Spring onions

All the places you could be when it happens,
if it happens, all the things you could be looking at –
the empty glass on the black café table
or the flattened Coke can on the pavement by the car.
You could be chopping spring onions or deciding
between rosé and white, maybe thinking about
whether Greece would be nice next summer.
You could be choosing your latest download,
worrying about a hundred other things that might
happen, but that, as you don't yet know, will not.
And when it happens it won't be like a film or a book
or even your favourite song, but it will be a thing
all itself, a thing that makes the Coke can
or the spring onions solidify and weighten,
acquire gravity beyond their status, and afterwards,
when someone asks you about it, you will start
with the spring onions, you will remember
the acrid smell, your favourite little kitchen knife,
the flecks of mud on the green chopping board.

Concrete, Communism, Ecumenism

Dom Sylvester Houédard in the Czech Republic

GREG THOMAS

Broumov Monastery, located in the north-east of the Czech Republic just below the Polish border, is a majestic baroque complex and former monastic community. It was founded in the early thirteenth century by the Benedictines of Břevnov, based 100 miles south in Prague. By the eighteenth century Broumov had become 'a supra-regional centre of culture and education'. That's according to the catalogue for Monika Čejková's exhibition *Dom Sylvester Houédard: Endlessly Inside,* which ran at the monastery from June to October 2023. The show was part of the Ora et Lege ('pray and read') curatorial project, whose title adapts the Latin Benedictine credo 'Ora et Labora' ('pray and work').

The pieces on display by Houédard range from magnificent, rococo typewriter-art constructions creating illusions of three-dimensional depth (Edwin Morgan dubbed them 'typestracts') to 'reversible' poems, with letterforms, found objects and materials suspended in transparent sheets of plastic, designed to be viewed from both sides. Meanwhile, in the monastery's library are examples of Houédard's poetry publications, produced by his and John Furnivals press Openings. The library itself is a lavish, two-storied, barrel-shaped vault created during the early-eighteenth-century restoration that gave Broumov its current appearance. Prior to the First World War, the library contained 45,000 books, ranging from law and church history to philosophy, medicine and architecture. This collection was systematically neglected and plundered after 1945, particularly after the dissolution of the monastery by the governing Communist Party in 1950. (Returned post-Velvet Revolution to the Břevnov order, Broumov is now open to the public, though the monks never returned.)

Any Benedictine monastery is a wonderfully apposite location for a display of work by Dom Sylvester Houédard, who balanced his extravagant forays into the 1960s counter-culture and the world of intermedia art with monastic enclosure at Prinknash Abbey in Gloucestershire. It was from this unlikely base that he galvanised a group of regionally located poets and artists (including Thomas A. Clark, Astrid and John Furnival, and Kenelm Cox) into a phase of loosely collective activity animated by the idea of rendering words and language forms as visual and sonic matter. The cries of Scottish cultural nationalists aside, it is in the semi-rural south-west of England, and not in Glasgow or Edinburgh (the erstwhile homes of concrete poets Edwin Morgan and Ian Hamilton Finlay respectively), that the British concrete poetry movement, if it ever existed, found an epicentre. That was largely thanks to Houédard.

Dom Sylvester's faith and poetics were closely entwined. His work often constituted an attempt to ren-

der what I have called, in my 2019 book *Border Blurs: Concrete Poetry in England and Scotland*, a state of union with the divine. In the case of his typestracts – an extensive selection of which can be found in seconds by Googling the *sui generis* term – my own contention is that the form pushed into shape by the clacking of the typewriter keys, with its strange, architectonic appendages, its waterfalls of brackets, or its haze of commas, is not always the true object of contemplation. Rather, it is the white space, the encompassing void whose presence this curious object implies, that is the true vessel of Houédard's negative or apophatic conception of God. The *via negativa* of his poetics is also, of course, writ large in the simple use of letterforms without any semantic implication.

Houédard's work has been explored in greater depth than my own writing musters by two writers with connections to Buddhist and Catholic mysticism respectively, Nicola Simpson and Charles Verey. As Simpson writes in an article for the *Endlessly Inside* exhibition catalogue, Houédard's theological sensibilities were profoundly informed by his encounters with Buddhism during the 1960s and beyond. Based on this, she proposes 'two doorways through which the reader / viewer of this exhibition… can enter to understand Houédard's work':

> There is the direct and sudden Zen path to enlightenment invoked in a piece such as the laminate poem *live all the immediately while wafted available to the even waterlogged ground* (1967). When originally made and exhibited this was a mobile (rotating sculpture) with three petals sandwiched in red, orange and blue plastic that would have 'wafted' in the breeze made by gallery visitors circumambulating the work, a movement bringing the attentive viewer's awareness to the present moment, the now, where we can 'live all the immediately.' [....] The other doorway is through the entrance of gradual enlightenment depicted in the works that engage with the ritual practices of Tibetan Tantric Buddhism.

Simpson elaborates on this process of incremental attunement, which we are presumably able to bring to bear on a range of Houédard's work, in terms of 'performative and experiential Tantric ritual methods of mudra, mantra and yantra [which] transform the practitioner's body, speech, mind and environment into that of their chosen Tantric deity'.

The agnostic humanists amongst us might struggle with the somewhat baroque connotations of mystical experience outlined here. We might instead choose to emphasise that Houédard's engagement with Buddhism – as Simpson notes – was entirely mediated by socio-political circumstance. His work thus tells a human-centred tale alongside that of the inward path to enlightenment. In particular, the violent consolidation of Chinese control over Tibet in the 1950s, culminating in the Dalai Lama's flight from Lhasa in 1959, spread a diaspora of Buddhist monks across the west. Houédard established direct relationships with several teachers based in Britain and elsewhere as part of an interfaith dialogue committee set up in Britain under the auspices of the Second Vatican Council (1962–5), a period of relative liberalisation and 'aggiornamento' ('bringing up to date') within the Catholic Church. It is in this context that we can frame the increasing incorporation of Zen and Tantric Buddhist symbolism into his poetics across the 1960s.

In 1950, a few years before Houédard was receiving his monastic cousins – banished by one communist regime – at Prinknash, his Benedictine brothers at Broumov were rounded up by Czecvhoslovakia's repressive communist regime and placed in an internment camp located within their own monastery and grounds. This was, the *Endlessly Inside* catalogue informs us, part of 'the first phase of the infamous Operation K – the state-controlled liquidation of male religious communities in Czechoslovakia, followed closely by Operation Ř (the dissolution of women's convents)'. All of which brings us to qualify a point made earlier in the article: while any Benedictine monastery offers an appropriate setting for Houédard's work, one located in the only former Eastern-Bloc country where an extensive concrete poetry movement emerged suggests particularly piquant routes to engagement.

In her own catalogue essay, Monika Čejková details the (fairly modest) written communication during the 1960s–70s between Houédard, a prodigious letter-writer, and three Czech concrete poets: Bohumila Grögerová, Josef Hiršal and Jiří Valoch. Čejková notes how important it was 'for artists living in totalitarian dictatorships [presumably referencing the communist Czechoslovak Republic among others] that their poems could get to foreign periodicals and exhibitions not only by mail, but often through a trusted intermediary'. If this provides some practical context for the scope of the various missives she describes – which concern exhibitions or anthologies in which one might feature the other, or list useful contacts in respective countries – it also adumbrates a brief engagement with Czech concrete poetry itself.

As Edwin Morgan wrote in his 1974 essay 'Into the Constellation: Some Thoughts on the Origin and Nature of Concrete Poetry', 'one cannot brush aside "moral, social, and psychological values" so long as the medium in question is linguistic' [here he quotes the critic Mike Weaver, who, Morgan felt, had argued too strongly for a pure, formalist variant of concrete poetry]. As evidence for the potential 'political and social engagement' of concrete poetry he name-checked the Czech concrete movement, which he described as equal to the more famous but similarly politicised Brazilian Noigandres group in terms of its 'widespread impact and distinctive qualities'.

We might see these distinctive qualities as having to do with a certain emphasis on slippage between different languages, on mistranslation and miscommunication, whereas concrete poetry in its classic iteration was often about paring down and synthesising languages – on achieving some form of transnational poetic *esperanto*. For poets working in a country that had only recently (in 1918) secured independence from the Austro-Hungarian Empire when it was overrun by the Nazi empire in 1938, and had then been co-opted as a Soviet satellite state, this emphasis on a slippage of tongues was not only anti-concrete (in the sense of being

anti-minimalist, against an immaculate clarity of language) but also trenchantly political.

The most expansive period anthology of concrete poetry, Mary Ellen Solt's *Concrete Poetry: A Worldview* (1967–8), contains three works by Grögerová and Hiršal, romantic and creative partners who produced much poetry in collaboration. Two of them, 'Egotist' and 'Quarrel', consist of blocks of text in which the Czech words 'ty' and 'já' ('you' and 'I') seem to vie for control over the space. The conflict here bears connotations of lovers' tiffs, in a way which introduces gendered expression into the typologically neutral, implicitly male tonal range of the original concrete poetry movement. But the duo's third poem, 'Developer', speaks more directly to the wider socio-political realities in which the Czech concretists were operating.

'Developer' consists of two typewritten columns of capitalised letters which, through incremental permutation, morph from one word into another, or rather, into the same word in another language. Over twenty-one lines, the German 'LIEBE' ('love') becomes the Czech 'LÁSKA', while over thirty-six increments the Czech 'SVOBODA' morphs into its English equivalent, 'FREEDOM'. It's an abstract poem, but one full of oblique political symbolism. What does love signify in a coloniser's language? What does freedom mean when it expresses itself in the *lingua franca* of global capitalism? As Jamier Hilder notes of this poem in his 2016 text *Designed Words for a Designed World: The International Concrete Poetry Movement*, '[p]ost World War II Czechoslovakia was attempting to shift identities from one occupied consciousness, the German, to another, the Soviet, making the inclusion of the English word "freedom" an especially loaded political statement at the height of cold war relations'.

In short, in the context of Czech culture during the 1960s, the abdication of linguistic clarity, of semantic transparency, meant something different than it did in the spiritually loaded, non-semantic gestures of Houédard's typestracts. Crucially though, those gestures were not as divorced from earthly concerns as they might appear. In the worldview of Houédard's 'wider ecumenism', which sought spiritual truths outside the mainstream of the Catholic church in everything from Buddhism to beat culture, the stripping of semantic sense from the concrete poem was also an anarchistic gesture, one oriented towards the possible future conditions of a utopian, non-hierarchical society. As he noted in a 1966 article, 'Poetics of the Deathwish', 'merely to present the gap seems to constitute the lightest & briefest of fingers on the trigger – the least fascist invitation to engage spectator interest & participation – & so create a primitive human selfregulating society'.

These comments were not, of course, made with any focus on the Czech concrete scene, nor were they rooted in the political and cultural concerns of Houédard's Prague-based comrades. But they suggest a shared emphasis on the troubling of semantic meaning (or, indeed, its wholesale erasure) as an implicitly democratically minded gesture. It was one that could, in some cases, point mutely towards possible futures in which certain insidious systems of authority, embedded in language, have unravelled, allowing new and more humane forms of social structure to emerge in their place. This is another lesson to draw from the phantasmagorical delights on display at Broumov Monastery.

Four Poems

LAURA SOLÓRZANO

Translated by Adriana Díaz Enciso

(*delonix regia*)

The tree has died
The trunk has lived and has died
The leaves have fallen on dust
The branches sweat
The limbs' shadows and the light
(the light of the tree)
The flower of light without tree
The arboreal emotions
The avid explosions, the emotive
Branches break
A tree goes on foot like one dead
With a zombie rustle
On goes a superfluous corpse, green
Like a living corpse, rootless
The tree descends from the wind
The voice comes from vertigo
There is no light like the canopy
Nor flight like the verb
The verb comes from the tree

(from *Boca perdida*, Bonobos, Metepec, Mexico, 2005)