed by another, dated '180463' – seemingly by Themerson, upon receipt – which begins 'My dear moncher/ I wrote as you niticed [sic.] on EASTER DAY' (18 April 1963d). The first letter must also date from 1963, then, when Easter Sunday fell on April 14.

¹³Hilder asserts that these poets' work misrepresented the initial aims of concrete poets such as Gomringer, and 'should not be read as exemplary of the movement' (ibid.).

the word ‘typestract’ added to the dictionary, and recalled first using it in a letter to Houédard sent on or around November 20, 1963:

Houédard [had] sent me some of his ‘typewriter poems’ (there was as yet no term for them), and I wrote back enthusiastically about them, referring to them as typestracts. The term arose swiftly and spontaneously in the course of writing the letter, but I suppose it was a portmanteau word from ‘typewriter’ and ‘abstract’.

As Morgan’s letter implies, one of the defining characteristics of the typestracts is their ‘abstract’ quality, involving not just an absence of semantic content but also, in most cases, a lack of any clearly figurative or pictorial visual element. In this sense, we should not expect the themes and contexts just outlined to be borne out by explicit visual or linguistic gesture. At the same time, the typestracts do display various recurrent compositional features which cultivate a general impression of multi-media ferment, and of *apophasis* – a renunciation of positive expression – which allows us to infer that more precise set of compositional reference-points.

As the typestracts’ multi-media character has been central to discussion so far, I want to focus here on the latter of these qualities, *apophasis*.¹⁴ The apophatic quality of the typestracts is partly conveyed by their wordlessness, of course: whereas earlier concrete poets used the visual arrangement of language to enhance semantic sense, in Houédard’s work the presentation of language as a visual entity generally means the erasure of semantic sense. But the orientation of these poems around their implied object is more complex than that simple renunciative gesture would imply. Rather than the typestracts purporting to assume some transcendent expressive capacity by casting off the word – so that the visual structure itself is implied to possess some magical intimacy with its referent, or to become its own referent – the structure generally seems characterized by its relationship with an enveloping three-dimensional void.¹⁵ It is this encompassing and permeating space rather than the visual form ‘pushed into shape’ by it – as Sharkey puts it in his *Mind-play* introduction (1971, 18) – which stands for the poetic object, specifically for that inexpressible union with the divine outlined above. The structures are rather representations of the processes of thought, prayer or supplicatory ritual by which the subject attempts some intimacy with or awareness of that state.

These two aspects of apophatic composition – the absorption of language into abstract visual motif, but also the orientation of the visual structure around a blank space – are evident in almost all of Houédard’s typestracts. But there are distinctions to be observed in the terms of their deployment. In some cases, the structuring void seems to be enclosed or captured by the visual form, as in the piece ‘Chakrometer’ (1967a [Figure 1]) from *A Book of Chakras*, which suggests a hollow cylindrical structure containing an emptiness. In other cases, the emptiness seems to envelop the design from without, as in the untitled work below (1972b [Figure 2]), from a later collection, *Like Contemplation*. A more significant distinction, perhaps, is that some of the typestracts are granted a degree of

¹⁴The term ‘apophasis’ appeals because of its allusions both to apophatic theology – the idea that the nature of God can only be indicated by rejecting of all positive descriptions of him – and to literary and rhetorical contexts, in which it would function as a form of irony, of conscious reference through conspicuous non-reference.

¹⁵This may remind us of the relationship between typographic form and visual space outlined in Mallarmé’s essay ‘Crisis in Poetry’ (1896), which describes printed language as ‘a fragmentary disposition with alternations and oppositions, all working towards the total rhythm of the white spaces, which would be the poem silenced; but it is translated to some extent by each pendent’ (232).

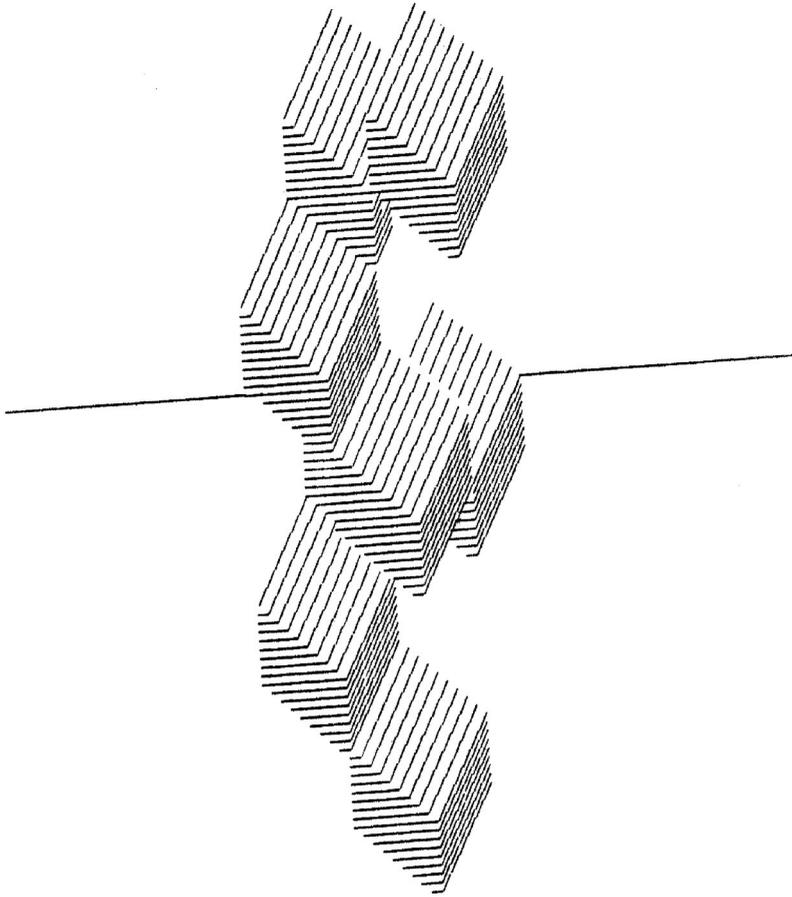


Figure 2. [Cube typestract]. 1972b. From *Like Contemplation*. This and all subsequent images are reproduced with acknowledgements to Writers Forum.

They thus function as ‘maps of the system, together with detailed instructions for working the mechanism’, providing information or cues regarding the forms of psychosomatic activity by which these points of energy could be engaged or interacted with, by which subjective being could be merged with the creation process (Rawson, [1978] 2010, 14).¹⁶ This particular piece is a representation of energy channels called ‘nadis’

¹⁶Rawson describes the Tantric creation process based primarily on Hindu rather than Buddhist variants. According to Tantric mythology, he states, the entire ‘universe of phenomena’ ([1978] 2003, 14) is generated by:

[t]he active play of a female creative principle, the Goddess of many forms, sexually penetrated by an invisible, indescribable, seminal male. In ultimate fact He has generated Her for his own enjoyment. And the play, because it is analogous to the activity of sexual intercourse, is pleasurable to her (9–10).

As noted, the energy of this creation process is concentrated at particular points in the body and world, so that the perceptible universe has a ‘subtle four-dimensional skeleton of channels’ (14). Thus, while the creation process is impalpable to subjective consciousness, Tantric practice can familiarise or merge subjective being with the energy of creation through an interaction with these points of energy called ‘sādhana’: ‘i.e. psychosomatic effort, assimilating his own body to higher and higher levels of cosmic body-pattern. In the end he may become identical with the original double-sexed deity, which is involved, without beginning or end, in blissful intercourse with itself’ (14). Much sādhana involves mimicking the creation process, occasionally through ritual sex.

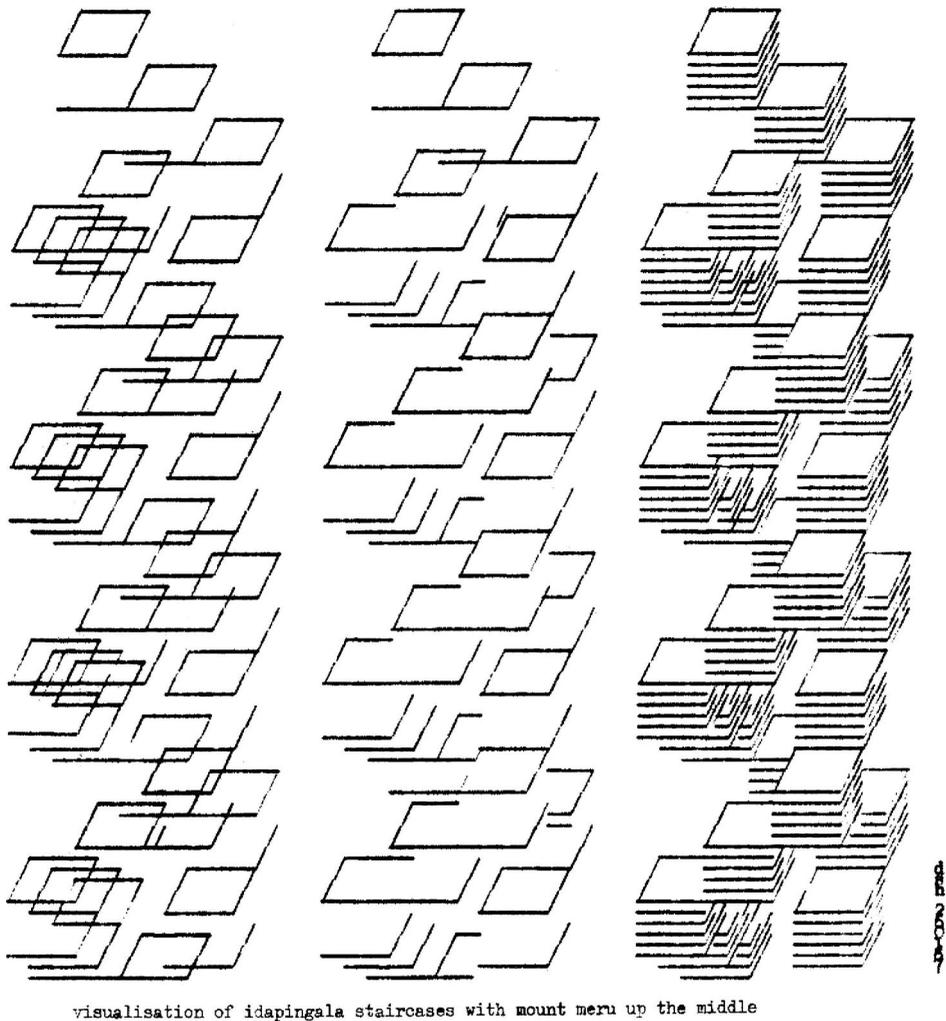


Figure 3. 'Visualisation of Idapingala Staircases with Mount Meru up the Middle.' 1967b. From *Tantric Poems Perhaps*.

located within the 'subtle body', the body as envisaged in a rarified, spiritually defined state aloof to empirical study. An equivalent image in Tantric art would indicate a series of psychosomatic states to be passed through by engaging particular points on those energy channels called 'chakras' in order to cultivate greater and greater intimacy with the energy of creation (Rawson, [1978] 2003).¹⁷ Accepting the unavoidably new-age connotations of this terminology, the key point is that Houédard's 'staircases' are not images of the creation process or the creator itself. Instead, they represent and

¹⁷These are ideas common within the aspect of Tantric ritual defined as Yoga. Houédard's terms 'ida' and 'pingala' refer to two of the nadis within the subtle body, which spiral upwards from left and right-hand positions around a central spinal nadi or 'suṣumna'. All the nadis have associative qualities and locations, ida connected to femininity, the moon and the Ganges, pingala to masculinity, the sun and the Yamuna river, and suṣumna to the central point of the universe in Tantric mythology, the sacred, five-peaked Mount Meru, hence Houédard's titular reference.

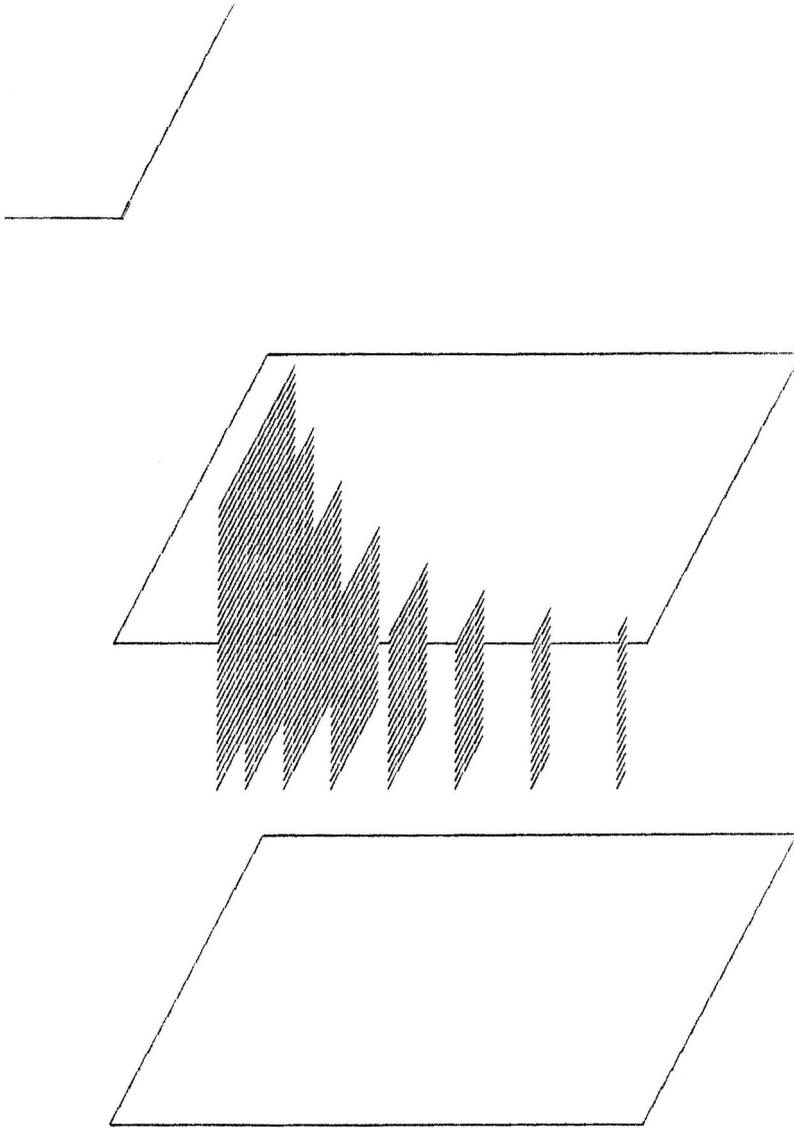


Figure 4. [Screen typestract]. 1972c. From *Like Contemplation*.

solicit particular forms of mental and bodily activity undertaken in response to it. As per the general apophatic impulse of the typestracts, the viewer's gaze is thus averted from the poem's true object.

Returning to an earlier point, even in those cases where we cannot define that state of response or orientation using a linguistic annotation, the typestracts' visual forms still invite analogies with various theories of mental and spiritual epiphany. Often they feature recurring sets of motifs or shapes which gradually shift form or position, as in the untitled typestract above (1972c [Figure 4]), from *Like Contemplation*. Minimal gesture though it is, taken in the broader context of Houédard's theological writing the incremental shrinkage of these screens seems redolent with associations of Platonic

metaphysics and Christian mysticism: the idea of reality as a projection of shadows, or the gradual renunciation of subjective sense as coextensive with some blossoming state of spiritual awareness.

The exclusively religious interpretations that tend to emerge from such ‘close readings’ offer some context, if not justification, for the dismissal of Houédard’s work as eccentrically or fatuously transcendentalist: in spite of its emphasis on the inexpressibility of the divine, and the deep scholarship on which it is based. But the typeextracts always also express the more wordly, secular dimensions of Houédard’s poetics outlined earlier: its playful circumvention of the yearning towards transcendent expression in first-wave avant-garde art; its reformulation of the Sartrean relationship between being and néant; its expression of an interplay of different perceptual channels, as demanded by McLuhan’s age of electric communication; and, which *is* clear from the examples just given, its openness to a range of global and non-orthodox spiritualities in the context of the Second Vatican Council.

Bearing all this in mind we might return, finally, to the opening distinction between concrete poetry as exemplified by Finlay’s practice and Houédard’s. It is sometimes argued that by removing the foundational significance of language from the concrete poem, the quality which made it something of its own time and place, rather than a repetition of experiments conducted half a century earlier, was also shorn away. It seems, however, both from an exploration of the term ‘coexistentialism’ and from the richness and scope of Houédard’s poetic practice during the 1960s–1970s, that we should now acknowledge the value and timeliness of this other, coexistentialist concrete poetics, and of Houédard’s contribution to late-twentieth-century poetry and art.

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