Sum:
Word Maps

Gil McElroy
2015

a   b   c   d   e   f   g   h   i   j   k   l   m
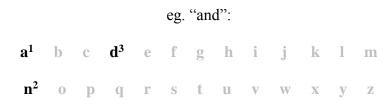
n   o   p   q   r   s   t   u   v   w   x   y   z

Word Maps: The Closed System (Original Introduction, 1983)

Consider an arbitrary (and imaginary) structure composed of two parallel "lines" running horizontally, each "line" containing thirteen possible letters spaced at equidistant intervals.

ie.

a   b   c   d   e   f   g   h   i   j   k   l   m

n   o   p   q   r   s   t   u   v   w   x   y   z

Consider integers (attached to the component letters of a word in an exponential manner, eg. a^2) denoting letter-position within the *pre-mapped word* (any plurality therefore indicating letter-frequency, eg. $a^{2,4}$).

Consider the word, mapped onto the aforementioned structure according to how its component letters occur within each "line".

eg. "and":

a^1 b   c d^3 e   f   g   h   i   j   k   l   m

n^2 o   p   q   r   s   t   u   v   w   x   y   z

This is a "genotype"*

The word is stripped bare, denuded of its characteristic, environmentally-generated (sic) *"phenotype(s)"*, and the genotype exposed.*

Cleansed.

Examination of various genotypes reveals recurring patterns (it is important to keep in mind that this is only due to the arbitrary constraints of the mapping structure).

In each of the following Word Maps, a particular kind of genotype-pattern is moved through sets of mapping structures (for the sake of clarity), generating the various genotypes seen.

Phenotypes themselves are important only in ensuring that the genotypes are translatable.

---

* "Genotype" and "phenotype" are Biological (sic) terms denoting, respectively, the genetic constitution of an organism, and the characteristics manifested by that organism.

It is possible to have the same genotype (read: component letters and order) yet varying phenotypes (read: meanings, associations, etc.) owing to environmental influences.

a^2 b^3 c^1 d e f g h i j k l m

n o p q r s t u v w x y z

a b c^1 d^3 $e^{2,4}$ f g h i j k l m

n o p q r s t u v w x y z

a b c d^3 e^2 f^1 g h i j k l m

n o p q r s t u v w x y z

a b c d e f g^3 $h^{1,4}$ i^2 j k l m

n o p q r s t u v w x y z

a b c d e f g h i j k l m

n o p q r^1 s^3 t^4 u^2 v w x y z

a b c d e f g h i j k l m

n o p q r^2 s^4 $t^{1,5}$ u^3 v w x y z

a[3] b[1] c[4] d e f g h i j k[5] l[2] m

n o p q r s t u v w x y z

a b c d e f g h i j k l m

n o[3] p[4] q r s[1] t[2] u v w x y z

a[2] b[1] c d e f g h i j k l m

n[3] o p q r s t u v w x y z

a[2,4,6] b[1] c d e f g h i j k l m

n[3,5] o p q r s t u v w x y z

a b[3] c[1] d e f g h i j k l m

n o[2] p q r s t u v w x y z

a b c d e[2,3] f[4] g h i j k l m

n o p q r[1] s t u v w x y z

a b c d e f g[3] h[4] i[2] j k l m

n o p q r s t[1,5] u v w x y z

a³ b¹ c d e f g h i j k l m

n o² p q r s t u v w x y z

a b c d³ e² f g h i j k l m

n o p q r¹ s t u v w x y z

a b c d¹ e²,³ f g h i j k l m

n o p q r⁴ s t u v w x y z

a b c d⁴ e²,³ f g h i j k l m

n o p q r¹ s t u v w x y z

a **b**[1,3] c d e f g h i j k l m

n **o**[2] p q r s t u v w x y z

a[2] b c **d**[1,3] e f g h i j k l m

n o p q r s t u v w x y z

a b c **d**[1,3] e f g h **i**[2] j k l m

n o p q r s t u v w x y z

a b c d **e**[1,3] f g h i j k l m

n o p q r s t u **v**[2] w x y z

a b c d **e**[1,3] f g h i j k l m

n o p q r s t u v **w**[2] x y z

a b c d **e**[1,3] f g h i j k l m

n o p q r s t u v w x **y**[2] z

a b c d e f g h i j k l **m**[1,3]

n **o**[2] p q r s t u v w x y z

a b c d e f g h i j k l m

n **o**[2] **p**[1,3] q r s t u v w x y z

a b c d e f g h i j k l m

n o **p**[1,3] q r s t **u**[2] v w x y z

a b c d e f g h i j k l m

n **o**[2] p q r s **t**[1,3] u v w x y z

a b c d e f g h i j k l m

n o^2 p q r s t u v $w^{1,3}$ x y z

a^{2,4} b c d e f g h i j k^{1,5} l m

n o p q r s t u v w x y^3 z

a^{2,4} b c d^3 e f g h i j k l m^{1,5}

n o p q r s t u v w x y z

a^{2,4} b c d^3 e f g h i j k l m

n o p q r^{1,5} s t u v w x y z

a^5 b^3 c d e^2 f g h i j k l m

n o p q r^4 s t u v w x y z^1

a^6 b c d e^2 f g^4 h i j k l m^5

n o p q r s t u^3 v w x y z^1

a^6 b c d e f g h $i^{2,5}$ j k l m

$n^{3,4}$ o p q r s t u v w x y z^1

a^1 b c d e^4 f g^3 h i j k l^5 m

n^2 o p q r s t u v w x y z

a^1 b c d e^5 f g^3 h i j k l^4 m

n^2 o p q r s t u v w x y z

a b c d e^4 f g h i^2 j k l^3 m

n^5 o p q r s^1 t^6 u v w x y z

a b c d e^5 f g h i^2 j k l^1 m

n^6 o p q r s^3 t^4 u v w x y z

a^{12} b^{13} c^3 d e^{15} f g^9 h^{10} i^8 j k l^{14} m

n^2 o^4 p^5 q r^7 s t^{11} u^1 v w x y^6 z

After Words

I've a longstanding interest in visual poetry. As a visual artist, text has figured largely in many of my works on paper, in sculpture, and even as full-scale gallery installations. And as a curator, I had the wonderful opportunity to organize a touring exhibition of the visual poetry of the late bpNichol.

As a working poet, though, most of my visual poetry dates back to the late 1970s/early 1980s. It was there that *Word Maps* took shape. I'd been casting around for a way of "disorganizing" words as semantically meaningful units, conversely seeking some organization scheme that would allow me to do something visual without devolving into what I thought of as the decorative or ornamental. While I wasn't necessarily opposed to the aesthetic by any means (the words I chose to map, for instance, were most certainly the product of aesthetically based decision-making), so much visual poetry I had seen struck me as trite, especially by comparison with what visual artists – Lawrence Weiner, Gerald Ferguson, Jenny Holzer, even a piece by 'earth' artist Robert Smithson – were doing with language. It was far more sophisticated than the an awful lot of visual poetry I had seen by poets.

But it was still held hostage to meaning, and I wanted to get outside of that. So, for good or ill, I thought that systematization would be just the trick, and I embraced one of Modernism's great devices: the grid. I wanted to see words – the purely visual unit – differently, to strip away anything hinting of meaning, connotation, metaphor, what have you, and consider the pure artefact. Hence, *Word Maps*, visual units mapped onto an organizational grid that prevented meaning from adhering and so gave sight to something elemental, essential. In an introduction I wrote for the first (and only) appearance of *Word Maps* in Grain magazine (November 1983 issue,"Visual and Written Languages in Dialogue") and for an exhibition at AKA Gallery in Saskatoon, I pompously referred to a mapped word as a "genotype," borrowing from science, and the semantically meaningful 'worldly' unit as (logically) the "phenotype."

Sigh.

I believed in a lot of things when I was in my twenties. I completed a body of *Word Maps* and then all but abandoned the project (one mapped word did transfer over into my art work, becoming a painting). I moved on, but never entirely forgot this project, occasionally adding to it.

So this is a revisiting of work done over thirty years ago, a tying up of loose ends, if you will. Shifting from the typewriter of initial composition to the computer, I've moved away from the strict rigidity of the fixed typewritten grid to the slightly more fluid virtual grid that shifts and sways ever so slightly (itself an artefact of the word processing program) as I reconstruct – and in several instances, construct – the body of work. At first, I hated the artefactual looseness, that breach in formal, set structure, and that stalled me for awhile as I began to work around it. But I've come back to it; it's grown on me. I've come to regard the original typewriter grid of the piece's initial composition as rather "Newtonian": an absolute, fixed and immoveable, a set structure against which the proverbial world could be measured. It was also inert and inflexible, an unyielding structure that really rather began to annoy me.

Conversely, the "digital" grid of my word program came to seem "Einsteinian" by comparison: a relativistic creature, shunning the absolutes of fixity and yielding to the dynamic of the mapped word. Things shift, warp, and I came to rather like the consequent deformation.

Words can – and are – bent by the world.

Words should – and do – bend the world.

I'm not making an argument that there is absolutely anything groundbreaking in any of this – for there clearly is not. I'm merely presenting something akin to a final product. I'm unlikely to revisit ever this piece again. I wanted to put its affairs in order.

Gil McElroy is a poet, visual artist, curator and critic living in the village of Colborne. He's published four books of poetry and a non-fiction memoir with *Talonbooks*, and a book of writing on visual art for *Gaspereau Press*. His most recent chapbook is *The Doxologies* from above/ground press.