

The Tower of Babel: Concrete Poetry and Architecture in Britain and Beyond

The visual aspect. Concrete language structures either do not follow the traditional verse and line order or they follow it in such a limited way that one is not reminded of traditional forms [...] the visible form of concrete poetry is identical to [its] structure, as is the case with architecture.¹

The idea that language could emulate architecture, especially modernist architecture in the constructivist tradition, was foundational to the international concrete poetry movement of the 1950s-70s. This essay assesses the development of concrete poetry and the associated use of architectural forms and analogies, first by the movement's founders, then by three British poets: Edwin Morgan, Ian Hamilton Finlay and John Furnival. It also assesses those three poets' responses to a tension inherent in any analogy between architecture and language rooted in their essentially distinct roles: on the one hand, the physical creation of space, generally for utilitarian functional use; on the other, the recreation of, or reference to, prior semantic objects. The concrete poets' language-architecture metaphors reflected a desire to create objects which would be functional in the way that inhabitable structures, for example, were functional, while somehow remaining in the mediatory domain of language.² This apparent logical fallacy, along with a sense that concrete poetry had disinterred techniques exhausted in early-twentieth-century avant-garde and modernist writing, perhaps explains its longstanding literary-critical oversight, at least in Britain. Considering how Morgan, Finlay and Furnival negotiated the Janus-like concept of a language of objects is partly intended to contribute to a recent wave of British critical reevaluation.³ First, however, the style's origins, and innervating relationships to constructivism and architecture, must be assessed.

Concrete Poetry in Post-War Germany and Brazil

The Swiss poet Eugen Gomringer and the Brazilian Noigandres poetry collective – comprising Décio Pignatari and brothers Augusto and Haroldo de Campos – collectively adopted the term 'concrete poetry' in 1956 to refer to work they had been producing independently since 1952.⁴ Their 'classical' concrete poetry of the 1950s and early 1960s was partly defined by its minimalistic grammar and lexicon and neat phonetic permutations, but its most striking feature, as relayed in the Noigandres's 'Pilot Plan for Concrete Poetry', was its use of 'graphic space as structural agent': visual form as a kind of substratum to semantic meaning.⁵ These techniques reflected concrete poetry's primary imperatives: if the first two implied efficiency of linguistic expression through the semantic and phonetic streamlining of signifiers, the visual effects – and to some extent the sonic qualities – suggested the replacement of signs with

¹ Eugen Gomringer, 'Concrete Poetry' (1956), trans. Irène Montjoye Sinor and Mary Ellen Solt, in Solt, ed. *Concrete Poetry: A World View* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1970) [rpt. of spec. issue of *Artes Hispanicas* 1.3-4 (1968)], 67.

² The word 'functional' is used throughout the essay to denote this sense of physical, utilitarian function, notwithstanding the different, representative 'functionality' of language.

³ This reevaluation is evident in the number of recently published or republished anthologies and critical texts by or about British concrete poets. See for example Ian Hamilton Finlay, *Ian Hamilton Finlay: Selections*, ed. and introd. Alec Finlay (California: University of California Press, 2012); Nicola Simpson, ed., *Notes from the Cosmic Typewriter: The Life and Work of Dom Sylvester Houédard* (London: Occasional Papers, [2012]); Bob Cobbing and Peter Mayer, eds., *Concerning Concrete Poetry* (1978), introd. William Cobbing, Rosie Cooper, Andrew Hunt and Fraser Muggeridge (London: Slimvolume, 2014 [facsimile ed.]). An equally relevant document of the British concrete scene is Stephen Bann's (ed. and introd.) *Midway: Letters from Ian Hamilton Finlay to Stephen Bann 1964-69* (London: Wilmington Square-Bitter Lemon, 2014).

⁴ Stephen Bann, 'Introduction', in Bann, ed., *Concrete Poetry: An International Anthology* (London: London Magazine Eds., 1967), 7. Although the Swedish artist Öyvind Fahlström had independently published a manifesto for 'concrete poetry' in 1954, the British poets I assess worked in response to the Noigandres-Gomringer coinage, which can thus be considered authoritative in this context.

⁵ Noigandres, 'Pilot Plan for Concrete Poetry' (1958), trans. Noigandres, in Solt, *Concrete Poetry*, 71. My definition of 'classical' concrete poetry is based on Charles A. Perrone's use of that term, amongst others, to describe the output of the Noigandres during its 'heroic phase' of 1956-60. Charles A. Perrone, *Seven Faces: Brazilian Poetry Since Modernism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1996), 26. My focus on these poets' classical work belies their movement beyond classical principles from the early 1960s, notably through Augusto's 'popcrete' poetry and Haroldo's prose sequence *Galaxias*.

objects: or rather, in combination with the retained semantic element, the curious impression that the concrete poem *became* what it described.

This partly reactivated – perhaps somewhat belatedly – drives in modernist and avant-garde writing towards immaculate manifestation of the linguistic object arguably inaugurated with symbolism, stalled by World War Two. But the Pilot Plan's references to information theory and cybernetics reflect a more contemporaneous set of affinities for concrete poetry's notions of linguistic efficiency. Moreover, its titular allusion to concrete art reflects a simultaneous inheritance from visual and sculptural mediums, especially concrete art's ancestral style, constructivism.

A foundational tract of Soviet constructivism, Naum Gabo and Antoine Pevsner's 'Realistic Manifesto' (1920), suggests the key characteristic to which the concrete poets responded: '[n]o new artistic system will withstand the pressure of a growing new culture until the very foundation of Art will be erected on the real laws of Life [...] Space and time are the only forms on which life is built and hence art must be constructed'.⁶ Alluding to theories of relativity, the manifesto invokes artistic expression which would transcribe the imperceptible scientific forces at work in the generation of perceptible phenomena rather than their subjective sensory manifestations. Stylistically, this connoted a preference for minimal, non-figurative forms, naturalistic representation being associated with the subjective expressive ego. In transcribing these universal scientific principles – or 'laws of Life' – art would assume a universal intelligibility which, certainly in the case of Soviet constructivism, would become the touchstone of a collectivist society.

The concrete poets' ideals of efficiency of linguistic expression were rooted in this supposition of universally coherent forms, to be relayed as directly as possible, and bore comparable connotations of social homogenisation. However, their post-1945 surroundings altered the terms of that supposition. Notably, both Gomringer and the Noigandres encountered constructivist ideals through the intermediary genre of concrete art, developed by a younger generation of artists including Max Bill and Josef Albers, which consolidated constructivist notions of efficiency of expression by endowing basic elements of visual and sculptural composition – colour, for example – with objective values; concrete poets were partly applying similar principles to lexical and syntactical construction.⁷

Concrete art's influence on Gomringer is neatly emblematised by his employment from 1954 as Bill's secretary at the Hochschule für Gestaltung, a design school in Ulm. Bill had co-founded the Hochschule in 1953 to revive the aesthetic and sociological imperatives of the Bauhaus, a hub of Northern European constructivism closed under Nazi pressure in 1933. At Ulm, constructivist postulations of collective aesthetic responses as the means to new collectivist states were coloured by the more humanistic imperatives of post-Third-Reich social reconstruction: more likely to involve appeals to innate human sensibilities as means of rebuilding international social relations. This reflected the school's formation as an outgrowth of the Ulm School of Adult Education, co-founded in 1946 by Inge Aicher-Scholl, sister of Hans and Sophie Scholl, to remedy an absence of engagement in post-war Germany with 'questions of a new beginning or societal change'.⁸ A tempering of constructivist pedagogy with reconstructive empathy is crystallised in the marriage of rational abstraction and emotional intimacy in many of Gomringer's 'constellations'.⁹

The Noigandres poets' work reflected and shaped the very different Latin American concrete art scene which emerged following the development of the Arte Madí and Arte Concreto-Invención groups

⁶ Naum Gabo and Antoine Pevsner, 'The Realistic Manifesto, 1920', in Gabo, *Gabo: Constructions Sculpture Paintings Drawings Engravings*, introd. Herbert Read and Lesley Martin (London: Lund Humphries, 1957), 151-52.

⁷ The words 'subjective' and 'objective' used in my analysis of constructivism and concrete art also inform my discussion of the different forms of expression used by concrete poets. It is therefore worth clarifying that the word 'subjective' is taken to refer to any expression openly rooted in individual thought or perception, its 'individuality' defined by its possible contradiction of other thought or perception formed in response to the same object or situation. 'Objective' refers to expression rooted in thought or perception assumed to be universally shared or coherent, which should therefore theoretically be intelligible to any given interpreter.

⁸ Inge Aicher-Scholl, 1982 interview qtd. in Martin Krampen and Günther Hörmann, eds., *Die Hochschule für Gestaltung Ulm – Anfänge eines Projektes der Unnachgiebigen Moderne: The Ulm School of Design – Beginnings of a Project of Unyielding Modernity* (Berlin: Ernst and Sohn, 2003), 33.

⁹ See for example 'From Deep', trans. Jerome Rothenberg, in Gomringer, *The Book of Hours and Constellations*, presented by Jerome Rothenberg (New York: Something Else, 1968), n.pag.

in Buenos Aires from 1944 onwards,¹⁰ partly as a result of dialogue with European constructivist-influenced intellectuals fleeing the war in Europe.¹¹ Clüver notes particular affinities between the Noigandres's work and that of the São Paulo concrete art collective Ruptura, displayed together at São Paulo's first *Exposição Nacional de Arte Concreta* (1956).¹² In 1950s Brazil, concrete art's investment in objective aesthetic principles symbolised a newly purposive national culture undergoing a period of rapid industrial, technological and social development, its economy strengthened by provision of raw materials to the Allied Forces.¹³

The concrete poets' ideals of linguistic efficiency were thus tempered by connotations specific to post-war Germany and Brazil. Their specific preoccupation with modernist and constructivist architecture partly reflects a comparable interest in its efficiency of formal expression, partly an ideal encapsulated in the title of a 1960 manifesto of Gomringer's: 'The Poem as a Functional Object'.¹⁴ This ideal was an extrapolation of constructivism's infatuation with functional rather than aesthetic forms, itself an extension of the idea of efficiency of expression, as the surest way of directly relaying scientific principles seemed to be to remove expressive mediation altogether and simply present them in action, a job suited to objects which performed practical physical tasks. Constructivism had thus incorporated a range of functional practices by the early 1920s, including architecture, perhaps the consummate functional practice because of the size and longevity of many of the objects it produced, and because its functionality also incorporated inducement to the new patterns of thought and behaviour – through the collective routines facilitated by its design – which art could only indirectly solicit.

The concrete poets also inhabited environments where derivations of constructivist architecture were powerful cultural emblems. The Hochschule's Department of Industrialised Building applied constructivist maxims of efficiency and functionality to new modular and cellular mass-construction techniques, a task again undertaken in awareness of the exigencies of reconstruction: literal in this case.¹⁵ Meanwhile, in late-1950s Brazil, the construction of a new capital, Brasília, in the country's mountainous interior became an iconic manifestation of an architectural philosophy rooted in constructivist design, with its connotations of social evolution retained in diluted form: a response to Henry-Russell Hitchcock and Phillip Johnson's 'international style' more preoccupied with organic forms.¹⁶ Again, in this context constructivism bespoke a new national purposiveness, emphasized by the city's hinterland location, in defiance of colonial coastal development.¹⁷

It is understandable, therefore, that the concrete poets sought to emulate architecture, especially architecture which recognised and maximised the qualities with which constructivism had endowed it: constructivist architecture itself, and the modernist styles it configured. The homage was expressed in architectonic visual construction, the implicit ideal of the poem as functional object through a more general, visually-rendered impression of immediate, efficacious presence. Both are evident in Augusto de Campos's 'Quadrado', reproduced here in its original typescript (see Figure 1). Semantically and sonically this poem generates an impression of concentrated expressive efficiency. Conjunctive grammar is eradicated, lexicon reduced to five Portuguese nouns: 'quadra': a quatrain of poetry or side of a square; 'quatro': four; 'quadro': picture or painting; 'quarto': quarter; 'quadrado': square. The minute phonetic gradations between these terms generate a complementary sense of interlocking precision, while the visual

¹⁰ Dawn Ades, *Art in Latin America: The Modern Era, 1820-1980*, contributions by Guy Brett, Stanton Loomis Catlin and Rosemary O' Neill (New Haven CT; London: Yale University Press, 1989), 241-45.

¹¹ Tomás Maldonado, interviewed in Krampen and Hörmann, *The Ulm School of Design*, 41.

¹² Claus Clüver, 'The Noigandres Poets and Concrete Art', *Ciberletras* 17 (2007), n.pag. <<http://www.lehman.cuny.edu/ciberletras/v17/cluver.htm>> accessed 22 March 2014.

¹³ Ivo Mesquita, 'Brazil', in Edward J. Sullivan, ed., *Latin American Art in the Twentieth Century* (London: Phaidon, 1996), 211-12.

¹⁴ Eugen Gomringer, 'The Poem as a Functional Object' (1960), trans. Irène Montjoye Sinor and Mary Ellen Solt, in Solt, *Concrete Poetry*, 69-70.

¹⁵ Herbert Ohl, 'Industrialised Building at Ulm' (1987), in Herbert Lindinger, ed., *Ulm Design: The Morality of Objects* (Berlin: Ernst and Sohn, 1990), 197-99.

¹⁶ Henry-Russell Hitchcock and Phillip Johnson, *The International Style: Architecture Since 1922* (New York: Norton, 1932).

¹⁷ Mesquita, 'Brazil', 212. On the influence of Brazil's new architecture on the Noigandres see Antonio Sergio Bessa, 'Architecture Versus Sound in Concrete Poetry', *Ord och Bild* 1-2 (1998), 39-44 [as "Silence=Death: Arkitektur Kontra Ljud I Konkret Poesi?"] <<http://www.fahlstrom.com/on-fahlstrom/architecture-versus-sound-concrete-poetry-bessa-1997>> [trans.] accessed 16 March 2014.

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Fig. 1. Augusto de Campos, 'Quadrado', typescript, 1 March 1959. Author's private collection, São Paulo. Reproduced by kind permission of Augusto de Campos.

form fills the page in imitation of interlocking blocks, extending black diagonals suggesting three-dimensional depth. These thing-like visuals, and the specific architectonic hint, seem to present what the poem represents linguistically. Augusto notes that its shape was devised in homage to the 'quadros' of Brazilian concrete artists, in particular an untitled 1953 work by Ruptura-co-founder Geraldo de Barros.¹⁸

Concrete Poetry in Britain: Edwin Morgan, Ian Hamilton Finlay, John Furnival

Over the next decade-and-a-half, this model of poetic practice came to influence writers and artists all over the world, who adopted it with varying degrees of fidelity, loosely bound by an interest in language's visual and sonic facets. The many causes and attributes of this mushrooming process – documented in Solt's introduction to *Concrete Poetry: A World View* (1968)¹⁹ – are beyond this essay's scope. Certainly, the style was altered by its partial incorporation into a 1960s wave of 'intermedia' art, whereby concrete poetry's visually and materially augmented grammar was interpreted as a means of transgressing the boundaries between different artistic media rather than buttressing semantic sense.²⁰

The origin of concrete poetry's reception in Britain is, practically speaking, easier to trace. On 25 May 1962, a letter from the Portuguese poet E.M. de Melo e Castro appeared in the *Times Literary Supplement* introducing 'poesia concreta', 'a successful experiment in ideogrammatic or diagrammatic writing', seemingly the first printed reference to the style in Britain.²¹ Writing in the *TLS* the following year, the concrete poet and monk Dom Sylvester Houédard cited this as the means by which various poets, including he, Edwin Morgan, Anselm Hollo and others became aware of concrete poetry.²² The aesthetic and cultural co-ordinates of the resultant flurry of concrete practice amongst British poets are trickier to plot. However, the adoption by English and Scottish poets of a style so conspicuously foreign in techniques and origins partly suggests a desire to define themselves against nationally prevalent movements seen as culturally introspective and formally stifling: the Movement and – by that point – the Scottish Renaissance. There was also a shift in the style's connotations by the early 1970s similar to that which defined its international development, its endpoint arguably encapsulated by Bob Cobbing's prodigious mixed-media practice of that period.

The Glaswegian poet Edwin Morgan, after reading the *TLS* letter, wrote to Melo e Castro, who posted him an anthology of Brazilian concrete poetry along with Augusto's address. Morgan also alerted Ian Hamilton Finlay in Edinburgh to his discoveries, and by June 1963 was publishing his first concrete poems in Finlay's pamphlet *Fish-Sheet*.²³ Morgan's engagement with concrete poetry reflects his attempts to align his work with an international tradition of socialist literary modernism distinct from the Anglo-American canon – which he associated with Eliot's solipsistic ennui – and from MacDiarmid's dogged Scottish nationalism. His *Sovpoems*, a 1961 collection of translations from poets under communist rule – Mayakovsky, Brecht, Yevtushenko – hinted at the place that a constructivist poetry might assume in such a lineage.²⁴

Morgan's existing interest in the thresholds between visual art and language is indicated by the sixteen extraordinary scrapbooks which he compiled between 1932 (starting as a pre-teen) and 1966.²⁵ The sheer range of data these huge books contain – subjects range from the American civil rights movement to medieval crucifixion painting – and their various functions – photo-journalism, surrealist collage, picture-diary – guard against tendentious analysis. However, in formal terms they certainly contain spatial juxtapositions of visual and linguistic data creating the kind of concise, visually-oriented associations typical of concrete grammar. Thematically they also reveal a fascination with modernist architecture: among the multitude of structures whose images populate their pages are the Calder-

¹⁸ Augusto de Campos, email to the author, 11 March 2014.

¹⁹ Mary Ellen Solt, 'A World Look at Concrete Poetry', in Solt, *Concrete Poetry*, 7-66.

²⁰ For the definition of 'intermedia' art cited here see Dick Higgins, 'Intermedia', *Something Else Newsletter* 1.1 (1966), [1-3].

²¹ E.M. de Melo e Castro, 'Poetry, Prose and the Machine', *Times Literary Supplement* (25 May 1962), 373.

²² Dom Sylvester Houédard, 'Paradada', *Times Literary Supplement* (4 August 1964), 696.

²³ Ian Hamilton Finlay, ed., *Fish-Sheet* (Edinburgh: Wild Hawthorn, 1963).

²⁴ Edwin Morgan, ed. and trans., *Sovpoems* (Worcester: Migrant, 1961).

²⁵ Edwin Morgan, *Scrapbooks* [1-16] (1931-66). Edwin Morgan Papers, University of Glasgow Library, MS Morgan C/1-16. For an excellent introduction to the scrapbooks see James McGonigal and Sarah Hepworth, 'Ana, Morgana, Morganiana: A Poet's Scrapbooks as Emblems of Identity', *Scottish Literary Review* 4.2 (2012), 1-23.

decorated amphitheatre at Villanueva's Ciudad Universitaria in Caracas, Rio's Ministry of Health and Education, and skyscrapers flanking a multi-lane highway in São Paulo.²⁶

More uniquely related to the terms of Morgan's turn to concrete are the newspaper images documenting the deliriously swift regeneration of Glasgow throughout the long sixties, especially the construction of system-built concrete high-rise social housing. Glendinning and Muthesius note that 'in Glasgow from 1961 to 1968', multi-storey flats 'accounted for a staggering 75% of all new public housing'.²⁷ Recalling that period in 'Epilogue: Seven Decades' (1990), Morgan evokes the city's shifting skyline as a poetic muse and, by homonymic association, implies the unique capacities of concrete poetry – which he discovered the same year he himself moved into a multi-storey complex – to emulate Glasgow's new architecture:

sent airmail solidarity to São
Paulo's poetic-concrete revolution,
knew Glasgow – what? – knew Glasgow new – somehow –
new with me, with John, with cranes, diffusion
of another concrete revolution, not bad,
not good, but new [...] ²⁸

Notwithstanding Morgan's interest in modernist architecture as a point of analogy and inspiration for concrete poetry, his concrete poems reveal little of the associated investments in efficiency of expression or the poem as object. In Morgan's hands, concrete poetry's peculiar sonic and syntactical features were instead restlessly adapted to express a range of unique communicative scenarios and imperatives, offset by visual evocations of rigidity and stasis.

The Cheltenham-based Gloucestershire College of Art magazine *Link* published many of the first British concrete poems, including Morgan's 'Construction for I.K. Brunel', which appeared in a 1964 homage-issue for Brunel below a visually similar piece by Houédard (see Figure 2). This poem exemplifies Morgan's concrete style both linguistically and visually. In the former case, Augusto's reductive permutational grammar gives way to a permutational-esque style that implies composition from a limited word-pool through close phonetic linkages while in fact ranging over a deceptively wide sonic and thematic landscape. Implied efficiency of expression is overridden by a runaway train of subjective association which, in the context of concrete poetics, codifies a certain scepticism regarding the premise of universally valid linguistic forms. In an unpublished typescript – undated, although identical in several sections as a radio-script dated December 1964 ²⁹ – Morgan revealed the range of references he sought to incorporate:

I built up a series of approximations to ['Brunel'] which would all suggest by their associations something relevant to Brunel & his work. Eg. Brumel the Russian high jumper leaping across... Boommill because he made the mills boom... Brunelleschal because theres something of Brunelleschi's massive quality & approach about his work... Bluemezzo because the bridge in the middle [sic.] of the blue sea or sky... And the main span of the bridge is made up of blocks of words referring to specific works of Brunels [...]. These references are not straightforward or linear, theyve all been welded together spatially to give impression [sic.] of a mans whole integrated lifework.³⁰

The 'spatially welded' visual form itself subtly undermines evocations of objective presence in its very use of pictorial reference. Concrete poetry avoided overtly pictorial visuals, as they tended to generate the impression not of having captured the immediate essence of the linguistic object, but of being another

²⁶ Morgan, *Scrapbook 12*, page 2404; *Scrapbook 9*, page 1670; *Scrapbook 12*, page 2411.

²⁷ Miles Glendinning and Stefan Muthesius, *Tower Block: Modern Public Housing in England, Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland* (New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 1994), 4.

²⁸ Edwin Morgan, 'Epilogue: Seven Decades', in Morgan, *Collected Poems* (Manchester: Carcanet, 1990), 594. John Scott was Morgan's long-term partner in the 1960s-70s.

²⁹ Edwin Morgan, 'Concrete Poetry', radio-broadcast typescript, December 1964. Edwin Morgan Papers, University of Glasgow Library, MS Morgan L (Acc. 4848, Box 69).

³⁰ Edwin Morgan, 'Concrete Poetry', typescript, n.d., page 9. Edwin Morgan Papers, University of Glasgow Library, MS Morgan L (Acc. 4848, Box 69).

tool for signifying or gesturing towards it.³¹

Morgan's admission of subjective expression into the concrete poem allowed the possibility of an authorially invested, even polemical concrete, a possibility previously explored by the Noigandres. A case in point is 'Instant Theatre Go Home', which appeared in Morgan's first concrete collection *Starryveldt* (1965), published by Gomringer's eponymous press. This poem uses architectonic visuals to frame didactic topical content, a tension made more pointed by its use of Gomringer's 'Ping Pong' as a visual-sonic model.³² 'Ping Pong' exemplifies the practice of concrete poetry as an attempted art of universals, formed from the title-words repeated in a small rectangle with reverse symmetrical appendages at top left. Morgan mimics this shape and sound but uses echoes of those words to refer with clipped invective – oddly enough – to the withdrawal of British colonial forces from Malaysia:

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Variations on 'ping' ricochet down a central column stratified by repeated letter-positions – made possible by typewriter composition – notably 'Penang', a North-West Malaysian province which had retained colony status until the Federation of Malaya gained independence in 1957. In 1963 Penang became part of the new nation of Malaysia, seen by many in the region as a neo-colonial puppet-state. The odd term 'half-penny', split in half with 'ping', suggests half-measures or short-changing. The underlying phrase, 'a half-penny in Penang', critiques the protracted and bloody British withdrawal from the region, and may have been penned in response to the new nation's formation, while also alluding to the Malayan Emergency, a war of independence waged between Commonwealth forces and the communist guerrillas of the Malaysian National Liberation Army. The rigid visuals are a foil to this subjectively invested message, the poetics for which they stand subtly satirized by the contrast. The intrusion of topical reference partly critiques art-forms which, in seeking transcendent expressive registers, jettison social and political realities. Such art-forms include both concrete poetry – that sardonically-timed closing 'pong' suggests the inadequacy of poems like Gomringer's to topics like this – and intermedia art: the words 'instant theatre' and 'happening' – the latter picked out in capitals – draw grim, bathetic analogies between the intermedia performances of fluxus artists, similarly directed towards expression liberated from convention, and the 'instant theatres' created by guerrilla skirmishes in the Malaysian jungle.

If the piece reflects a scepticism of classical concrete poetics, it also exemplifies how British poets were able to rejuvenate them, in Morgan's case by using concrete poetry's formal features as exoskeletons for an obdurately subjective poetic voice. Perhaps because of a resultant overlap with his narrative lyric voice, after a period of avowed and industrious concrete practice in the 1960s-70s, Morgan was able to dart in and out of the style in his later work.

For Finlay, by contrast, concrete poetry was the means to an irreversible formal sea-change. In April 1962, just before Morgan showed him Melo e Castro's letter, Finlay had published the illustrated poem-booklet *Concertina* through his and Jessie McGuffie's Wild Hawthorn Press.³⁴ Jessie Sheeler (née McGuffie) recalls that Finlay had also started making 'what he called toys', 'emblems or icons rather than

³¹ The Pilot Plan notes that in its early stages, concrete poesis or 'isomorphism' might involve 'movement imitating natural appearance', but in its 'advanced' stages would 'resolve itself into pure structural movement'. Noigandres, 'Pilot Plan for Concrete Poetry', 72.

³² Eugen Gomringer, 'Ping Pong' (1952), in Bann, *Concrete Poetry*, 32.

³³ Edwin Morgan, 'Instant Theatre Go Home', in Morgan, *Starryveldt* (Frauenfeld: Eugen Gomringer, 1965), [17].

³⁴ Ian Hamilton Finlay, *Concertina*, illus. John Picking (Edinburgh: [Wild Hawthorn], 1962).

playthings': little wooden models of cows, ships, fish and other naïve-seeming objects.³⁵ If the first of these projects indicates an ever-increasing impulse towards the poem as materially-augmented form, the second suggests a desire to realize that impulse on a deeper level, not simply by combining language and illustration but by rendering language itself a material object, the frustration of that desire evident in an abandonment of language in favour of wordless modelling: in a 1968 letter to Derek Stanford, Finlay tellingly referred to his toys as 'models of poems'.³⁶ By emphasizing the material qualities of language itself, concrete poetry allowed him to reconcile his model-making and lyric impulses: to render the poem as object.

Finlay was amenable to the constructivist tenets of this ideal in classical concrete. However, he was more enamoured of the constructivists' suprematist peer Malevich, whose work he took to indicate a similar attunement to objective aesthetic principles divorced from narratives of socio-political evolution by a sense of their irreconcilable dislocation from social reality. In an often-quoted letter to Pierre Garnier, written in 1963, he stated:

I approve of Malevich's statement, "Man distinguished himself as a thinking being and removed himself from the perfection of God's creation. Having left the non-thinking state, he strives by means of his perfected objects, to be again embodied in the perfection of absolute, non-thinking life..." That is, this seems to me, to describe, approximately, my own need to make poems ... though I don't know what is meant by "God." And it also raises the question that, though the objects might "make it," possibly, into a state of perfection, the poet and painter will not. I think any pilot-plan should distinguish, in its optimism, between what man can construct and what he actually *is*.³⁷

Whereas Gomringer and the Noigandres proffered objective aesthetic forms as mediums for new states of social being, in Finlay's post-lapsarian poetic universe, only art could intimate models of a lost order unattainable in reality.

This connoted a distinction in the nature and role of architectural forms and analogies in his work, reflected in the proliferation of classical (in the non-concrete sense) architectural motifs from the late 1960s onwards. By the terms of this architectural lexicon – tempting to associate with Finlay's residence in Edinburgh's neo-classical new town during 1961-65 – the building was a model not of an efficiency and functionality to which language could aspire, but of a comparable order irretrievably bound to a mythic past, to be eulogized rather than emulated.

Finlay may have composed his first concrete poems on Christmas Day 1962.³⁸ His first concrete collection *Rapel: Ten Fauve and Suprematist Poems* appeared early in 1963, and suprematist and classical impulses found expression in 'Homage to Malevich' (see Figure 3). This poem partly responds faithfully to classical concrete poetics, revealing none of the stowed-away semantic-sonic range of Morgan's 'Construction', nor its pictorial visuals. The lexical and sonic scope is even narrower than in 'Cuadrado', suggesting an earnest attempt at efficient expression of universal forms; monolithic, non-figurative visuals seem to capture the essence of the linguistic object, and yield an architectonic hint. However, the poem does not ultimately promise, or seek, an architectural objectivity for language. The whimsically tragic invocation of 'lack' and 'lock' achieved by severing each line's opening letter implies both the impossibility of a language bereft of subjective association and the painful emotional ascesis of attempting to create one: as Finlay added to Garnier, 'one does not want a *glittering* perfection which forgets that the world is, after all, also to be made by man into his *home*'.³⁹ The avowed reference to Malevich's *Black*

³⁵ Jessie Sheeler, 'Commentary', in Janet Boulton, *Some Early Toys by Ian Hamilton Finlay* (Axminster: Colin Sackett, 2009), 8.

³⁶ Ian Hamilton Finlay, letter to Derek Stanford, 2 August 1968. National Library of Scotland, Acc. 6589/1.

³⁷ Ian Hamilton Finlay, 'Letter to Pierre Garnier, September 17th, 1963', in Solt, *Concrete Poetry*, 84.

³⁸ See the letter to Robert Creeley quoted in Alec Finlay, 'Introduction: Picking the Last Wild Flower', in I. H. Finlay, *Ian Hamilton Finlay: Selections*, 29.

³⁹ I. H. Finlay, 'Letter to Pierre Garnier', 84.

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l a c k b l o c k b l a c k b

homage to Malevich

i h f

Fig. 3. Ian Hamilton Finlay, 'Homage to Malevich', in I. H. Finlay, *Rapel: Ten Fauve and Suprematist Poems* (Edinburgh: Wild Hawthorn, 1963), n.pag. Reproduced by courtesy of the Estate of Ian Hamilton Finlay.

Square (1915), an early visual expression of the imperative of objective aesthetic form, also distances the poem from the imperative in the very act of homage, placing the latter in an irreclaimable retrospect, the poem in a late-twentieth-century paradigm of conscious mimicry.

Finlay's abiding attachment to subjective expression was subsequently revealed, as in Morgan's concrete poetry, by an opening out of referential range: not in Finlay's case as a means to polemic, but to temper evocations of an irreclaimable aesthetic order with palliative personal associations of beauty or tranquillity. Moreover, whereas the symbolic rejuvenation of Morgan's concrete poetry largely involved language, Finlay's occurred to a greater extent at the material level itself, through his development of a rich lexicon of visual and sculptural symbols. Ironically, although this obviated the ideal of an architectonic language by using visual effects separately to words rather than in their arrangement, it allowed Finlay to make more extensive use of actual architectural forms, accompanied or inscribed with words, than any other concrete poet.

That visual-sculptural lexicon found virtuosic realisation at Stonypath – later Little Sparta – the Pentland Hills farmstead to which Finlay moved in 1966 with his new collaborator and partner Sue Finlay (née Swan), converted over the next forty years into an interactive landscape of architectural-poetic forms. But the prelude to this was his early-to-mid-1960s development of a mercurial range of material formats for the concrete poem: from standing-cards and posters to booklets with thematically and formally integrated physical characteristics, to wood, glass, steel and, finally, sculptural poems, the latter placed in mutually transformative relationships with landscapes.

Finlay's late-1960s sundial-poems perhaps mark the consolidation of this development. One such work is *The Four Seasons in Sail*, constructed as a free-standing marble slab by Maxwell Allen and placed in situ at Little Sparta in 1968 (see figure 4). Two counterpointed lines of text are inscribed in four stages around its sides:

THE FOUR
WINTER-WOOD SNOW

SEAS-
SPRING-CLIPPER

ONS IN
SUMMER-MUMBLEBEE

SAIL
AUTUMN-WOOD BARQUE ⁴⁰

The linguistic element indicates a clear development on 'Homage to Malevich'. Although the poem's crux is the black-block-like word-pair of 'seas' and 'season' – the words' grammatical similarity emphasized by a line-break revealing one within the other – it is incorporated into a succinct lyric phrase evoking one of the symbolic domains within which Finlay suffused the concrete poem with personally meaningful associations: the rural-Scottish-cum-symbolist world of water-bound vessels. The metaphorical binding of sea and land achieved through the grammatical echo of 'seas' and 'season' also alludes to one way in which Finlay diverged from the idea of a realizable lexicon of objective aesthetic forms: by presenting their invocation as a drawing together of naturally disparate phenomena, an act of will, even violence, rather than formal logic.

The development in the visual form is equally significant. Firstly, it is no longer primarily expressed through the linguistic arrangement, which is instead set into an independent three-dimensional structure which is the primary visual focus. Secondly, that structure is equally figurative, not only expressing Finlay's new classical influences but, more playfully, invoking the world of boats and boating through the gnomon's resemblance of a sail. It thus stands both for a lost aesthetic order to be eulogized through art, and for the tempering of that lament with personal visions of beauty.

Though Finlay broke self-consciously with concrete poetry in the late 1960s, the premise of the poem as object, which he took from it, underlined his entire subsequent practice. Moreover, he continued

⁴⁰ *The Four Seasons in Sail* (1968), marble, Little Sparta, Dunsyre, Edinburgh. A two-dimensional reproduction, 'The Four Seasons in Sail', appeared in I. H. Finlay, *Honey by the Water* (Los Angeles: Black Sparrow, 1973), 39.

Greg Thomas. "The Tower of Babel: Concrete Poetry and Architecture in Britain and Beyond." *Spatial Perspectives: Essays on Literature and Architecture*. Eds. Terri Mullholland and Nicole Sierra. Oxford: Peter Lang, 2015. 161-88.



Fig. 4. Ian Hamilton Finlay, *The Four Seasons in Sail* (1968), marble, Little Sparta, Dunsyre, Edinburgh. Photographer Stephen Bann. Reproduced by courtesy of the Estate of Ian Hamilton Finlay, with acknowledgements to Stephen Bann.

for a time to align his work with classical concrete poetics on the basis of a common emphasis on enhanced semantics, against the anti-semantic, intermedia style with which British concrete was increasingly associated.

John Furnival, by contrast, explicitly devised his text-mural *The Fall of the Tower of Babel* – the first in a series which now seems among the most remarkable products of British concrete poetry – as an ‘anti-concrete work’.⁴¹ Suspicion of the term ‘concrete’ perhaps partly reflects the fact that Furnival was working in the style to which it was applied prior to encountering the movement. In 1963 he staged a text-art exhibition at a gallery-space attached to Gloucestershire College of Art, attended by Dom Sylvester Houédard, then enclosed at nearby Prinknash Abbey. Houédard arranged a meeting at which he introduced Furnival to the work of Gomringer and the Noigandres, and Houédard and Furnival’s press Openings was formed the same day. Furnival began the Babel project soon after, orienting his pre-existing style with inquisitive scepticism around concrete poetry.⁴² Furnival and Houédard helped to forge a West Country concrete milieu generally critically overlooked in favour of the Scottish poets and the London scene centred on Cobbing’s Writers Forum, perhaps because it was less easily pegged to suggestive narratives of geographically rooted cultural identity.

That Furnival’s concrete poetry has received so little literary-critical attention also reflects its connection to a genealogy of visual art, a connection which reveals concrete poetry’s position within a broader 1950s-70s paradigm of sonic and graphic linguistic experiment manifested in different ways in cut-up poetry, abstract expressionist mark-making, aleatoric scores, Tom Phillips’s book-art, the lettrism and ultra-lettrism of various French post-surrealist groupings and, especially relevant to Furnival’s work, the marriage of text and image in pop art. Furnival trained alongside Hockney at the Royal Academy from 1957 to 1960 when pop art was flourishing in Britain, having achieved visibility at the 1956 exhibition *This is Tomorrow*.⁴³ Furnival’s route to concrete through pop suggests an attunement to sensorily augmented language as a tool of consumer capitalism in the dawning electric age prophesied by Marshall McLuhan rather than a post-constructivist meta-language, as manifested in the impression of babbling repetition, and the satire of universal or atavistic languages, evident throughout the Babel series.

‘The Tower of Babel’ is an informal title for that series, a collection of spontaneously composed free-hand text-murals, all depicting buildings, variously exhibited as free-standing panels and published as screen-printed posters. The first, *The Fall of the Tower of Babel* (1963),⁴⁴ grew from repeated inscriptions of the phrase ‘Peace for the World’ in English and Russian, arranged in ascending rows.⁴⁵ As Furnival notes, the rows ‘become more and more intermingled, forming odd words in other languages, or just meaningless noises, until at the top even the different characters combine and, rather than fall into a heap on the ground, eventually evaporate into nothingness’.⁴⁶

The core phrase is lexically reductive in concrete style, but through the loaded linguistic contrast, and stultifying repetitiveness, that reductiveness comes to signify an obstinate delusion rather than a universal validity: ‘I evidenced the usual scepticism when confronted with concrete poems for the first time, so instead of their tendency to reduce and pare down, I mocked them with this additive process’.⁴⁷ The stereotypical sixties ideal of ‘peace for the world’, associable in this context with concrete notions of universal linguistic forms, is undermined in the evident context of the Cold War, in which Furnival had played a small part as a Russian translator for MI3 during 1956-57.⁴⁸ The title offers a Biblical analogy for the division and disruption of meaning thereby presented as the actual characteristics of global communication: ‘[i]t was at this time’, Furnival notes, ‘that the United Nations was becoming more and more powerless to deal with world crises’.⁴⁹ Visually speaking, though the poem clearly mimics an object – indeed, a building – the teeming, fragile-seeming extemporized structure implies none of the objective bedrock conveyed by classical concrete visuals, rather a further impression of communication in

⁴¹ John Furnival, ‘John Furnival’, in Bob Cobbing, ed., *Gloup and Woup* (Gillingham: Arc, 1974), n.pag.

⁴² John Furnival, interview with the author, 15 May 2012.

⁴³ Furnival, interview.

⁴⁴ John Furnival, *The Fall of the Tower of Babel* ([Woodchester], Openings, 1963); reprod. [dated 1964] in Emmett Williams, ed., *Anthology of Concrete Poetry* (New York: Something Else, 1967), n.pag.

⁴⁵ Furnival, interview.

⁴⁶ John Furnival, ‘John Furnival’, in *Between Poetry and Painting* (London: William Kempner, 1965), 41.

⁴⁷ John Furnival, ‘John Furnival’ [*Gloup and Woup*], n.pag.

⁴⁸ Furnival, interview.

⁴⁹ Furnival, ‘John Furnival’ [*Between Poetry and Painting*], 41.

dissolution. The overlaying of text across certain sections creates half-shapes suggestive of mushroom clouds, contextualising this impression with a Cold-War emblem of Armageddon.

The second instalment, generally referred to as *The Tower of Pisa* (1964), is composed from a wider range of linguistic sources (See Figure 5). Indeed, the skittish reader-instructions placed in niches at the tower's top and base – 'ORSTART/ HERE/ AND/ WORK/ UPWARDS/ OR OROR/ OR OROR/ OR OROR/ OROR' – suggest that, unlike its predecessor, it is partly an open-field poem, through which individual narrative routes can be plotted. Like many of the 'Babel' murals, it features text collaged from existing sources, placing Furnival, as Solt noted, amongst those concrete poets 'with distinctive typographical styles [...] who can "perform" the texts of other poets to great advantage'.⁵⁰ Sources here include Joyce – the arches at the base are crammed with passages from *Finnegans Wake* – and Finlay's poem 'Archie, the Lyrical Lamplighter', whose lines occupy the fourth layer. Perhaps more suggestive than these 'performances' are ziggurat-like arrangements of the five vowels – based on similar arrangements of the six Greek vowels, a recurring motif in Furnival's work – and graphically-arranged charms and hexes from pre-Christian cultures, notably the 'abracadabra' triangle. This suggests an interest in the notion of linguistic units surpassing mediation to assume magically efficacious powers perhaps bound up with their visual-physical forms. The link to concrete poetry is clear, especially in the context of the dedications to Finlay, Houédard and the Noigandres inscribed elsewhere. Of course, the babelic pile-up of graphic forms, and the obvious visual analogy of the leaning tower – perhaps consciously throwaway in a pop sense – counterbalance those ideals with impressions of skewed and disrupted perspective.

Several further instalments in the *Babel* series appeared, all expressing a sardonic sense of both the power and ineptitude of language. Furnival's evident scepticism, like Morgan's and Finlay's, regarding notions of universally coherent linguistic forms, and the idea of language as a functional object – both of which were expressed in analogies between language and architecture – might seem to indicate the obviousness of concrete poetry's theoretical blind-spots. But these poets' very engagement with the style typifies a wide-ranging sense of its cultural pertinence in the post-war decades – in North and South America, Asia, all over Europe – which cannot be overlooked, reflecting its capacity to express a wide range of contemporary social, political and aesthetic paradigms: from a post-war European emphasis on rebuilding international relations through simplified forms of communication to the new national purposiveness in Latin American culture expressed through the appropriation of avant-garde styles from the imperial West; to McLuhanite impressions of an impending 'electric' age wherein different communicative grammars would be 'simultaneously' or 'spatially' processed; to the unravelling of medium boundaries in intermedia art as a counter-cultural revolt against socially mediated psychology; to the constructive impulses of post-war British town planning, wherein 'concrete' stood for a fleeting spirit of social optimism. It is this feedback with its own epoch, despite its evident indebtedness to earlier literary and artistic styles, which makes concrete poetry worthy of the renewed critical attention it is finally receiving.

⁵⁰ Solt, 'A World Look at Concrete Poetry', 64.

Acknowledgements

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