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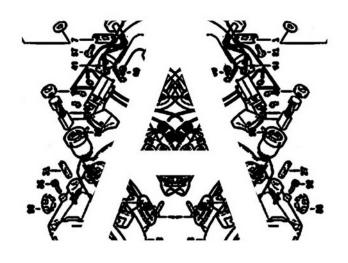
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Relations of Time and Space in Concrete Poetry

Kyle Larsen

Concrete poetry presents its readers with a unique and often confounding situation. In addition to using language or parts of language in non-traditional ways, concrete poetry also uses elements that are more commonly associated with visual art. However, concrete poetry is not visual art. It is still concerned, primarily, with the use of language, generally to communicate some meaning to the reader in a way that is undeniably linguistic in nature. Concrete poetry is therefore an especially unique genre that draws upon and incorporates many different concepts from a variety of disciplines in order to fill in the gaps left when traditional grammar and syntax are eschewed.

One particularly useful cross-disciplinary element employed in concrete poetry is the use of space. The poetry of Emmett Williams, Seiichi Nikuni, and Ilse and Pierre Garnier in particular, make use of spatial relationships in their poetry. Space can be employed in place of traditional grammar and syntax to convey meaning in concrete poetry, particularly when the spatial position of one element is taken into consideration with other elements of the poem. Another element that may arise from these spatial relationships is a temporal aspect that all poetry employs, but which becomes uniquely meaningful in the context of the concrete poetry of the twentieth century. Without these relationships concrete poems may appear as crude distortions of words on a page, with no significant sense

or meaning to communicate. Therefore, the temporal/spatial relationships between poetic elements become necessary tools which the reader needs in order to fully understand the linguistically driven meaning behind many concrete poems.

Traditional poetry does make use of time and space, but in ways that are subordinated to traditional semantic and grammatical elements.[1] A sonnet, for example, uses a rigid set of rules in its creation. The requisite fourteen lines ensure that the sonnet is constrained to a limited space on the page, and the strict use of iambic pentameter creates a rhythmic *tempo* (a *temporal* relation) within the lines themselves. Even when spoken aloud, as this is the origin of all lyric poetry, the sonnet takes up a limited and fixed amount of time and space. With the possible exception of the turn, none of these rules of form informs the meaning of the poem itself. Time and space are empty vessels, subordinated to language and rules of form.

However, for a poet in the twentieth century, these traditional forms begin to lose their relevance. As the nineteenth century drew to a close, scientists felt they were coming "close to a complete description of the universe" (Hawking 4). Theories of Relativity and the science of the twentieth century would all but shatter this possibility. Pierre Garnier would take this fundamental shift in human knowledge to heart: "now we are waves sprouting in the cosmos. How can we expect to remain wrapped up in the atmosphere of the sentence?" (qtd. in Solt, "France" n.pag.). For Garnier, traditional modes of language and linguistic expression were as constricting as traditional modes of science and thinking. Humankind could no longer be

afforded the privilege of believing it was solitary in a finite universe. Garnier believed that poetry must begin to reflect humankind's awareness of itself "as a cosmic being," and would coin a new term, *Spatialisme*, to describe this new, spatially oriented, poetic movement (*Ibid.*).

Concrete poetry, then, is "the creation of verbal artefacts which exploit the possibilities, not only of sound, sense and rhythm…but also of space" (Draper n.pag.). As concrete poetry can take many forms, this may refer to the space on a page, or the physical space of a three-dimensional creation. What distinguishes concrete poetry from visual art forms which make use of space is that concrete poetry's "purpose is to communicate through words," which something that a painting or sculpture does not do (*Ibid.*). Because concrete poetry does not always adhere to traditional forms of grammar or syntax, "the spatial elements of the poem must do the work of traditional syntax and articulate the meaning that lies dormant in words" of the poem (*Ibid.*). It is this sort of spatial analysis that allows the reader to glean greater linguistic meaning from concrete poetry, and elevates it from mere "whimsy" or "ingenious doodling" to become a true linguistic genre (*Ibid.*).

As Mary Ellen Solt points out, typography in concrete poetry becomes a matter of careful consideration on the part of the poet, not something left to editors and publishers, as this is one way that the poet can prescribe the use of space in their poetry (Solt, "Typography" n.pag.). In Emmett Williams' poem "Like Attracts Like," the words are initially separated by spaces much greater than typical typography would prescribe (Williams

307). These spaces decrease line by line as the two "likes" get closer and closer. The attraction of the two "likes" is a spatial literalization of the phrase "like attracts like," which is the whole basis of the poem. However, Williams also begins to play with a temporal element as well as a spatial one. The attraction of the two "likes" takes place over the course of thirteen lines; Williams does this by choice, as there are no rules of form to follow. The effect is much more gradual than if the poem were only three lines long. Therefore, the length of the poem plays with time, much as its typographic width plays with space. The overall meaning of the poem is that like attracts like gradually, over a significant period of time.

Williams' experimentation with space and time is only the beginning. The use of lines to show time is quite traditional, and the spatial relationship of the variations of the phrase "like attracts like" leaves a specific impression of the poem. Other poets, like Pierre Garnier, would argue that concrete poetry should be perceived and therefore "the experience of the poem will not be the same for all who look at it" (qtd. in Solt, "France" n.pag.). There should be little attempt by the poet to lead the reader to a specific understanding of a work. The experimentation and creation of temporal and spatial relationships should "involve some loss of semantic control by the poet, but a corresponding increase of opportunity for the reader" resulting in the reader being responsible for co-creating the meaning of the poem (Draper n.pag).

Seiichi Nikuni's poem "Rain" relinquishes a bit more control to the reader of the poem. The majority of the poem ap-

pears as a block of tiny, black dots, patterned in groups of four, but not all identical as some are lighter or broader (Nikuni 308). The bottom of the pattern features a symbol encompassing one of the groups of four dots, and an explanation following the poem proves the symbol with the four dots to be the Japanese character for rain. This explanation of the symbol allows the reader to make several interpretations based on the spatial relationship between the dots and the completed symbol. The patterning of the dots, along with the symbol, shows that there is potential for more completed symbols. The meaning can then be taken as the one completed symbol representing the first drop of rain, with the promise of more to come. Conversely, the position of the completed symbol at the bottom of the block could indicate a temporal relationship. Readers of English would read left to right, starting from the top of the page, placing the symbol on the *last* "line" of the poem. The meaning could then be that this is the *last* drop of rain after a rain storm. However, traditional Japanese reads from top to bottom, starting from the right, in which case the meaning could change for someone whose mother tongue is Japanese. Whatever the case, the spatial, and possibly temporal, relationships in the poem allow for the creation of meaning that is more complex and individualised than the simple meaning of the word "rain."

The poem "Extension 2: Soleil," by Ilse and Pierre Garnier represents a use of both space and time that is much more progressive and modern. Prior to the twentieth century, time was seen to be fixed and constant. However, the emergence of Relativity Theories early in the twentieth century proved that time,

like space, was relative—even mutable—not fixed or constant (Hawking 35). Pierre Garnier believed that, "in poetry we become aware of the universe – for it to be based upon the enumeration of feet is an absurdity" (qtd. in Solt, "France" n.pag.). Therefore, in order for poetry to reflect a universe that is relative and expansive, the poetry itself must also become more relative and expansive. The "fixing" of time through feet and meter is no longer justifiable.

"Extension 2: Soleil" is written in lines that overlap, and do not always align perpendicular to the page margins (Garnier and Garnier 309). Indeed, the text of the poem follows no constant margin, refusing to align in a standard block format. The poem is composed of the letters that make up the word *soleil*, the French word for "sun." Sometimes lowercase, sometimes capitalized, and in varying combinations and orders, the letters often overlap, creating a sense of depth and solidity. Where the letters are heavily overlapped, for example at top of the poem, the lack of space creates an impression of darkness and depth, while areas of less overlap and more space seem lighter. Capitalized letters tend to subordinate their lower case counterparts, creating another means of indicating depth. The nonlinear nature of the lines creates darker closed spaces where line-ends overlap, and lighter open spaces where they fan out. The letters do not dictate that the reader should read left to right, and a top-down reading is only supported by the presence of the poem's title at the top of the page.

The poem lacks all sense of rhythm or timing traditionally provided by meter, or at least by spaces between words, or

breaks between stanzas; there is nothing to indicate to the reader where to pause, or how quickly or slowly to read. Indeed, there are no spaces between the letters in each line, and the lines are all connected, by some degree of overlap, in one block of text extending down the page. The poem extends in a haphazard, relative fashion with no apparent pattern, ending only as the page does. But for the end of the page the poem seems as though it could continue indefinitely, expanding in an ununiform manner through space and time.

Two lines of the letter "m," one capitalized, one lower case, confound a simple reading of the poem. What could the m's be part of? Certainly not *soleil*. Perhaps *montange*, *moullie*, *mouettes*, or *mer*? These are only words in French that start with the letter "m." What possibilities might there be if words that simply contain the letter "m" are used? The only constraint on possibility lies in the reader's imagination, and ability to reconcile the conceivable options into a coherent interpretation of the poem. As the poem's typographic nature plays with space, creating light and dark areas, the "m's" could be the sea (*mer*) at the horizon as the sun sets creating reflections on the water. The relative light and dark areas could then represent the variances in lighter and darker colors one would expect to see in such an instance. If the overlapping and connecting of lines play with time, rather than space, the letters could represent how long an observer of a scene lingers on certain objects. An example could again be a sunset, or even sun rise, where the observer lingers primarily on the sun rising or setting with a short interruption by a gull (*mouette*) flying by. In this instance, the poem's

experimentation with space on the page, and the indistinct nature of time in the poem, allow a reader to almost compile a narrative as part of the poem's meaning. These two possibilities are nowhere near exhaustive of the wealth "of opportunity for the reader" to create meaning while reading this poem (Draper n.pag.).

It is clear, however, that the traditional ways in which space and time have been utilized in poetry are all but gone in the case of this work. "Extension 2: Soleil" represents a type of poetry that exists in a world where Relativity Theories have redefined humankind's place in the universe. Traditional poetry, which employs strict rules of form and meter to bind time and space within the poem into fixed and constant quantities, is not capable of fully realizing and explaining the new realities of the twentieth century. It is through the experimentation with, and exploitation of, these elements that poets like Emmett Williams, Seiichi Nikuni, and Ilse and Pierre Garnier are able to create a new kind of poetry for a new century.

The primary mode of concrete poetry is still language, in its various forms. The goal of concrete poetry is still to communicate ideas through language, even when it subverts or rejects the traditional grammar and uses of language. This means that readers of concrete poetry require a different set of tools in order to read and understand it. Spatial relationships are one possible way for readers to do this, as the spatial arrangement and layout of concrete poems becomes a chief concern of poets, and can be used in place of traditional grammar and syntax

to help create meaning. Similarly, the lack of traditional lines and meter makes time within the poems more flexible, and mutable, resulting in further opportunity for the reader to create meaning from the poem. More than just opportunities, however, these new ways of thinking about poetry are necessary for readers to interpret and understand this highly irregular genre of writing.
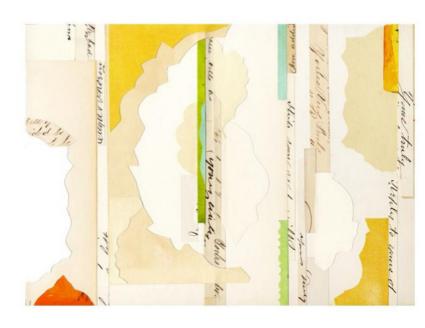
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[1] R. P. Draper cites George Herbert's "Easter Wings" as an example of a visual poem which is not concrete as it "is created through time and sound rather than through space and the seen image" (n.pag.). A sense of time is created because the unique metrics of each line allow the "shape" of the poem to be perceived even without a visual cue. There is no spatial relationship in this poem; it is the timing (the feet and metrics) of the lines that create the effect. That the poem is visually sideways is not critical to understanding its meaning. I have expanded the idea of time in poetry to sonnets, as an example of traditional poetics, because the fixed feet and metrics of the sonnet regulate the tempo (time) of the poem exactly. True concrete poetry will deal with time much differently, as will be shown.

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like        attracts        like
like        attracts        like
  like      attracts       like
    like    attracts      like
      like  attracts    like
        like attracts like
          like attracts like
            likeattractslike
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