

Task 14: A concrete poem

The final weekly task invites you to be creative again. In the 1950s, in several countries including Brazil, there was a surge of interest in poetry that was primarily visual – it became known as ‘concrete poetry’, and it was adopted by an international *avant garde*, many of whom were influenced by Brazilians such as Augusto and Haroldo de Campos. On moodle, there is one of several manifestos written by members of the movement. In the 1960s, the Brazilians corresponded with the Scottish poets, Ian Hamilton Finlay and Edwin Morgan.

An example of a concrete poem by Ian Hamilton Finlay is given below:



Of this poem, the American poet, Mary Ellen Solt, commented:

The sea and all that goes with it--boats, sailors, sailing, fish, waves, rocks, nets and stars, among which one may be found to steer by--is Finlay's favorite subject. In "wave rock" he captures it in blue sandblasted glass designed to be placed where the light can shine through it as it does through the wave destroying itself on the rock. Light enters the poem as part of its meaning. Notice also that the letters of the words "wave" and "rock" are typographically related to the form of wave and rock and that the word "wave" moves towards the word "rock." This is accomplished by appeal to our normal impulse to read from left to right. There is no dislocation in the placement of the letters: all of the "w's," "a's," "v's" and "e's" are placed directly on top of each other. Space created by left-out letters is used to convey the textural quality of the wave. But the poem actually happens in the crashing of the two words together. For although it is obvious that the rock is destroying the wave, it is equally true that the energy within the wave is exerting a more subtly destructive influence upon the stable-seeming rock so that the letters are thrown out of line without destroying their rock-like solidity through loss of control of space, and we are forced to read to the left. The crash is caused by the conflict between the normal movement of the reading eye and the stronger abnormal impulse to read in

the opposite direction. The movement here suggests that there is kineticism in the reading process that is accessible to the poet skillful enough to use it beyond the more obvious kineticism in the process of reading and turning successive pages. "wave-rock" looks like an expressionist poem, but its organization is basically constructivist. Its permutations are spatial: either the letter is removed from its space or its position is shifted slightly, so slightly and subtly in the case of "rock" that after we notice the crashing together of the words, we notice the instability of "o" in "rock" which seems to float between the two directional reading impulses.

"Wave-rock" is a great visual poem. It not only happens in the eye but also makes poetry from the movements of the eye. The eye is so actively engaged that we forget the ear even though we can speak the words if we consciously remind ourselves to do so.

From *Concrete Poetry: A World View* (1968, Indiana University Press)

<http://www.ubu.com/papers/solt/scotland.html>

But not everyone liked concrete poetry: the poet, Hugh MacDiarmid wrote in 1965 to a friend, complaining about Edwin Morgan's association with the concretistas:

I will not agree to work of mine appearing in any anthology or periodical that uses rubbish of that sort, which I regard as an utter debasement of standards but also as a very serious matter involving the very identity of poetry. These spatial arrangements of isolated letters and geometrically placed phrases, etc. has nothing with poetry – no more than mud pies can be called a form of architecture.

So, your task is to be iconoclastic. Try composing a concrete poem. And write a brief commentary on it, like Mary Solt's, explaining its aesthetics.