

How to Read a Concrete Poem

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Nearly everything you read about a poem, about all poetry, encourages a particular expectation. An expectation of short words creating an artistic representation in the mind. A translation from word to emotional experience. The genre of poetry called “concrete” has always been an oddball to the general reader.

Most people would think that the important thing about a poem is that it resonates within the mind. That even when you read, sitting quietly, you still feel the timber of the words. You feel the vowel sounds shift up and down, the consonants soft then hard, then soft. Poems are often meant to be read, and heard. But even when you see one, sitting quietly, and read the words on the page, you still feel the voice in your mind. You still feel those vibrations. Concrete poems feel unreadable at first. They seem to separate you from the feelings of the words. They make you contemplate the poem in full silence. This can be striking, it can be odd, it can be unnerving, it can even be uncomfortable.

One reason is because as adults, we have been conditioned to accept mystical meanings underlying everything. Nothing can be taken at face value, nothing can be simply viewed, read, taken in, and felt for what it is. As adults we look for the “work,” in both the artistic as well as the professional wrestling sense, that there is underlying meaning that we, as readers, are practically obliged to discover in order to get to the “real” meaning of the art. When you first see concrete poems, you don't know what to make of them necessarily. You are required to confront it with much of the same way you would as a child. The connection is thus made not with your learning, but with your experience.

All poems rely on the use of space. Consider the meaning of Whitman's free verse, with the long, long lines. The point where a poet decides a line break is necessary affects how you read a poem, and how that poem impacts you. Concrete poems also rely on the use of space, but use the space to communicate as much or more than written language itself.

Rather than going away from the point by putting so much work into creating a definition, or in going through the history and development of this genre, we should just look at a few poems. We should hink about them, teach ourselves what is poetic about them, and how to appreciate them. That is, to learn to read them and appreciate them in the same way you learned to read and appreciate the other methods of poetry.

The first time you experience concrete poetry can also be uncomfortable because your previous experience with literature is different. Your experience with poems, like all literature, requires you start at A, and read through, to the end, B. But the concrete poem is silent and motionless. It does not move in time, does not go from A to B. The meaning of a concrete poem is no longer tethered to its linear movement through time, from the beginning of you viewing, to the end.

Because it's free, its meaning is free. We grasp to find the meaning of a concrete poem, unlike when we read other poems, or novels, or short stories, or plays. We are left to confront the poem without an intermediary, without a grounding in something that would give us some kind of reference point. It's not unlike the story of being taught to drive a stick shift by suddenly being made to drive in the middle of traffic. With no experience, no reference, no ability, we get frustrated, worried everyone can see what we are not understanding, and frightened at the prospect of looking like a fool for not grasping what

feels like everyone else is understanding so effortlessly. It is as if portions of literature give us a relative sense of place and being that are necessary to understanding the whole. And concrete poetry removes that, and suddenly that the references you used before are unnecessary. This is a new way to approach reading.

Not only in literature, but in movies, music, acting; the linear requirements determine the narrative of the work. Narratives, these stories, rely on the passage of time, feeling time unfold as we move through it along the story. In the concrete poem, however, there is no unfolding time. The entirety of the story is presented instantaneously.

While this can be confusing to readers, this singular presentation frees you to truly see your connection with a concrete poem. You can examine the entire poem at will, in contexts you determine. You can look at the whole poem. You can look in at a small portion, examine its details, and even separate its context from the rest of the poem. And that allows you to look at the concrete poem in ways that you cannot do with other poems. Does looking at the smaller portion give you an idea of the whole? Does the whole give you ideas different from the individual sections?

tops
ops
ps
s
sp
spi
spin
spi
sp
s
ps
ops
tops
ops
ps
s
sp
spi
spin
spi
sp
s
ps
ops
tops

This is R. L. Draper's *top spin*.

We can describe it in the basest terms: the **s** forms the axis around which two four-letter words, **tops** and **spin**, are based. But we are not reading poetry to understand its construction as if it were a quickly-jotted description of the broken mailbox post we take to the hardware store to get help fixing.

Look at how the poem lays on the page, and how it feels like it moves. Even if I had not described the *s* as the axis, the poem feels like it moves around the middle. Is that what was intended? Maybe the *s* functions as the middle where both words act like a button you press that pops out the other side, expanding and contracting.

Earlier I stated that the blank space does as much work in the communication as the words themselves in a concrete poem. This poem is a good example of that. The space makes it look like the words move, separately, together, spinning. And the words themselves? Do they mean as much? The poem is called *top spin*. The poet has mentioned the reference to the spinning of the ball in playing tennis. But as you look at the poem, ask yourself – does that portion matter? It certainly adds a level of understanding to connect us to what the poet has in mind as they wrote this. But is it necessary to get to the meaning? In fact, do we even know what the words have to mean? It helps, admittedly, if you speak English to take this poem in, but it certainly isn't required. The apparent motion created is the meaning as much as, if not more than, the words themselves.

Further, there are other things to think about as you take the poem in. Does it have to be vertical? Would this work as well, poetically, if it were horizontal? Maybe knowing that the poem refers to tennis changed what the axis meant to you – maybe it's a tennis net, and we are looking down. The motion created is in two ways the motion of the ball. Both back and forth across the axis of the court as well as the spinning motion of the ball itself, around its own axis.

Here I have recreated the poem in a 'sideways' version. Do you see it differently? Does it mean something different? Maybe it's easier to envision the poet's meaning. Maybe it's harder.

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t          t          t          t          t
oo        ooo       ooo       ooo       oo
ppp      ppppp     ppppp     ppppp     ppp
ssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssss
  ppppp  ppppp  ppppp  ppppp  ppppp
   iii   iii   iii   iii   iii
    n    n    n    n    n

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This poem is by the Brazilian poet Ferreira Gullar. This poem, *verde*, is in Portuguese, but maybe we can see something in it without knowing the translation.

verde verde verde
verde verde verde
verde verde verde
verde verde verde erva

What can we say about it, not knowing what the poet intends? At first, we can take stock of everything literally. The word “verde” appears in a squared shape twelve times, with the word “erva” at the bottom on the right. It almost looks as if it is squeezed out, or spurting out, or maybe trailing off like the leaking remnants of a barrel. In any case, “erva” breaks the strict, efficient form made by the orderly structure of the 3x4 organization of the repeated word “verde.” At the very least we understand the term “concrete” when applied to works such as this. It does look structural, architectural, like a monolithic building with indiscriminate apartments or offices where hours and hours of bureaucratic management occur inside.

The sounds of these words seem similar as well. At least to our reading of them in English. (If you know Portuguese you know the pronunciation is similar.) The sounds of “verde” and “erva” are so similar, it's as if you are simply restating it with the same sounds. They roll around in your head like vibrations.

The combination of the large swath, or building, or barrel, or however you are feeling the words, with the small last little word on the lower right, evokes a scale, a power difference, a comparison. Verde is everywhere, ever-present, maybe even overpowering and ominous. Erva is small, possibly hiding, possibly spurting out, maybe even the shadow. The relationship between the two words is what is most important here, at least while we do not know the meanings of these words, and the relationship they might have. That requires no knowledge of the language, and the concrete poem is able to communicate beyond the meanings we attach to language.

green green green

green green green

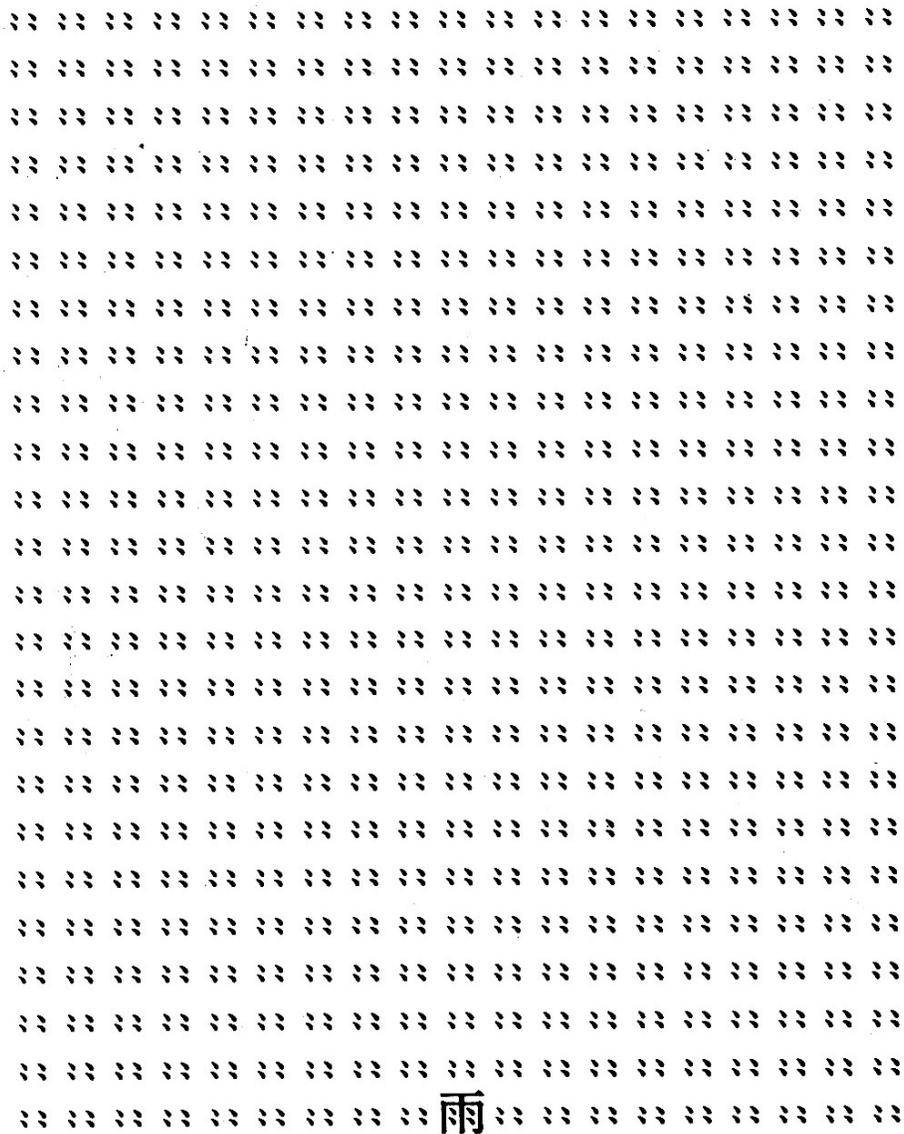
green green green

green green green grass

The meaning of the words are quite similar, as you can see in this translation from Leyland Guyer. Here you can see the field of “green” and the bit of “grass” in the lower corner. The relative sounds are kept, the *gr* still resonates in our mind as it did when we were feeling Portuguese sounds internally. Before we had the feeling of the words. The relationship of power between the two different words. And here, we see “grass” growing out of the large field of “green” and while maybe we have more understanding, it is not fundamentally different.

Maybe we take on an ecological perspective we didn't feel before, maybe we see grass trying to grow out of the green, to reclaim its position. Maybe we see all the heavily manicured lawns of suburbs and acres of golf courses, manicured to fervently to a crisp green that the natural portion, the very grass itself, has become practically valueless and immaterial. Maybe we see the grass growing against a painted tennis court, reclaiming what once was its own. Are there other similar relationships you can consider? Possibly the relationship of money to the environment, or even seeing the green as a lawn and the grass as... well, as a metaphor for people not seeing the forest for the trees. No matter how we see the action of the grass, we still see it as we did before, the small “erva/grass” against the large “verde/green.”

While we took Gullar's *verde* as an 'unreadable' poem, maybe we should consider works in foreign languages that we do not readily recognize as words that carry a particular meaning. While the last was, to non Portuguese-speaking minds, not readable, we were still viewing the words, and able to define what the words were, even if we couldn't automatically translate them.



This poem, *Ame*, by Seiichi Neiikuni, is a large, dwarfing field of drops, seemingly falling down onto the character at the bottom. You might describe it as a small building. It is easy to see the way the empty space means as much as the characters here.

Consider what you see as you view this poem. If I tell you that *Ame* translates as Rain, would you view the poem differently? Probably not. In fact, you probably saw the rain, falling, constant, but soft. A steady drove of the water drops cascading as far as is visible.

It is also easy to see how we see rain without being told of the rain, without reading the rain. And there are a few other important points about concrete poetry in general to see here.

Other forms of literature, including poems, as well as novels, plays, short stories, and so forth, require a linear reading. You must read starting at A, the beginning, and continue through, to B, the end. But the spatial component of concrete poetry removes that requirement. You view the poem as a whole, taking it in. You can view small parts of it, consider the small portion as a part of the whole, then view another part of it. This is how you might view a painting. Engaging with the visual as a whole, then looking

closer and experiencing the small parts all over. Every so often you might back up and once more engage with the whole, then back into the smaller parts.

You read concrete poems differently. While two people will read (read in the sense of take in the poem, either by sight or sound or touch) a poem such as Maya Angelou's *Phenomenal Woman* in physically, sequentially, the same way, starting with the first line, continuing through each stanza, then ending with the last, two people will not necessarily read a poem such as *Ame* the same.

Let's look back at *Ame*, and consider the character at the bottom.

雨=rain

Notice now that the character does have the appearance of some kind of structure, standing against the rain. But the kanji is also the name for the rain itself. And further, we see now that the dots of rain were not simply stray marks or punctuation, but rather all of the drops are portions of that same word, the four slashes in the center of the kanji. Not only would you read the character, but you were contending with (presumably unreadable) portions of that same character across the entire poem. What were drops are merely incomplete words, much in the way raindrops are incomplete streams or rivers.

But just as the meaning of incompleteness is made more obvious through an explanation, looking back, that understanding was already there when we first viewed the poem. We already understood the incompleteness of the raindrops, the incompleteness of the characters, was a shadowy expression of something more obvious. More obvious, but not more comprehensible. Sometimes you need incomplete elements to express something more clearly.

One further advantage of reading concrete poetry without a context of language is because of how our brains work. When we learn to process symbols, when we learn to read, it then becomes impossible, cognitively, for our brain to see the words and not read them, not process them for their meaning.



One of the things we never consider in literature, thanks to the availability of translations, is that the author is thinking and creating in a language. However, with concrete poetry, we can see where the words of the language fail. Not simply a failure in translation, where the meaning of a word does not match an acceptable representation of another language. I mean the failure of a writer's language – or indeed any language - to have the word or words necessary to convey. Or possibly there are ideas which defy encapsulation in words.

This is a portion of the poem that makes up Steve McCaffrey's book Carnival. Looking at it we see letters of different sizes and fonts and colors. There are numbers as well. As we look around the piece, we find least one identifiable English word – but does it mean what we think it means? We look at this and wonder if the random arrangement of letters means something when we can identify a word like “moon” hiding within. Above it, slightly harder to read by its fractured state, is the word “balloon.” Is it an accident? Is it merely a pleasing arrangement of stamped and typewritten characters? Is it a false cognate into some other language that the poet intends?

Look at the two different types of stamped Cs, for instance. They connect both to each other, which is not a common dual letter in English. But as they connect they connect in ways that defy linework, and in some cases create a pattern. Other Cs connect to stamped Es in a similar way – similar in the sense that the two letters connect to each other in every way possible except as you would find two letters together in a word. What would that mean to you? The letters, the basic blocks of written communication, connected in every way possible. Every way except as they are intended to be used.

Then there is the word moon. Written with a typewriter, while the stamped letters of different styles dominate. Almost hidden both in size and in style from the majority of the poem. The lower case o below, bubbling, floating. Until we follow it higher, higher, to see the word balloon. But balloon is not written as it should. It is almost breaking away from itself. A single balloon cannot do that. A group of them could, but this is a single word. And, even more amazingly, is above the moon, as if the balloon could not only float beyond, into space, but become more than a single balloon.

Or, possibly, these words are random occurrences, and they simply looked pleasing to the poet. Or the words mean something else, and we are pushing our English language onto them.

Encountering these kinds of concrete poems, when they might create the dismissive feeling of “anyone could do that,” ask yourself further, was this poem worth creating? If not, then what is the minimum necessary for a poem? Was that what was finally communicated?

Here you could also ask if maybe the colors and fonts and stamping work are meant to add to the work, or possibly distract you from the meaning, hidden in the words moon and balloon. Or possibly the existence of recognizable words is distracting you from examining what does not quickly fit together, focusing only on what is immediately recognizable to you.

That is quite a lot to generate from a poem that at first appearances has no words.

In the end, though, the concrete poem is made up of letters, and possibly words, and in some cases other shapes. The letters confound us. We are at once given objects that stand as symbols of reading, and at the same time, are given these symbols in a way that prevents us from reading them. Or at least reading them as we understand reading. These letters and words thus become something else. Recognizable, but transmuted. And we have to fight everything we have learned and devise a new way to take in and process the symbols. This is true even when the poems are written in a language we do not know. We can recognize the character strokes in Japanese, or Portuguese, or German, or what have you. We know they are symbols of language. But we also immediately see that these symbols are not used in the way that language as we know it demands. In this way it is not unlike discovering a lost language. Stumbling upon great Olmec calendars, seeing that the symbols are writing, representing a language. Finding the inscriptions in a Pharaoh's tomb. Knowing that the placement of the markings, the representations of letters and words and concepts, but what? And how are they to be read?

That is the conflict inherent in the concrete poem. The shared idea of language, from poet to reader, the ideas transmitted, is left untranslated. The reader can not rely on an explanation, they are required to come up with their own ideas of how these symbols communicate.

One thing all of these concrete poems so far have had in common is that they were created with a machine in between the poet and the output. Typewriter, computer, rubber stamp, They can also be drawn.



This untitled poem from Judith Copithorne appears deep, intense, and burning. If we concentrate and work at it enough, words come into view through the lines, the points, the flames. Some are positive space words, some are negative space words. Meet Feed Hearts Flame is in the bottom right corner. Bright Sun Shine in the bottom left. Spring Blooms next to that. Working, looking deeply, zooming in on one section, then out to the whole, we see sentences, fragments of ideas that do not coalesce.

When you look at this poem, ask yourself: Do you think it is important that this poet works in pen and ink as opposed to a typewriter (this poem is from 1968)? Or does the method matter? Is it important that it requires substantial effort to read the words? What is the difference here between the words used in positive space and the words in negative space? Are the meanings of the words and phrases related to their shapes, even if it is superficial? Do the styles of the words affect how you read the sentences? Can you still appreciate the emphasis of the poem without 'deciphering' the words?

Something else to consider, is how you approached this poem, at this point in the essay. After viewing the other poems, most of which required no linear thought, did you still approach this poem with the mindset of A to B reading?

All of these poems are not the beginning or the end of what you can find in a concrete poem. As you discover more, it may seem like the difference between concrete poetry and graphic design, or art, doesn't exist. In some ways, that is true. But there is a poetic meaning behind all of these works. It is not lightly taken that someone would describe a piece as concrete poetry, because concrete poetry is a very niche field. Much of the method of viewing a piece of art, the non-linear viewing of the piece, the

interaction between the portion and the whole, is similar to a painting. But the emotional connection through language, even if that language is fractured, is very much a part of the method of poetry.

As you find new pieces, you can ask yourself similar questions about the piece. What was the poet's intent? What were they unable to say with the language they have that made it easier to say in this manner? Are they using letters as I understand them, or are they creating new alphabets?

With a start, you can take it upon yourself to go further, both into the poems and into the connection with the poets.