

NOTES ON CONCRETE POETRY

Mike Doyle

THE COSMIC CHEF GLEE & Perloo Memorial Society under the direction of Captain Poetry presents . . . an evening of Concrete . . . courtesy . . . Oberon Cement Works. "A book of poems is a damned serious affair," said Wallace Stevens. A most serious element of Concrete poetry is the verbivocovisual play. Highly experimental (still in genesis, like the human race itself) the medium involves much "playing around," but is not thereby to be lightly dismissed. Group action and manifestoes appear alongside much apparently anarchic activity. The two are related without inconsistency. As Ernst Jandl says: "There must be an infinite number of methods of writing experimental poems, but I think the most successful methods are those which can only be used once, for then the result is a poem identical with the method in which it was made."

Form-content identification is a leading characteristic of Concrete, which itself seems, in part at least, a product of that merging or fusion of art forms which has been occurring throughout most of the twentieth century. Concrete shares with other art forms a concentration on its own methods and techniques, in its case deriving from the recognition

of the narrow range of merely linear reading. Its antecedents have been traced back to Mallarmé, or even to picture-writing, the formation of the alphabet (obvious source of bill bissett's "Evolution of Letters Chart," *Cosmic Chef*, p. 8). Those intimately involved in the movement, however, are quite clear that it is a new departure, with its own character and originality. Dom Sylvester Houédard, a leading English Concretist, specifies: "true poesia concreta got viably geboren in mental symbiosis at ulm meeting in 1955" (*TLS*, August 6, 1964, p. 696). This date is widely accepted, so the movement runs parallel in time with the activity of the Black Mountain poets, Beat poetry and "found" poetry, sharing with all a sense of the poem as thing-in-itself rather than representation or copy.

But what is "true poesia concreta"? Rich in antecedents in both literature and art, the movement had separate, widespread beginnings in the late 'forties and early 'fifties (Belloli in Italy, Gorringer — whom Emmett Williams calls "the acknowledged father of Concrete poetry" — in Switzerland, Fahlström in Sweden, Diter Rot in Iceland, the Darmstadt Circle — which included poets of various nationalities, and — perhaps most

haps more complex. For one thing, while they reject direct message communication as an art activity, they nevertheless insist on the nature of language as communication by words. In general, the Brazilian sense of "poesia concreta" is a step nearer the ideogrammic structure of, say, Chinese. As implied in Fenellosa's *The Chinese Written Character as a Medium for Poetry*, the ideogram is ultimately and necessarily causal and connective, even though the connective element is greatly diminished. Yet the Brazilians have also moved further away from language than has Gomringer. Two poems in *The Cosmic Chef*, from David Aylward's *Typescapes* (p. 34, p. 71) have little obvious connection with Concrete poetry as language. (I find p. 34 one of the book's most satisfying.) In the mid-'sixties, Pignatari and a fellow-Brazilian, Luiz Angelo Pinto, proposed a theory for the Semiotic poem. They broadened the concept of language to include the way in which any set of signs is used by any individual in any (single) circumstance, thus in a sense returning to the poet's archetypal function as both "namer" and "maker". Aylward's pieces are like this, but are limited to visual/sensory response and do not require lexical keys like those provided by Pignatari, Pinto and the British Concretists, Ian Hamilton Finlay and John Furnival. Semiotic poems may be experienced both as examples of "nova linguagem" and as immediate visual presences.

Aylward's work, together with bp Nichol's (the hand on p. 37, p. 57, p. 66), affords little or no opportunity to "read", but should be allowed to act related to the plastic poems of the Japanese Kitasono Katue (Pound's friend Kit Kat) and to Garnier's rejection of

the traditional structures of literature, his sense of cosmic space, his perception of words as concrete phenomena and of their "topography" (an approach akin to Gaston Bachelard's *The Poetics of Space*, to phenomenology, to Roland Barthes — a starting point for *The Cosmic Chef*, see p. 7 therein). Garnier, indeed, declares that the poem should not be "read," but should be allowed to act upon the perceiver, first as an entity and then discretely. Garnier insists on the importance of "surface" (Poundian "opacity"), proposing a mystique of the holiness of things-in-themselves.

From Gomringer's recognition of the "play" element in Concrete, to Garnier's sense of its cosmic responsibilities, the medium is widely embracing. Even the most expressionist Concrete poetry is anti-rhetorical, a common aim being to discard worn-out language, forms, grammar, syntax. Visual rather than mental, Concrete is yet centrally concerned with word-structure, thought-structure. Thus Gomringer is able to emphasize order and organization as important aspects of it, to perceive it in terms of architecture. Max Bense sees the contrast between literary and Concrete as being one between sequence and design, and declares Concrete's primary constructing principle regarding words to be the "perception of their togetherness". This "togetherness" is the meaning of a Concrete poem; content is form. Thus John Riddell's comic strip "Pope Leo" (*The Cosmic Chef*, pp. 13-17) is satisfyingly dexterous, but seems at best impure as an example of the medium.

In some respects *The Cosmic Chef* is confusing. Its visual quality cannot match Solt or Stephen Bann, but it has the immediacy of typewriter and manu-

script. Then again, some of the items included do not seem to be Concrete poems (though, obviously, I have not succeeded in providing a single clear definition of "the Concrete poem". This does not seem to me possible at present). Nelson Ball, to take one example, is a fine sensitive poet, but I would not have seen his work as Concrete, nor would I see Seymour Mayne's "Pompass" (p. 48), which is like a fugitive piece of Henri Michaux, as having an obvious place in *The Cosmic Chef*. Both, however, are more than welcome.

Real "live entertainment" is here to a degree not often found nowadays in more conventional anthologies. As sheer "play" my fancy is tickled by bp Nichol's "Sematic chaos equals moral anarchy" (p. 36), and by the visual jokes of bill bissett and J. R. Colombo (p. 50, p. 57). A typical "cement works," the book is a fascinating amalgam of personal anarchies (handwriting, private jokes, Riddell's "tragedy") and standardized constructions, typographically based.

bill bissett's *S TH STORY I TO* is a rich book, full of *om*-like, anti-thought chants ("o lord of all creation it is only to live."). He asks:

is it such
a big deal to be
ready for the blossom
of the future changes seed
now

and exhorts: "do more, from th heart out." But he is not hortatory, preaching, or asking for critical response. He offers a surface, not food for thought, the clear sound of a bell, a declaration: "th ancient lord of the universe asks you to be." bissett's Zen-like poems reject penetration. He offers, too, Goeritz-like constructions, some of which (for example,

the page involving "v" and "x") are foci of meditation. Attractive and substantial, the book is given its coherence by an underlying mysticism.

Maxine Gadd's *Hochelaga* "grabs" me, but has almost nothing to do with Concrete. She has skill, intensity, and a curious, still, formal, sense:

he
so cold and clean, his eye so grey and clear
his skin so cool and pale, a little smile
my dove hop down, o
nothing ask, only you lie there
and let me, let me

Bertrand Lachance makes interesting shape poems, particularly "in the concrete forest," "only child flashing thru" and a vulture-like airplane. His more "literary" work such as "the whores of granville st" tends to be rather tedious. Can't think of anything, right now, I want to say about Ken West's work. During his short life, d.a. levy was an energetic, prolific, sensitive poet. He deserves someone's troubling to gather all his many small press publications together and summing up for him, and us. From what I have seen of it, blewointment press produces a higher proportion of good lively work than most, including the Concrete scene as a central part of its concerns.

That scene today is still not finally clear. Perhaps it will become so when the two lines of development, expressionist and constructionist, fuse together? Both lines share one healthy objective, the continuing task of purifying "the dialect of the tribe(s)". Even the expressionist Concrete poem serves to control, rather than to indulge, the emotions. Even though some so-called Concrete poems are anarchic (or perhaps just hopefully liberated) the medium, at core,

seems firmly based on rationality. In the face of a torrent of self-indulgent ego trips, its firm link with reason may make it durable, and of continuing value to our life.

¹ The books which prompted these notes are: *The Cosmic Chef: An Evening of Concrete*,

edited by bp Nichol (Ottawa: Oberon Press); bill bissett, *S Th Story I To*; Ken West, *Wire*; Maxine Gadd, *Hochelaga*; Bertrand Lachance, *Eyes Open*; d.a. levy, *Red Lady* (all Vancouver: blewointment press).

² Mike Weaver, "Concrete Poetry." *The Lugano Review*, Vol. I, no. 5-6, 1966, p. 100-125.

BIRTH OF THE BUTTERFLY

Robert Harlow

THESE NOTES are personal, set down with the hindsight not available to me during the dozen years I spent with the CBC in a job that allowed me some access both to the production and the executive sides of its operation. I must say, too, that I do not share Max Ferguson's romantic view of the Corporation (*Here's Max*), nor am I able, for temperamental reasons, to share Frank Peers' classical and scholarly approach (*The Politics of Canadian Broadcasting*). A beginning, then, might be to restate what most of those who read this already believe: the CBC was a good idea. The proposition that all public radio and TV frequencies should be used for profit and the perpetuation of private points of view is not a tolerable one. So, even at a time (now) when the CBC has become a \$160,000,000 giant, in which rather inexpensive brains jockey for petty power and ways to keep it, there is still a real case for its continuance, though not, perhaps, in its present form.

Another beginning, and this closer to the subject (the CBC's influence on

Canadian letters) might be this: a country already blessed with good writers may use any new medium well (witness Germany, France, Italy, England, where the best authors participate with distinction in all forms of expression, and where the media use their works with a real sense of contributing to a cultural heritage). Good writers will enlarge a country's consciousness and widen its horizon of expression even under adverse conditions. The CBC, however, was created at a time when there were virtually no useable literary talents in the country to contribute to the new public medium. This situation was made more complex (and the situation is still with us today) by the fact that most of the audience that potentially good writers might have had was reading, watching, listening to the products of other talents from other cultures. Remember too that the CBC did not grow from fertile ground but was created by legislation to satisfy an intellectual need. The Corporation's service to Canadian letters was born in triple jeopardy: no writers, minimal audience and small local experience.