A Basis of Concrete Poetry

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FAMILIAR shapes in familiar surroundings are invisible. We do not usually *see* words, we *read* them, which is to say we look through them at their significance, their contents. Concrete poetry is first of all a revolt against this transparency of the word—as is all poetry. I hardly need to quote "A poem should not mean but be" and all the similar statements. But there is a difference. While poetry in general uses the material aspects of the word as functional in the "poetic information" process in poems *about* whatever subject ("The sound must seem an echo to the sense"), concrete poetry makes the sound and shape of words its explicit field of investigation. Concrete poetry is *about* words. Further, it stresses the visual side which is neglected even in the 'sound and sense' awareness of ordinary poetry (as well as in the oral bias of most linguists).

This does not mean that concrete poets want to divorce the physical aspects of the word from its meaning—which would be a most difficult thing to do. Words are not colors or lines: their semantic dimension is an integral part of them. In order to destroy meaning you would also have to destroy the word as a physical object: you would have to atomize it into letters, fragments—or go to a language you do not understand. To judge by the name "Noigandres," which the Brazilians Augusto and Haroldo de Campos and Décio Pignatari chose for their group, they seemed to intend exactly that. The name is taken from Pound's "Canto XX" where the old Provençal scholar Lévy says:

> "Noigandres! NOIgandres!
> "You know for seex mon's of my life
> "Effery night when I go to bett, I say to myself:
> "Noigandres, eh, *noi*gandres,
> "Now what the DEFFIL can that mean!"

But the name is more polemical than the Noigandres manifesto, which makes very clear that these poets intend to work consciously with all three dimensions of the word, with its "verbivocovisual" nature.[1] What they are against is not meaning but representation. Lest this seem a gratuitous difference let me quote Quine's example of the analogous difference between *meaning* and *naming*:

> The phrase "Evening Star" names a certain large physical object of spherical form, which is hurtling through space some scores of millions of miles from here. The phrase "Morning Star" names the same thing, as was probably first established by some observant Babylonian. But the two phrases cannot be regarded as having the same meaning; otherwise that Babylonian could have dispensed with his observations and contented himself with reflecting on the meanings of his words.[2]

Concrete poets using either of these phrases would be interested in the meaning (plus sound plus shape) of the words, but not in the "large physical object" referred to ("named"). Their intention is anti-mimetic. Gomringer calls each of his "constellations" "a reality in itself, not a poem *about*."[3] It is a structure which explores elements of language itself rather than one which uses language to explore something else. The parallel to the non-representational painters like Mondrian and Kandinsky is explicit. Structure is contents: "structure-contents," says the Noigandres "Pilot Plan."[4] This is not, Mary Ellen Solt to the contrary, a reversible statement.[5] It is the clear opposite of the Romantic notion of organic form where content is structure, i.e., where content determines the structure, the form. With the concrete poets it is the structure which determines the content. The emphasis is formalist rather than expressive.

If the real concrete text only represents itself and is identical with what it shows, we can immediately rule out shaped

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1 Augusto de Campos, Décio Pignatari, Haroldo de Campos, "Pilot Plan for Concrete Poetry," in *Concrete Poetry*, ed. Mary Ellen Solt, special issue of *Artes Hispanicas*, 1, No. 3/4 (1968), 72.

2 Willard Van Orman Quine, *From a Logical Point of View* (New York: Harper, 1961), p. 9.

3 Eugen Gomringer, *Worte sind schatten* (Hamburg: Rowohlt, 1969), p. 281. Emphasis mine.

4 Solt, *op. cit.*, p. 72.

5 *Ibid.*, p. 13.

poems which illustrate a content, e.g., George Herbert's "Easter Wings" or Apollinaire's "calligrammes." Let us also, for the moment, rule out those works which go below the word unit, which become visual works using language elements.

Within these limits, the most obvious feature of concrete poetry is reduction. A few words at a time. Maybe just one. Our reading habits tend to construct contents even out of fragmentary texts. Therefore the concrete poet reduces his material to a point where even the inattentive reader is forced to pay attention to the word as word, as a meaning and a "body." Siegfried Schmidt has pointed out this function of reduction,[6] which is much more plausible than Gomringer's explanation that language in general is becoming simpler in the service of fast communication.[7] To put it in more linguistic terms: the reduction functions as a foregrounding. It says: this is a word (in the singular), much as the convention of the line which ends before the margin says: this is a poem.

Since concrete poetry investigates language elements, it seems natural to turn to linguistics for a method of interpretation and analysis. Roman Jakobson has defined the poetic function in terms of the two basic linguistic operations, selection and combination. He has defined it specifically as taking equivalence in the axis of selection and projecting it into the axis of combination.[8] If we look at concrete poems in terms of this definition, we find that as long as there is more than one word there is certainly equivalence in the axis of selection. The words will be chosen from the same semantic field or share phonemes. There is nothing unusual about selecting the words "wind wave bow star" (Ian Hamilton Finlay) for a poem, or "guerra terra serra" (Carlo Belloli). It is in the axis of combination that we must look for the difference.

Here I would like to draw attention to Mary Ellen Solt's reading of Creeley's "Le Fou," wherein she isolates the repeated keywords and shows them to be something like a concrete poem—while being fully aware that this is only one element of the poem in counterpoint with "the too-slow movement of the old grammar and syntax."[9] It is tempting to think of a concrete poem at the core of every traditional poem, to think

6 *Ästhetische Prozesse* (Cologne: Kiepenheuer & Witsch, 1971), p. 93.
7 Gomringer, *op. cit.*, p. 277.
8 Roman Jakobson, "Linguistics and Poetics," in *Style in Language*, ed. T. A. Sebeok (Cambridge, Mass.: M.I.T. Press, 1960), pp. 358 ff.
9 Solt, *op. cit.*, p. 49.

of their relation as one of building up or dismantling. But it is inexact. For the sequences I quoted or which we might isolate from a traditional poem are not concrete poems, but only their potential material. So we are still where we were at the end of the last paragraph, with the finding that both kinds of poems tend to have chosen a certain number of words (or key words) which are in a relation of equivalence, usually semantic or phonetic.

In ordinary poetry, these words are imbedded in sentences as well as in a structure of poetic conventions—and in such a way that it stresses their equivalence. This is what makes for unity. Samuel R. Levin has shown that this way tends to be a coupling of the "natural" equivalences (semantic or phonetic) with linguistic or conventional equivalences, i.e., the same position in the sentence or the same position in the line (or with regard to metre, rhyme, etc., though with rhyme, this is rather tautological).[10]

In concrete poetry, both conventions and sentence are replaced by spatial arrangement. I will not try to classify the varieties of spatial articulation (Franz Mon has made steps toward this)[11] but instead look at a few examples for couplings analogous to the ones Levin talks about.

wind
wind

wave
wave

bough
bow

star
star

In the original of this poem by Ian Hamilton Finlay the word "bough" is green, all others blue.[12] As I have said, the blue words (wind wave bow star) are part of one semantic field. The spacing in one column reinforces the unity of field while

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[10] *Linguistic Structures in Poetry* (The Hague: Mouton, 1969).
[11] *Texte über Texte* (Neuwied: Luchterhand, 1970), esp. pp. 44–47.
[12] *The Blue and the Brown Poems* (New York: Jargon, 1968).

the equidistant pairs seem to indicate equal importance of the elements. The repetition (wind wind, wave wave) seems to point to a slow identification of the elements of the field, one at a time. But when we get to the point of divergence bough/bow, the identical sound is coupled with a pairing which demands identity of the words on the model of the preceding pairs. The different color underlines the semantic distance of the different spelling, distance both from its "twin" and from the whole field. A tree intrudes into our seascape. On the level of reference, the bough is above the perceiver and therefore leads naturally to noticing the star. Stephen Bann transfers the image of the tree to stars as the foliage of the mast.[13] Further, the combination of "bough" and the one man-made object in the text, "bow," might make us think about the closeness of man to trees in contrast to wind, wave, star. But the core of the poem is the linguistic tension of different meanings for identical sound; and it is evident that the effect is indeed due to a coupling of semantic/phonetic groupings with equivalent position on the page, notably the pairing of identical words.

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beba    coca cola
babe         cola
beba    coca
babe    cola caco
caco
cola

        cloaca
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drink   coca cola
drool        glue
drink   coca(ine)
drool   glue shard
shard
glue

        cesspool
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13 *Ibid.*

In Décio Pignatari's "beba coca cola" the words are not semantically related, but phonetically.[14] Again, we have columns, with a wider space between "beba" and "coca cola" than between the two words of the product name. Even though the three words are set up in three separate columns, evidently to be treated separately, their relation is not equal. The product is set off against the imperative to the potential consumer. The second line introduces Pignatari's main procedure: transposition. The syllables "be" and "ba" are switched around and change "drink" into "drool." The two are claimed to be the same thing through their position in the column and the identity of their letters. The same method turns coke into "shard" (bits of broken bottles for future archeologists? or figurative shards of an already dead, or at least doomed, civilization?) and finally "cloaca." The first new words had been unpleasant and viscous ("drool" and "glue"). Now the viscosity is openly identified as excremental. There is no mistaking the message of this anti-advertisement, the identities postulated through position in columns and through identity of letters which need only to be switched around (or not even that: a secondary procedure of simply isolating "coca" and "cola" sets free their meanings as Portuguese words). But there is one more switch: of columns. Right before the cesspool punchline "caco" and "cola" appear in the "beba" column negating the spatial separation that seemed to separate the product from the consumer. The sides are interchangeable; those who drink are no better than those who manipulate them into drinking. The two sides are but different transpositions of one pattern: socially as well as linguistically. And this last point is made by coupling transposition inside the word with transposition in the spatial arrangement.

A single-word poem, such as the following one by Gerhard Rühm, would seem to go beyond the possibilities Jakobson and Levin thought of:[15]

```
leib leib leib leib
leib leib leib leib
leib leib leib leib
leib leib leib leib
leib leib leib leib
leib leib leib leib
leib leib leib leib
leib leib   leibleib
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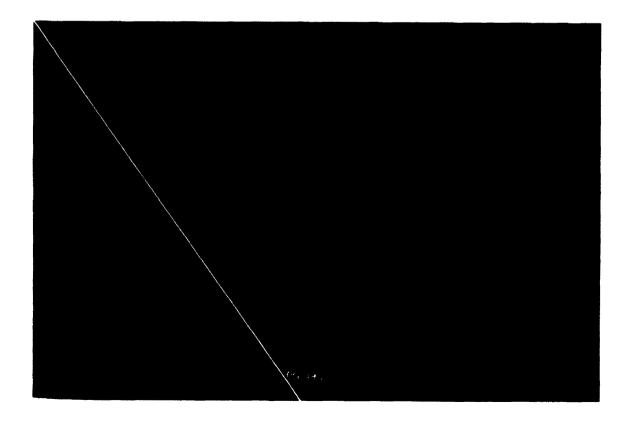
14 Solt, *op. cit.*, p. 108, fig. 15. Translation by Maria José de Queiroz and M. E. Solt.
15 *Gesammelte Gedichte und visuelle Texte* (Hamburg: Rowohlt, 1970), p. 227.

Reading the reiterated word "leib" sets free another: "bleib." In case we do not trust the reading gesture the last running together, "leibleib," makes clear that the second word is indeed wanted. Here, the axis of combination generates rather than just underlines a series with close phonetic similarity and whose semantic tension (the near paradox of the transitory body and the idea of remaining, lasting) brings up a host of possible associations. First there is the idiomatic connection in "bleib mir vom Leib" (don't bug me). Then we might take it as an injunction to stay on the level of the body, addressed to either man or to the poem; after all, that is the intention of the concrete poem. We could read it as addressed to the body, an anti-death-wish: remain, my body. The repetition would go with this, making it a magic charm which by extending the duration of the word would lengthen the duration of the body. If we consider that the word "bleib" is actually the product of the word "leib" repeated and think of the geometric, unorganic shape of the poem, we might say it is about the conservation of matter: body remains though its state will change.

Rühm has done another more strictly one-word poem with the word "bleiben."[16] Here the poem is made entirely through

positioning. The diagonal which comes sliding down from the upper left corner introduces an element of movement into the even black rectangle. Thus the spatial arrangement puts the word "bleiben" in tension with its conceptual opposite and the visual aspect creates semantic complexity. We could again construct readings, like coming to rest after movement, a wish for stability, stability as a result of running down, etc.

In all these cases a spatial arrangement couples with, or even generates, equivalences on the level of sound or meaning. It must be added that all these examples use semantically rich words and use them evocatively, much as traditional poetry does, though with a different syntax. It is therefore not very surprising that it is possible to apply (with some adjustment) a method derived from traditional poetry. Renate Beyer makes a good case against the claim of radical innovation by pointing out such "poetical," evocative uses of language, as well as many techniques which depend on a traditional understanding of language and poetic genres (parodies, line structure, punchlines, structures like Solt's "Moon Shot Sonnet," etc.).[17] Not that this invalidates concrete poetry, as she seems to think. All it does is show that the manifestos are overstated (which is hardly surprising).

But Jakobson's axiom is general enough in its formulation that it is not limited to instances of what Levin calls the "natural" equivalences of words. Take this poem by Ernst Jandl:[18]

```
                    e
                   ee
                  eee
        ooooooooooööööoooooooo
        oooooooooöööööoooooooo
        ooooooooööööööoooooooo
        oooooooöööööööoooooooo
        ooooooööööööööoooooooo
        oooooöööööööööoooooooo
        ooooöööööööööööoooooooo
        oooöööööööööööoooooooo
        ooööööööööööööoooooooo
        oöööööööööööööoooooooo
        eöööööööööööööoooooooo
        eeöööööööööööööoooooooo
        eeeeeeeeeeeeeeceeee
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16 *Ibid.*, p. 270.

17 "Innovation oder traditioneller Rekurs?" *Text und Kritik,* No. 30 (April 1971), pp. 23–33.

18 *Sprechblasen* (Neuwied: Luchterhand, 1968), p. 95.

This visual genesis of the German "ö" through a meeting of e's and o's couples with the fact that the "ö" is articulated phonetically between the German "o" and "e" and that the same sound is sometimes spelled "oe." There are no emotional associations conjured up, only linguistic fact. Yet the visual arrangement of these vowels definitely underlines the nature of their preexisting phonetic and conventional (spelling rule) closeness.

One last example, by Claus Bremer, for whom selection is often determined by what can be shown on the page:[19]

rendering the legible illegible

rendering the illegible

rendeflegible

rendegible

We can no longer really speak of equivalences within the axis of selection or of combination. We rather have a total equivalence of the two axes themselves: the visual arrangement shows or does what the sentence says. Such isomorphism is an extreme case of the effect of coupling equivalences, namely unity.
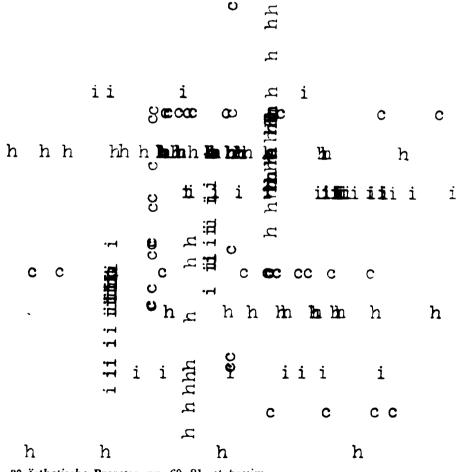
Now lack of unity would hardly seem a danger in poems which work with so few words at a time, which brings us to the question of complexity and to my concluding question: what is the advantage of such a spatial syntax? The advantage is precisely that its complexity is potential. It needs the reader to activate it. The absence of context and the non-linear combination leave words in their full lexical meaning, with none of its possibilities ruled out. The reader is free to construct his own contexts. He is given a stimulus rather than a closed product: he has to become a co-producer of the work. This is even more the case when a strewing effect lets one take the words in many different sequences.

A great number of interpretations is possible. But beyond a purely linguistic one there is no way of claiming that one reading is right to the exclusion of all others. In this perspectivism

[19] *Anthology of Concrete Poetry*, ed. Emmet Williams (New York: Something Else Press, 1967) . This is a translation by the editor of the German original which begins "lesbares in unlesbares übersetzen."

Siegfried Schmidt sees the social importance of concrete poetry, its political and revolutionary potential: it presents a text (and thereby "reality") not as something given, fixed, to be accepted, but as a structure that can be seen differently from different perspectives and can therefore be changed.[20] Schmidt calls it Musil's *Möglichkeitssinn* put into practice. Whether we share this revolutionary optimism or not, concrete poetry fulfils in an exemplary way the function of all art, namely to save us from ossifying in habits, in clichés, which would eventually keep us from seeing and feeling.

We also have to keep in mind that I isolated out of the spectrum of concrete poetry only the segment where the word dominates and where the spatial syntax is rather simple and subordinate. There is much work to be done to develop a vocabulary for the interaction of the word and a visual syntax for its letters, as in Gappmayer's "ich poem":[21]

20 *Ästhetische Prozesse*, pp. 60, 91, *et passim.*
21 *Anthology of Concrete Poetry.*

Likewise, we must explore those visual structures which treat the word as a shape or use the shape of letters, word fragments, and which seem to explore the borderline between shape and sign, the possibility and beginnings of sign, meaning, communication.