(De)Coding Beauty: a conversation/interview about concrete poetry with S. Cearley

Begin with the poems and interview at Queen Mob's Teahouse.

AHP: When did you become interested in concrete poetry? Is there a particular piece or concrete poet whose work influences or has influenced your own?

SC: The first time I encountered concrete poetry and it was called concrete poetry was a writing assignment in a high school writing class. We had a daily assignment and one day it was to create a concrete poem and it seemed so infantile. I don't think the teacher had any respect for concrete poetry but needed a day to fill. Even though I had MANY more opportunities to learn literature and poetry and the like in elementary through high school - more than schools anywhere else because of the University and the Press - concrete poetry never showed up in anything but children's books.

However, I have always been attracted to the hot color swirling practically illegible work of late 60s/early 70s rock show posters. They perfectly fit as examples of concrete poetry but are never called such. Sometimes they're just considered poster art or something but they, to me anyway, are amazing poetry.

Once I got to university, and started studying German literature in earnest, I discovered Ernst Jandl, and that is what made me truly aware. Concrete poetry before then had always been about making a specific shape. A tree, a dog, that kind of thing. Then in high school, on one of the visits Miller Williams mentioned something about poetry is the form where where you don't write on the page is as important as where you do write. It stuck with me but it wasn't meaningful until I saw Jandl.

The two poems of the Jandl ones we studied that struck me were "Schtzngrmm" and "lichtung". Especially lichtung, as I could so easily so immediately see how rooted it was in German, yet so easily translated to English, like a normal poem, but the flipping of space, the placement of the letters, it floored me. Schtzngrmm was more of a sound poem but the writing to mimic war both as sound and visually struck me.

After my undergraduate studies I lost my focus on poetry, worked on short stories both in the artificial intelligence field as part of my graduate studies as well as writing for men's magazines to help make rent and such. But mostly it was the deconstruction of language and philosophical papers that filled my mind in those years.

So Ernst Jandl showed me both what sound poetry and concrete poetry could be. It wasn't until after 2000 that I discovered the typewriter template art and such work that more closely resembles what I do. True uses of typography, of space and void to make a statement that transcends language but still fills with that swirling sense of a deep poetic sensibility.

AHP: "Swirling sense of deep poetic sensibility" is an inspiring way to render the aims of concrete poetry. In your Queen Mob's Teahouse interview, you wrote, "I really think there hasn't been enough exploration of shape and symbol and the word to understand what we mean when we write a concrete or other form of visual poem." You also wrote, "Poetry's first visual importance is that where you don't write on the page is as vital as where you do write."

Do you feel as if you are working through a process of trial and error when you are creating your concrete poetry? Trying to render poetic sensibility via a visual form? And how about the opposite, you've said that it matters that the words are visible and identifiable as symbols.
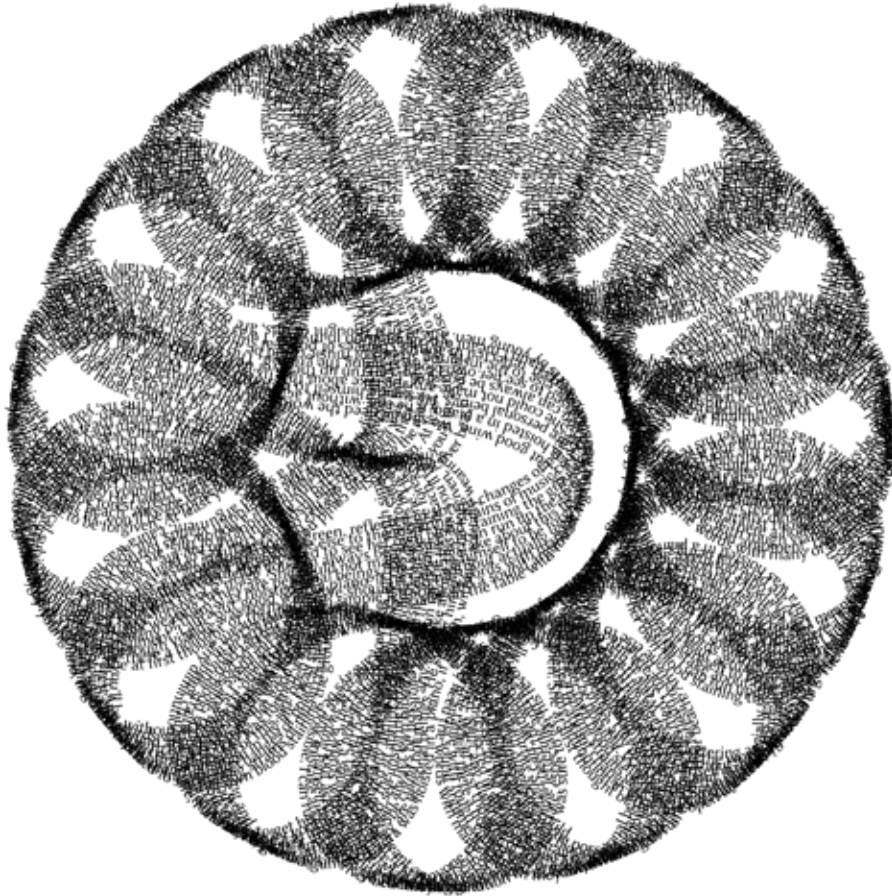
reflected in abrupt changes

Do you chuck out poems that don't succeed on both these fronts: as rendering visible words and communicating a poetic sensibility? How can concrete poets explore shape, symbol and the word more profoundly?

SC: I am always working in trial and error because part of what I do as a visual poet is in two parts: First, make the computer create something, and second, glitch it. Glitch art has really stimulated me. It feels something like gardening. I set up the garden, plants the seeds, then the computer grows the object and after that I cut it back, trim it, move it about. I make it better by reintroducing some of the humanity that the computer, by reason of being a computer, strips out. It may be a bit of a roundabout process and maybe to some people unnecessary, but it's my process, it's how I construct and deconstruct to come up with a final piece.

I put the pieces together to make a final poem. Poems aren't chucked but the component parts are eliminated and revised constantly. So the degree of visibility of the words depends on the words the computer and I have created as well as the form they take. There are a lot of individual stages in the process where I decide the degree of acceptable consistent legibility. Some poems are almost unidentifiable as having individual words, but the form makes them speak the meaning.

AHP: The rock show posters were psychedelic and colourful. A lot of concrete poetry has tended to be black and white. As have the poems of yours that I've seen. I can see a certain psychedelic influence, especially with the shapes of your poetry. Have you ever experimented with colour in your work or wanted to?

SC: I have tried a few times to introduce color but so far I'm unable to get the color to shift the way I want. Once or twice I have posted using color, most recently using the red/blue 3D method. The 3D work was really fun for me, especially in the need to use such a low-fi method of enjoying the 3D. I stopped doing 3D because getting the red/blue glasses turned out to be much harder than I expected. I keep trying and eventually hope to get

some color included that will be good enough for me to be happy with.

Another reason I use black and white is because I post full PDFs of some of these pieces and I like to pretend people are actually printing them out and enjoying them, which is easier done in black and white than color. Especially when I make larger pieces.

AHP: What influence, if any does visual art have on your concrete poetry? Do you ever try to replicate shapes or uses of space that you've seen in visual art?

SC: I don't try to replicate much of anything beyond plants, and that it because I've stumbled across mathematical ways to get plant shapes rendered. I don't try to represent other pieces, or get involved in the process of how others make visual art, though I have considered seeing what happens when I reduce photographs to lines and reverse engineer math to generate those lines then tweak it. Just another method of me glitching, I suppose. Rather than glitching my own work I distill someone else's then run it through the computer then glitch it. I haven't tried it, but it is something I think about when I see photos that border on the abstract.

Is this something you see in concrete and other visual poetry? There is erasure poetry, but beyond that, I'm not familiar with this kind of influence.

AHP: It's more a question of shapes and colour for me. I'm not directly influenced by visual art, it's just there in the shadows. Gary Barwin works in both black and white and colour. Sometimes he incorporates individual letters into photographs. I have played with Albrecht Dürer's engravings in my visual poetry. There are also visual poets who use collage and text, such as Camille Martin. Conversely, there's a wonderful Canadian visual artist named Michèle Provost who incorporates text into her art.
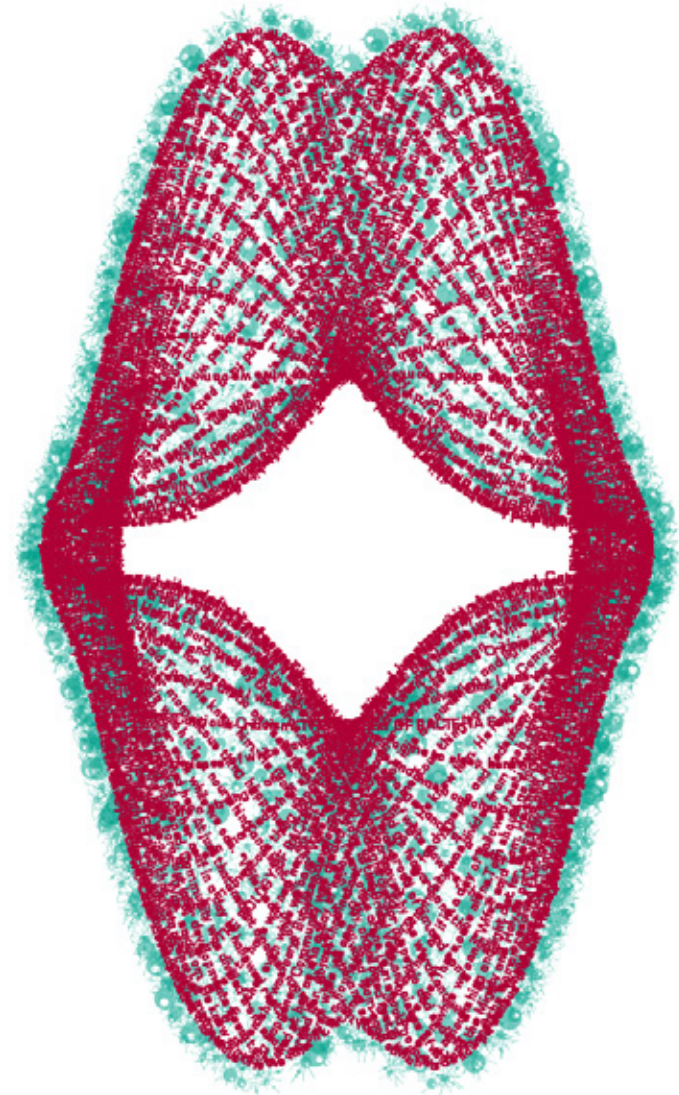
the biology of bacteria

I love the idea of glitch art. It's like the photographer who deliberately keeps a photo out of focus. There's something more interesting with the glitch, a kind of serendipity and whimsy. Although your process sounds quite systematic, there's a whimsy to your work, from the titles of the pieces to the twists and turns and shapes. Do you feel that whimsy is a factor in your work?

SC: Letters and related characters (punctuation!) have built-in meaning when you learn a language. Cognitively, once you learn how to read, you can't not read something when you see it. That symbol processing happens automatically. You've essentially re-wired your brain. So when you see an incomplete symbol (such as a fragment of a word) or a symbol that has no meaning to you yet (foreign language, dead language, pictograms), you get stuck. You don't have a programmed emotional reaction to the symbol processing, so you are forced to investigate it deeper. You have to figure out on your own if the communication is sad, or joyous, or even a simple accounting. You get to associate all new meaning to what it means to you. You're now able, in a way, to process language as abstract art, to process language as aesthetics rather than communication.

With all that said, yes whimsy is the basis of my poetry. It has to be fun otherwise why do it? It has to be a tweak of conventional norms to be this kind of poetry, so why wouldn't it be fun to do so? It's not just a jab at established poetics, but it is, it has to be, fun and playful. It is hard to come up with something good as a poem but it's still, over all, fun. It's laughter and smiles and splashing in puddles. Maybe when I edit the text of the poems I focus on a phrase that might be dour or sad or melancholy but overall the function is enjoyment. Every poem I make is for fun. I am lucky if someone else enjoys seeing a poem of mine as much as I enjoy creating it.

AHP: I think it's exciting when work can combine both some kind of rigour and whimsy. Have you seen the math vispo of Kazimier Mazślanka? There seems to be a lot of fascinating possibilities for exploration of the word / symbol connection via mathematics and computational programs. bpNichol worked with the Apple IIe to produce computer poems. There are some visual poets who work with animation programs. Your own work combining coding with text generates work that is unique and compelling. You've mentioned you've played around with 3D in your concrete poetry? Are there any other technologies that you'd like to try out for your work? I admit that I just noodle around in Photoshop mostly, but I seem to be able to make it do things with text that it wasn't really meant to do, which I find very satisfying.

SC: I am not familiar with mathematical poetry but it makes sense. Other mathematics I knew, from the numerical relations of phi to flame theory, dealt with the coding of beauty in nature (or the application of known coding to nature). The end game of mathematics is to quantify it and therefore reproduce it with regularity. But there is a beauty to simplicity, to multi-dimensionality; there is art in mind when you talk about something like fractional dimensions and negative numbers and Mandelbrot sets, you have to think visually, think beautifully. It's not different to distill the essence and enjoy it for what it is whether you use a formula or you use a poem.

I am familiar with bpNichols' work as well as Jackson Mac Low's in the computer generated poetry. In both of their cases I thought it was interesting but it was more like they did it just to see what they could do. It didn't feel like they were creating as much as they were investigating and publishing their findings. Now it's an early test of people learning to program to learn to program markov chains and apply it to a sample of text to create similar kinds of lines. It sounds like I'm denigrating what they did, but quite the opposite. They are pioneers in computational literature. bpNichols was much more successful; and Canada was always the place that embraced concrete and visual poetry the most.

Do you have any idea why that might be? Do you feel there's something particularly Canadian about vispo as a field?

I would like to learn advanced animation, to make my desires to push 3D more honest. The red-blue 3D is more of a gimmick. A very fun one, but still something of a 1950s Cinerama gimmick. I'd learn some kind of animation so you could view the poem structure from any angle. The other option is 3D printing, which is something I am not a fan of but I have resigned myself to.

And as much as I look to fully-formed tech representations of the poems I just as much find something old that makes me wonder what it would take. A letterpress version of one of these poems, with varying depths (and even heights), excites me too. I know very little about letterpress except that is very involved, very manual, very mechanical. And that is probably the allure to me. The simplicity combined with the depth of texture; texture bringing a new field of exploration to poetry.

AHP: The technology available to the general public in the 70s, at the time that bpNichol was practicing, was very limited. I remember playing Pong for the first time in the early 80s and being very excited about it.

I've always thought that concrete poetry and sculpture would be a phenomenal combo. Letterpress concrete poetry would be amazing.

I hadn't really perceived Canada is any more embracing of concrete and visual poetry than elsewhere, but we do have a fair number of writers who are also working with the form. One of my earliest encounters with visual poetry was the Letraset visual poetry of derek beaulieu. He has received a lot of attention outside of Canada. I find that especially outside of North America, there is a lot of experimentalism going on with art/language hybrids. In Hungary, Márton Koppány has some interesting minimalist visual poetry that is outside language. Satu Kaikkonen of Finland does some amazing work with colour and text. Hiromi Suzuki and Koji Nagai of Japan work with text and collage.

I have one final question for you. You describe your work as concrete poetry. What, in your opinion is the difference between the terms "concrete poetry" and "visual poetry?"

SC: I see Canada as the current or continuing home of concrete and related experimental poetry. Something seemed to remain in Canada, something clicked, something in the community of poetry continued to find experimental poetry valuable.

But to get to your last question. There are really three reasons I consider my work, and use the term "concrete poetry" rather than "visual poetry"

1) Visual poetry seems to be what all poetry is. Certainly poetry is meant to be spoken. But when you mention an audio kind of poetry you bring to mind the very experimental material such as, to mention bpNichols again, the Four Horsemen. Or maybe it calls slam poetry to mind. But the functioning business model of poetry is in printed works, of selling books and chapbooks, and those are all read. It's pedantic, but all poetry ends up being written, ends up as something viewed then processed. Concrete poetry is a subset. It's fixed. It's solid. It is placed and then made unmovable.

Look at derek beaulieu's Letraset pieces (as an aside, I used to go to my mother's work, in an ad agency, and I was allowed to spend time playing with all the Letraset. That stuff is so easy to screw up, the only partially get on the page. It must be maddening to work with with that kind of specific placement). His work is fixed. There are no line breaks. In fact, if you re-break the lines you functionally shift the poem. You change it into something else. Walt Whitman was for years, and continues to be, printed with linebreaks where he did not intend. But it doesn't really change much about how you approach his poems.

2) "Visual poetry," as a phrase, doesn't feel as cool as "concrete poetry."

3) I learned the descriptor "concrete poetry" when I was in my teens, and I've only come across the term "visual poetry" in the past five years. I've got a couple decades of habit to overcome.

I appreciate that some people prefer the term visual poetry (especially when you take into consideration the wide variety of description-defying poetry that so many continue to astound us with), but it's a habit I don't have much focus or intent on breaking.
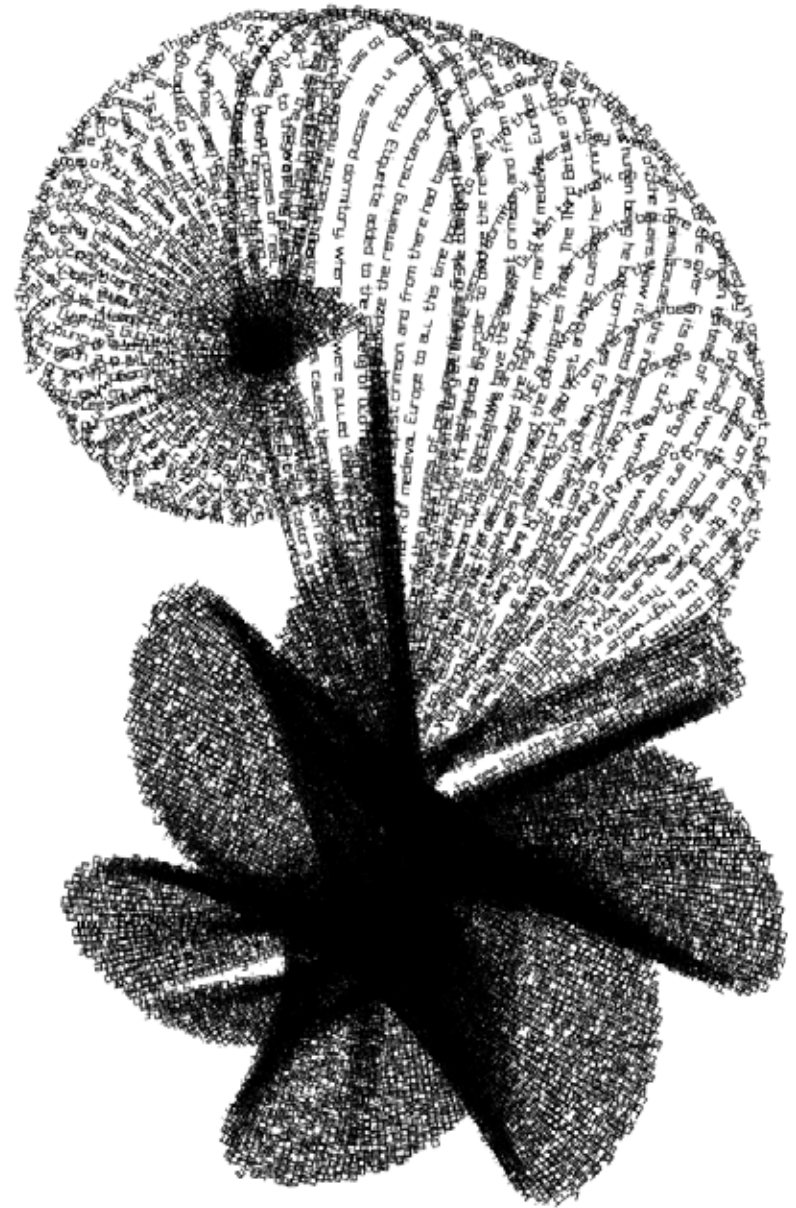
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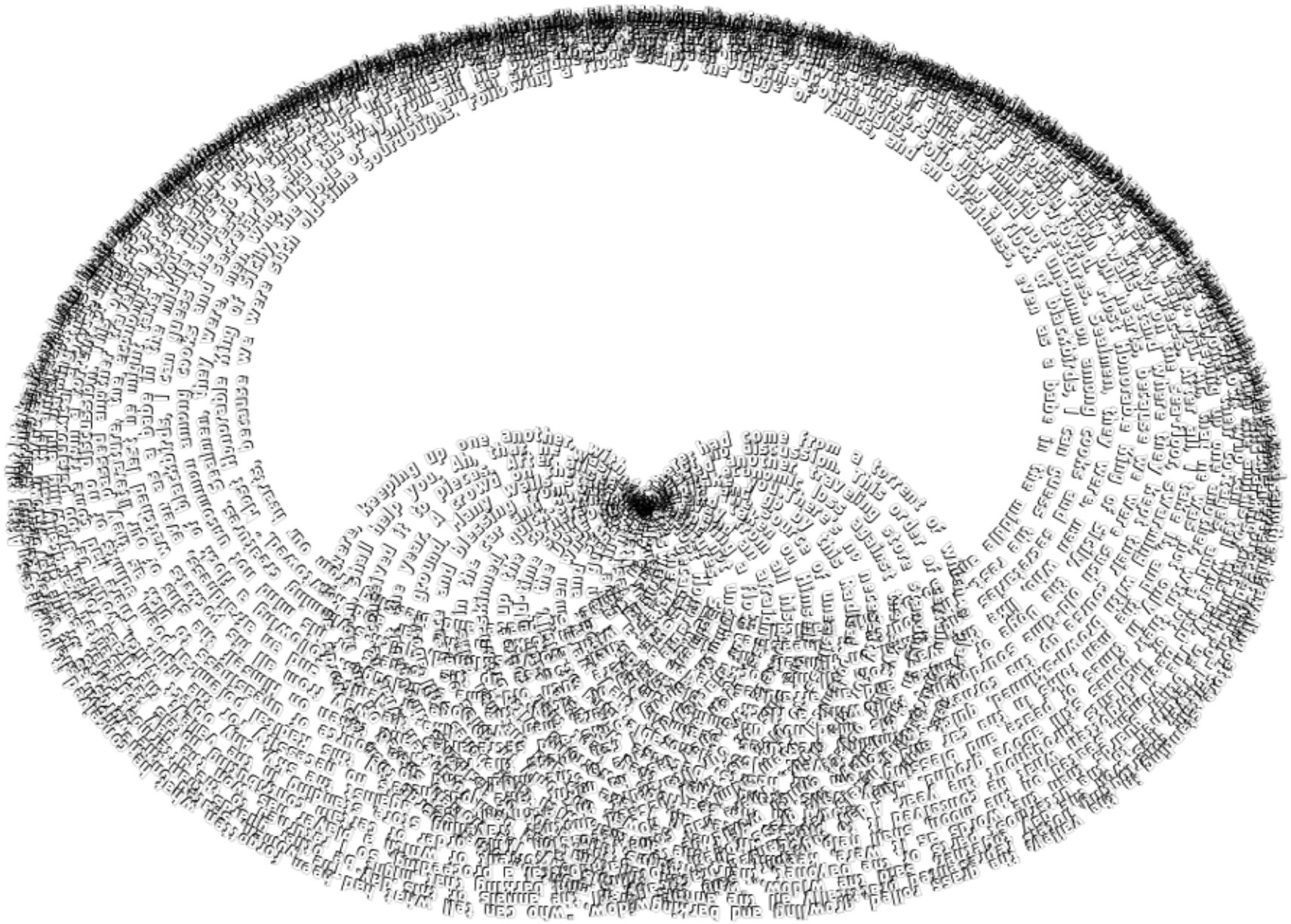
who can tell what had been forgotten

S Cearley is a former professor of philosophy and AI researcher in computer-derived writing. He currently lives eight inches above a river watching ducks, otters and herons. His major influence is from the background of human-computer interaction, learning from each other and forming new methods of creating imagery in the natural and synthetic mind.

S Cearley's chapbook "The Travesties of Plato" was published by Spacecraft Press in Sept '15; other pieces were previously published in A Bad Penny, The Los Angeles Review, Your Impossible Voice, NationalPoetryMonth.ca, Lockjaw, Entropy, Requited Journal, and Floating Bridge Review. His website is futureanachronism.com.