

# Transcreating Concrete Poetry

**By John Corbett**

Concrete poetry offers particular challenges to literary translators, or perhaps it is more accurate to say that concrete poetry accentuates challenges that are shared to a lesser degree with other types of literary translation. While often considered a late modernist phenomenon, concrete poetry has a long pedigree, stretching back to ancient Greece and China. 'Syrinx' or 'Pan Pipes', accredited to Theocritus, is one of a number of enigmatic Greek pattern poems that might be considered the foundation of the genre in the West. A series of ever-shorter, riddling lines, all of which begin with the letter 'o', 'Syrinx' is a mind-numbingly opaque series of riddles to which the answer is always the god, Pan. The poem, shaped as a set of Pan pipes, with the 'o's' standing for the mouthpieces, offers a visual clue to the riddles' solution. In the East, China also has a tradition of pattern poems, usually occasional or petitionary in nature, shaped as circles, tortoises, or pagodas that have no direct bearing on the content. The primary challenge to translators, evidently, is how to combine meaning and puzzling formal elements, a challenge that is heightened when the formal elements of the source text (which may include the material on which the source text is written, printed, or even embroidered) are integral to a meaning that is nevertheless evasive.

The Chinese writing system, if not the Eastern tradition of pattern poetry, influenced the modernist explosion of 'concrete' poetry that emerged as a global phenomenon from the 1950s to the 1970s. Three Brazilian poets, Augusto and Haroldo de Campos along with Décio Pignatari, took inspiration from Ezra Pound and Ernest Fenollosa's idea of the Chinese ideogram as a visual repository of meaning. Whereas, in the second decade of the 1900s, the ideogram inspired Pound to write poetry composed of a series of images that the reader had to connect intuitively, by the early 1950s his Brazilian successors had reconceptualised the entire poem as an ideogram, breaking the tradition of composing in poetic lines, and using the visual space of the page as a canvas for written expression. At the same time as the Brazilians were experimenting with the poem as ideogram, the Swiss-Bolivian poet Eugen Gomringer was writing what he called 'constellations' in a similar style, and, independently, in 1953, the

Swedish artist, Öyvind Fahlström, published the earliest of many manifestos of concrete poetry. Relabelled and theorised, concrete poetry began to grow as an international movement. What role, then, did translation play in this global flow of literary and political ideas, and their attendant formal techniques?

In the early 1960s, concrete poetry began to impact on Scottish writing. Its first great exponent was Ian Hamilton Finlay, whose work was transformed by his exposure to the avant garde literary forms. While not a translator in the traditional sense, some of Hamilton Finlay's work can be considered an 'intersemiotic' translation of elements of the Western literary and artistic traditions. The most obvious, perhaps, is one of his earlier works entitled 'Homage to Malevich' (1966), in which the Russian painter's notorious 'Black Square' (1915) is reworked as a textual rectangle composed of the letters 'blackblock'. The poem can be considered a translation into English language typography of a Russian suprematist painting. Its rectangular shape recalls the strong formal features of the Chinese pagoda and circular poems, and the generic shift from one art form to another parallels the shift from music to visual poetry represented by 'Syrinx'. 'Homage to Malevich' is echoed in a later concrete poem, 'White' by the Taiwanese poet Chen Li, in which the Chinese ideogram for 'white' (白) is repeated in a long rectangle down the page, fading to white as it descends, to give an effect the poet himself likens to a Rothko painting.

While Hamilton Finlay was always interested in the visual arts and their interface with language, Edwin Morgan's engagement with concrete poetry tended to focus more on the purely verbal, and so his translational strategies are perhaps more conventional than those of Hamilton Finlay. In the early 1960s, Morgan struck up a regular correspondence with Augusto and Haroldo de Campos, translating some of their concrete poetry for North American publication, most prominently in Emmett Williams' seminal *Anthology of Concrete Poetry* (1967). Morgan's correspondence extended to other avant garde poets including Ernst Jandl, Mary Ellen Solt, Dom Sylvester, Houédard and John Furnival. Like Morgan, the de Campos brothers and Pignatari were all active translators, stimulated in part by the Brazilian modernists' call, dating from Oswald de Andrade's *Manifesto Antropófago* (1928), to 'cannibalise' world poetry by devouring it. Out of the formal difficulty of translating poetry whose visual form was essential to its meaning came a number of re-castings of the translator's art as 'non-translation', 'transfictionalisation', and, perhaps most enduringly, 'transcreation'. While he did

not, to my knowledge at least, formally adopt the last term for his literary translations, Morgan's practice suggests an affinity with the idea that the translation of a source text should mirror its formal as much as and perhaps at times more than its semantic characteristics. This practice is evident in Morgan's translation of Augusto's 'uma vez' ('once upon a time') as 'once was'. The original poem, in a series of terse two-word phrases that career across and down the page in a sequence that can be read in alternative ways, seems to tell an elliptical narrative of a shooting near a beach. Morgan keeps the two-word phrases and the sound patterning ('uma bala' or 'a bullet' becomes 'a whizz' in Morgan's text to maintain the hissing sibilants of the original). The correspondence between Morgan and Haroldo de Campos, in Glasgow University Library Special Collections, testifies to a close but critical relationship in Morgan's thoughtful translation of Haroldo's longer, more demanding poem of 1965, 'Servidão de Passagem' ('Right of Way'), as 'Transient Servitude'. This poem is a bitter portrait of a society lapsing into military dictatorship, a period of servitude beginning in 1964; it is the translator rather than the author who - perhaps wishfully - suggests that this period of servitude will be transient.

If Morgan, then, was important in diffusing the work of the de Campos brothers in the anglophone world, a selection of his original poetry was later refashioned into Portuguese in Virna Teixeira's slim collection of Morgan's poems, *Na Estação Central* (2006). Two poems in this collection are experimental. One, the popular 'A Canção Do Monstro Do Lago Ness,' is a version of Morgan's sound poem and (encouraged by the poet himself), Teixeira gives Nessie's song a Portuguese lilt: 'blm plm/blm plm/blm plm/blr,' becomes 'blu plb/blu plb/ blu plb/blb.' In the other, the 'Siesta of a Hungarian Snake,' she translates only the title and keeps the body of the poem, 's sz sz SZ sz SZ sz ZS zs ZS zs zs z', untouched.

Both strategies serve as a concise illustration of transcreation as an imaginative response to the challenges of literary translation. In her version of 'The Loch Ness Monster's Song,' Teixeira does not so much translate as reconstitute Morgan's original in a new sound system. In the second case, she allows the apparently universal language of onomatopoeic reptilian snoring to rest undisturbed, and simply changes the title, as one would translate the caption of a painting in a gallery. Her responses continue a long line of transcreative responses to literary texts: Morgan's melding of sound and sense in his versions of the de Campos brothers and, in turn, their own transgressive cannibalisation of world literature.

This is not a trivial game. Through such encounters the formal literary resources of different languages and cultures are jolted, defamiliarised, reimagined and enriched.

## References

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