

The non-Concrete Manifesto of Concrete Poetry

When someone learns how to process a symbol, such as in reading, then it is not possible for that symbol to enter the mind and *not* be processed. If a word is seen it is read, assuming it is in previously-learned bits. And even in those cases, it is often that the mind can process that the symbol is a symbol that stands for something, but something unknown.

When we create a poem, we are creating a specific structure made of specific words and parts of words in order to create emotional impact and stir sense memory into the reader's similar experiences, whether these memories are real or imagined. Poetry is simply that. It is (generally) devoid of a narrative structure like in other forms of literature, and thus relies on simplicity of moments. Spots of memory, spots of understanding, to create the imagery and emotions in the reader. I say 'reader' though the poem can be input in any number of ways. I use it here as a shorthand.

And this is where I write. This is where concrete poetry writes.¹ More than just words to create imagery and feeling, the form itself creates its own symbol. They don't look like poems as much as they appear like what a misunderstood grammar looks like. The main idea is there, and mostly understood, but details get confused, possibly to the point of collapse. In short, you look at the concrete poem, and you realize something is communicated. But what? How? You do not have the automatic processing of symbol, and you are now forced to cope with your own meaning.

This then folds into how humans process symbols. As I mentioned previously, when you learn how to read, your brain fixes on the symbol processing of reading language and it becomes impossible to *not* read words when they are seen or heard (or however the input is received). The fragments of understood symbols combine with the structure of the poem itself, an all new symbol, a glyph. It becomes its own symbol to read and to contemplate, its own pictorial manifestation of the communication between (biological) mind and (synthetic) mind, using natural and forced symbolic language structure.

Jacques Tati has done something similar with audio in his movies. The background noises and the dialogue are all at the same level. You only hear bits and pieces of conversations, not unlike hearing people walk by on the street. You know the communication happens, but the point of the dialogue doesn't need the specific words in order for you to understand what is happening. You create shortcuts to understanding, extrapolate alternate symbol processing, via context from other symbols. Another example from film would be from the climax of Close Encounters of the Third Kind. Tati's films only give you snippets, glimpses of complete conversations that you understand, while the rest is garbled. In Close Encounters, the entire "conversation" between the aliens and humans takes place using colored blocks and musical tones. We, as the bystanders of this conversation, and those in the film, trying to figure out how to reply, know there is communication, even if it's in some (as yet) indecipherable method. But there is something about what was presented that we, the humans (both in the movie and in the audience) realize is an expression of language.

Concrete poems offer a presentation that is an expression, and maybe one that creates a dialog, but as it is, can be understood as communication in some form. Even if the reader can't be quite sure of what is communicated. The enjoyment of receiving a communication is there. The complexities of a new language are there.

¹ Here I need to differentiate. In my mind, concrete poetry is not a synonym for visual poetry. However, the distinction is not important for the manifesto. So for the sake of the manifesto, consider concrete poetry to be all forms of visual poetry, however you like to consider them.

S Cearley is a former professor of philosophy and AI researcher in computer-derived writing. He currently lives eighteen inches above a river watching ducks, otters and herons. S Cearley's chapbook "The Travesties of Plato" was published by Spacecraft Press in Sept 2015; other pieces were previously published in A Bad Penny, The Los Angeles Review, Your Impossible Voice, NationalPoetryMonth.ca, Lockjaw, Entropy, and Floating Bridge Review.