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### **Transgressing the Normative in Edwin Morgan's "Message Clear"**

**Abstract:** Edwin Morgan's poetics of the language-game can be seen as functionalised in many contexts: historical, cultural, social, political, and aesthetic. A genuine Scot, known for his subversive political and social views, Morgan often engages in linguistic transgressive play in order to undermine the presumptions of the mainstream discourse but also to question the veristic rules of poetry writing. Insisting on expressibility and recognising a grounded, limited subjectivity as all that is on offer in socially structured practice, Morgan works at and against frontiers of the possible, transgression of limits being integral to his forms of attention.

The paper attempts to analyse Morgan's concrete poem "Message Clear" which undermines cognitively privileged habits of observation, preferred value systems, and dominant cultural assumptions. The analysis focuses on the poem's "verbivocovisuality" (Joyce) and morphodynamics, which not only question the one-way linear flow between poet and reader but also point to the idea of "freeplay" (Derrida).

In his book-length study of Morgan's work, Colin Nicholson writes what follows: "[F]ascinated by the zany, the arcane, the absurd, the possible futures anciently set and possible pasts figured futuristically, social, personal, linguistic and cultural othernesses comes to us in the poetics of communicative rationality, which often operates through mind-bending syntax" (5). In Nicholson's view, Morgan is repeatedly searching for semantic frontiers where "centripetal pressure separates and centrifugal energy draws together" (5). It seems that Morgan's interest in exploring semantic boundaries is most visibly seen in his concrete and "emergent" poems whose morphodynamics point at indeterminacy of meaning.

This article is an attempt at analysing Morgan's visual, and to be more precise, visual concrete poem, in which the poet mobilises concern about the loss of the "epistemic anchoring" (Nicholson 6) and engages in the quest for the meaningful through the apparently meaningless, that is to say, by using the postmodern way of conceptualization he ventures into meditation upon the nature of language (including poetic language), sign and meaning. I am interested in the way the poem "Message Clear" presents itself as "verbivocovisual"<sup>1</sup> text. It is

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<sup>1</sup> The term was coined by James Joyce in *Finnegans Wake* Book II Episode 3 (341.19), but in the 1950s it was appropriated by the Brazilian Concretists to evoke the synaesthetic character of their work, and, interestingly, "verbivocovisuality" is associated with concrete poetry ever since. To learn more on the international poetic inspirations, see Campos, Pignatari, and Campos; and McLuhan.

“visual” in that the constructivist scheme produces its own meanings but also brings out the material aspect of the word, its plasticity; “verbi,” in that Morgan is always constructing new meanings, creates new connotations; and “voco” (“musical” or “sound”), which often consists in adding subsequent levels of meaning and which frequently introduces and/or strengthens poem’s morphodynamics as Morgan tends to reify words in his concrete poems and in the rhythms of sound poems. He hears and transcribes words, and the readers are also to hear them in order to see them. I will focus on the way “Message Clear” contests the status of language as a bearer of uncontaminated meanings and how it questions the one-way linear flow between poet and reader which, as Marjorie Perloff observes, most visual writing today is preoccupied with (qtd. in Bohn 284).

For Jakobson, the so-called poetic function “projects the principle of equivalence from the axis of selection into the axis of combination” (358). This definition confines poetry to what the Brazilian Concretists call the cycle of verse (Krysinski 131). Having internalised a theory of language as a structural system of signs, the concrete poem laboratory explores the projection of the paradigmatic axis into the syntagmatic axis (Portela 1). For Bohn, this characteristic points to a third crisis of the sign: “[V]iolating the traditional prohibition against semiotic incest, the linguistic sign was transformed into a visual sign” (22). It will be clearly seen in “Message Clear,” particularly in the way the combination of graphs is viewed as images. Bohn states that if “‘poetry is organized violence committed on ordinary speech’ as Roman Jakobson maintains, then visual poetry is organized violence committed on ordinary poetry” (22). And concrete poetry in particular initiates the cycle of meta- and para-verse with respect to the “spatial and the iconic drive” (Krysinski 131). Hence, it seems evident that the well-known Jakobsonian definition of the poetic function does not help us understand the sense of the Concretist revolution that produced a completely new understanding of poetry (Krysinski 131). The visual poets were the first to recognise that poetry is inevitably seen as well as seen through. For the Concretists, Krysinski observes, the language of poetry is a curious symbiosis of the verbal, the visual, the iconic, the phonetic, and the vocal, and the message of poems is conveyed when all these elements coincide (131).

Manuel Portela notices that in retrospect, the poem appears as a script of meaning, even if this meaning is not predetermined. He adds that “despite their reliance on the ambiguity that results from superposition of sense and sound states, many concrete poems focus on language and print as technical devices for producing and exchanging information” (Portela 1). In his poem “Message Clear” (which can read “message received,” “message checked,” “message confirmed,” or obviously “simple message”), Morgan does precisely this: he explores the limits of communicativeness and, by extending them, he “makes the message clear” to the skilful reader.

am i  
 i am he if  
 he r o  
 h ur t  
 the re and  
 he re and  
 he re  
 a n d  
 the r e  
 i am r ife  
 s ion and  
 i d i e  
 am e res ect  
 am e res ection  
 o f  
 the life  
 o f  
 m e n  
 the sur e d i e  
 i s  
 s e t and  
 i am the sur d  
 a t res t o life  
 i am he r e  
 i a ct  
 i r u n  
 i m e e t  
 i t i e  
 i s t and  
 i am th o th  
 i am r a  
 i am the su n  
 i am the s on  
 i am the e rect on e if  
 i am re n t  
 i am s a fe  
 i am s e n t  
 i he e d  
 i t e s t  
 i re a d  
 a th re a d  
 a s t on e  
 a t re a d  
 a th r on e  
 i resurrect a life  
 i am i n life  
 i am resurrection  
 i am the resurrection and  
 i am  
 i am the resurrection and the life (Morgan 159)

### Manuel Portela claims that

concrete poetics moulds the structural and psychic materiality of the sign by linking its formal linguistic properties with the mind processing of those properties. Thus, it is a poetics of spoken and written language, as much as it is a poetics of hearing and reading. Its hermeneutics starts at the physiological processing of audiovisual input, which transmutes the poem into a cyborg, that is, a cybernetic simulation of meaning as a specific processing of information. (3)

In “Message Clear,” the game of repetition and difference is spatialised on the page in such a way that it seems to foreground the fact that a text is a set of instructions for reading itself. At first glance, the poem seems to be chaotic, lacking structure, not to mention cohesive or lexical unity. Subsequent lines look like disorganised scenes open to the reader’s response, as it is he/she who becomes the creator or scriptwriter. Having read the poem aloud, and this aspect of poetry has always been very dear to Morgan, one can easily notice that seemingly meaningless graphs make sense. Then the process of “collecting” a poem, or as Barthes would prefer to see it, the process of re-writing the poem can follow. This can be done in various ways, as each of the readers provides his/her own interpretative key to the poem.

In response to literature, one of the major principles that enable the reader to go beyond the information given in the text is what Culler calls the Rule of Significance. “The Rule of Significance” is, Culler suggests, the primary convention of literary competence: “[R]ead the poem as expressing a significant attitude to some problem concerning man and/or his relation to the universe” (115). The rule requires the reader to perform semantic and thematic transformations until he/she can read the poem in such a way. These transformations are subject to the constraints that shape and constrain the cognitive processes of abstraction and symbolisation (Tsur 43).

For Nicholson, “Message Clear,” supposed to be a monologue spoken by Christ on the cross, reconstructs a gospel triangulation of word, beginning and godhead (see John 1.1) by going forth and multiplying spatialised forms for one of Jesus’ utterances:

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i am      r                i f e
                i n
                s          i o n a n d
i                d          i e

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“The end effect,” Nicholson continues, “is a poem that seems to assemble itself as it goes along, and a text that calls for active decipherment and reconstruction by the reader” (95). Watson suggests that “[i]t is as if we are witnessing some interrupted . . . communication, only gradually patching itself together. Perhaps

the sender is having difficulty; perhaps the receiver is faulty; perhaps the atmospheric conditions are unpropitious" (175).

It could be argued that "Message Clear," as a concrete poem, exemplifies a kind of language generator which provides a microcosm both of the linguistic processes of word and sentence creation and of the more basic and fundamental structuring processes of the phonetic, syntactical, semantic, and pragmatic elements that produce language (Portela 1). Language here would be seen as, above all, the possibility of expanding elements, classes, and combinations, and that is why it is to be pulled apart and scrutinised in its microscopic materiality. Hence "where the bits and bytes that produce verbal meaning have been decomposed," the poem presents us with "the machine-code for the miracle of transubstantiation that occurs in linguistic signs" (Portela 2–3). Such analysis signals concrete self-reference to the poem's information code.

For concrete aesthetics, the dynamics of a syntactical combination that resulted from phonetic and graphical attractions and lexical cross-breeding is the guiding principle of composition. In Morgan's poem, its workings may be observed at the lexical and morphological level (agglutinations, prefixes, infixes, suffixes, and various types of fragmentation of both lexemes, morphemes and even graphemes), but also at the higher level of syntactic units, sentences. These procedures subject the semantic and ideological level of language to a combinatorial art that simultaneously deconstructs and reconstructs the texture of inferences, recurrences and references which uphold this fluid, trickster-like discursive coherence.

The poem starts from a question: "am i," which is followed by a conditional structure: "if i am he / hero / hurt / there and / here and / here / and / there."<sup>2</sup> It may be read as the speaker's identity quest, and if we take into account the last line, which is a direct quote from the Gospel of John (11.25), we arrive at a comparison made by the speaker between him and Christ. The speaker supposes that he is hero, and that he is hurt, and this again refers us to the story of Christ, who was a hero and who was hurt "here and there." The following lines immerse us even more deeply in the context of the New Testament as the speaker speaks of Jesus: "i am rife / in / sion [read "zion"] and / i die / . . . sure / the die / is / set and / i am / at rest / . . . i am here / i act / i meet / i tie." The shuttered images reflect the story of Jesus coming to Zion to be claimed as hero and destroyer of the status quo ("i am rife / in / sion / . . . / i am here / i act / i meet / i tie") and, later on, to be crucified because of that ("i die").

The lines that follow the reflection of the story of the Messiah refer us to Egyptian mythology. The speaker says: "i am thoth / i am ra / i am the sun / i am the son / i am the erect one." The figure of Ra, the Sun god, the godhead of the

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<sup>2</sup> I have decided to render the quotation in the way I read it, by collecting the graphs, thus creating a scene. From now on I will consequently use this scheme.

Egyptian pantheon, appears here accompanied by Thoth, the one who was considered the heart and tongue of Ra as well as the means by which Ra's will was translated into speech. Just as Thoth has been likened to the Logos of Plato (and also to the Greek Hermes, the hero who was mentioned in the previous part of the poem), his presence in the poem extends the spatial and temporal imagery by adding a parallel between Christ and his father Jehovah and Thoth and Ra. In Egyptian mythology, Thoth played a vital and prominent role, being one of the two deities who stood on either side of Ra's boat (similarly to Christ standing on the side of his father after his resurrection). He was involved in arbitration, magic, writing, science, and the judging of the dead (again, a striking similarity to the figure of Christ). Both Christ and Thoth are the executors of the will of corresponding godheads. The speaker appears as a conflation of Thoth, Ra, the sun, and Christ, the son being the embodiment of God Jehovah and "the erect one." The lines that follow speak of his powers and mission: "i am sent / i heed / i test / i read / i thread," which may read as: I am sent to the human race in order to heed, to test and read the hearts of people. The speaker also mentions symbols of Christ, namely a stone (Christ is called the corner stone of a temple of God<sup>3</sup>), and a throne (as an attribute of power to rule the human race). The final seven lines consequently lead us towards the message of Christ: "i resurrect / a life / i am in life / i am resurrection / i am the resurrection and / i am / i am the resurrection and the life." He is a life (or alive), he is (the Being), he resurrects; hence he embodies the Gospel, the hope of all the believers. Apart from being an avatar of God, Christ in his human aspect (Jesus) may stand for each human individual. And if so, the question which appears at the beginning of the poem may now be read as: am I (do I exist, am I the Being, God) if I am him, the hero (Christ)? From this point of vantage, the word "if" causes even more relativity of meaning than it could have been assumed at the beginning of the analysis.

It seems that the craft with which Morgan composes his poem allows the readers to come up with their own connotations, parallels, "scenes," and "scripts," without imposing his own path to follow. "Message Clear," similarly to the Gospel ("good news") designed to be "clearly" understood by everyone, contains numerous mysteries to be discovered by the readers. One can freely choose one's own key to the poem, and still, thanks to its morphodynamics, "Message Clear" will remain open to new readings.

That brings me to the Derridean concept of language seen as a philosophy, or perhaps, a philosophy of living, that can be deconstructed, presented as a new

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<sup>3</sup> In the Gospel of Luke we read: "But Jesus looked at them and said, 'What then is this that is written: 'The stone which the builders rejected, this became the chief corner stone?'" (Luke 20.17); in the First Letter of Peter we read: "For this is contained in Scripture: 'Behold, I lay in Zion a choice stone, a precious corner stone, and he who believes in him will not be disappointed'" (1 Pet. 2.6). See also Eph. 2.20–22.

"freeplay." The idea of opening the reader to new perspectives of seeing the text and the reality (the reading of which, according to Derrida, is textual) seems essential. In his essay "Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences," Derrida states:

Besides the tension of freeplay with history, there is also the tension of freeplay with presence. Freeplay is the disruption of presence. The presence of an element is always a signifying and substitutive reference inscribed in a system of differences and the movement of a chain. Freeplay is always an interplay of absence and presence, but if it is to be radically conceived, freeplay must be conceived of before the alternative of presence and absence; being must be conceived of as presence or absence beginning with the possibility of freeplay and not the other way around. (293)

Derrida claims that there are two interpretations of interpretation, of structure, of sign, of freeplay:

The one seeks to decipher, dreams of deciphering, a truth or an origin which is free from freeplay and from the order of the sign, and lives like an exile the necessity of interpretation. The other, which is no longer turned toward the origin, affirms freeplay and tries to pass beyond man and humanism, the name man being the name of that being who, throughout the history of metaphysics or of ontotheology—in other words, through the history of all of his history—has dreamed of full presence, the reassuring foundation, the origin and the end of the game.

There are more than enough indications today to suggest we might perceive that these two interpretations of interpretation—which are absolutely irreconcilable even if we live them simultaneously and reconcile them in an obscure economy—together share the field which we call, in such a problematic fashion, the human sciences. (294)

He admits that it should be our aim to find a middle ground of these interpretations and thus to enjoy the freeplay. Morgan succeeds in enjoying the freeplay without indicating the fear of having lost something or without showing the intention of recovering something.

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