

“concrete is not a kick”: An Interview with Gustave Morin

Mike Borkent

I first came across Gustave Morin's books A Penny Dreadful and ETC BBQ in 2007. I sat down and worked through both books immediately, captivated by their textual manipulations with scissors, tape, photocopiers, typewriters, and other seemingly archaic technologies. These poems dissolved the boundaries between text and image and showed from the margins ways to rethink literacy and literature by exposing the potential for meaning in the material page, the letter, the book, and other typo/bibliographic forms.

We met on his “West Coast Invasion” in 2012, when Morin came to Vancouver to help launch The Last Vispo Anthology. Emails and homemade postcards were exchanged. What follows is a selection of that dialogue.

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Mike Borkent: When did you first start creating concrete poetry? What led you to this form?

Gustave Morin: My interest in Canadian literature, believe it or not, is what led me to concrete poetry. And this took place somewhere between grade twelve and grade thirteen, while I was still in high school (around 1990). Immediately after superficial exposure to some of what I could find in the library did I begin, in earnest, creating my own. And I've more or less been painting in a cave ever since.

MB: Which authors were a part of this initial exposure? Do you find they've had any influence over your subsequent interests and/or writings?

GM: Roundabout the time that I was reading a little bit of everything I found a copy of *Where? The Other Canadian Poetry*, remaindered for 25 cents. And read that. Shortly after, I found *The Cosmic Chef* and read that through a few times. And not too long after, I found *bfp(h)aGe: An Anthology of Visual Poetry and Collage* and then I was off. (Of course, at the same time that my focus was being narrowed to CanLit, I was also reading a lot of American and international stuff. Poetry and fiction, but specifically all the standard concrete poetry anthologies, Emmett Williams, Mary Ellen Solt, J.F. Bory, whatever was in the library.)

One thing lead to another and the next thing I knew, I was becoming friends with a number of poets through the mails. And by the time I began university, I was publishing. I had failed to acquire my typing credit in grade eleven, but university became my first brush with the formal or more official hostile resistance to these spheres of activity, concrete and the like. Here I was, publishing my work in the world while simultaneously not being given the green light to take entry-level Creative Writing courses. So, at 20, concrete got me in trouble at school. At 30, I was only further embroiled in this trouble, which bled out into life. And now, at 40, I continue to wear the same cement shoes I was fitted with way back when. All I can say is that concrete is not a kick, it's a way of life.

The thing you are asking me here is who was most responsible for influencing my development. The guy's name is Hart Broudy. I found him early and latched on. His few books are remarkable. And made even more remarkable by the fact that for all intents and purposes no one, apart from a small coterie, has ever heard of the guy. What Mr. Broudy was up to in the seventies seemed more quote unquote "avant-garde" than what bp or bissett, or Steve McCaffery or David UU or Martin Vaughn-James or Robert Fones or John Riddell, or anyone else in Canada with a way-out literary project was doing. I liked his sense of the page, but I also liked his sense of the book. And I was amazed and I was in awe and I thought all I would like to do is make excellent little unclassifiable books like Hart Broudy. And that's basically what I've tried to do with my life. Sort of.

Of course, I would be remiss if I failed to mention jwcurry. See, it was from his bookstore, Room 3o2 Books, that I was able to acquire not one but two of the Hart Broudy books that were missing from my library. An entire book could be written on my first meeting with Mr. curry, over 20 years ago, following chronologically the great friendship I have enjoyed with him ever since. Not only is jwcurry important to Canadian letters, as far as I'm concerned he's one of the greatest Canadians of all time, period. What he has done since about 1975, with almost no money, has, in the words of Nicky Drumbolis (yet another unsung giant!), "changed the world." Which is more than anyone might expect from poetry, but there you have it. Mr. curry was my first official

mentor, if it could even be said that I had an official mentor.

MB: How do you think about the relationship between verbal and visual modes, between language and seeing? How does this relate to your poetic/artistic practice?

GM: I'm no expert, but it seems to me that "language is pictures." The various notations we "read" are a set of cues that sign, whistle, and command our garbled articulations. It took me 20 years to muster the courage of my convictions on this score, but I've taken to understanding that I happened to be correct within this intuition all along. Once upon a time I thought there was a more pronounced division between the verbal and visual modes (and once upon a time, there was!). But Bob Cobbing read rutabagas and soda pop bottles and ripped scraps of corrugated cardboard at his poetry readings more than 40 years ago. Why anyone calling themselves a poet might wish to limit themselves exclusively to the ABCs makes not one whit of sense this late in the game (and it most emphatically is later than we think). Our willing obedience to the strict, "authorized" use of the alphabet can be called a set of ruts we follow in our blind pursuit of the conceit of communication as useful activity. Which is sort of the opposite of poetry, to my way of thinking.

MB: How do you think about creativity and your work?

GM: My politick is such that I have set up a life and/or attempted to build my existence around the fixed notion that at some point I will get around to "making"

and/or become biologically involved in the act of creating something. I implicitly trust this, even though often enough there are long dark spells where this does not happen (and I'm little more than a fraud). I've nevertheless staked my life on the principle that sooner or later I will get around to it—the muck—and that I owe it to myself to admit that I am capable of making something that could potentially transcend my self. Everything seems to follow from this, a conceit, since nothing is actually capable of transcendence.

MB: You talk about “making” through the “muck” of life as a potentially (if illusory) transcendent act. I think this is a great statement about both creativity and practice, which for me is about particular orientations towards materials and actions. Could you elaborate on how “muck”-iness plays into your poetry? Do you mean that the collage and xerox manipulations, for instance, explore or draw into focus the muckiness of those technologies, or do you mean that your poems engage with the senses and materialities of life in some other way?

GM: The muck—the swirl that inchoate works find themselves trapped in, a half-clairvoyant, semi-amorphous state that is neither “art” nor “not art.” There are different stages to the creation of every individual work of art, but every single one of these works somehow comes up from the muck. The “muck” is just a semaphore for the store that I go to when I'm ready to buy some new poetry to foist on the unsuspecting world.

As for the muck of “xerox manipulations” as text: these are stored in a little

corridor off by itself that I call the “plastic poetries.” Both *a psychowestern* (2010) and *79 little explosions and q-bert stranded on a smouldering mosquitocoil frozen to a space formerly occupied by language* (2009) are books that manifest these tendencies to good effect. It's proper for a concrete poet to dabble in plastic poetry now and again, provided they don't go assuming that every little thing they do is a concrete poem.

MB: Do you have a process or questions that guide you in making a piece of concrete poetry?

GM: The constant across this work (now that I have “a history”) seems to be “me,” whatever that is (and my uneven development, wherever that has taken me)—though it's emphatically true that my work of twenty years ago is not the work I make today. After all this movement, what I think I am after, very simply, is to see something I've never seen before. And I want to write the books I cannot find in the library, just like George Orwell. It's really terribly simple. And painfully real.

MB: Please explain in relation to a specific example of a poem.

GM:

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That took me 14 years to come up with. (Hubert Selby, Jr., only spent 7 years on his “tra-la-la” of *Last Exit to Brooklyn*.)

MB: I love the broken symmetry of this poem. The supposed palindromic sameness that is simultaneously skewed, off balance. What is it about this poem that you like so much?

GM: Its obliquity; but specifically, its ability to resist any easy analysis—ergo, its tiny difficulty. Also, its severe minimalism; how “so much civilization” is effectively quarantined by a mixture of 2 dots and 2 virgules. To do and be all that and remain fairly banal, if alien. This too I like. It’s almost pretty and it’s almost profound. It’s almost ugly and it’s almost meaningless. Were it prettier or were it more profound I’m almost certain I’d like it less. Were it uglier or were it more meaningful its quiet impact could be disfigured and, at once, rendered somehow stupider than it already is—good ol’ “teb” = .//.

MB: What techniques or technologies do you prefer to use to develop concrete poems? How have these preferences varied over time?

GM: Back in 1990 I had the choice to fall with aplomb into what I’m doing now or flop resignedly into a very prosaic learning curve around computers and their limited use. I opted to keep computers out of my work. Almost as a rule, there is no electricity employed in the basic construction of my poetry. Teensy weensy scraps of paper, glue, ink, razorblades, scissors, (manual) typewriters, occasional letraset, spray paint, liquid paper, etc. Everything I make is real. And by that I mean it has an actual referent in the world, a piece of paper somewhere housing all of the various coordinates. None of it is made on the computer. (I don’t even want to publish my work on the computer, though this seems a hardline harder and harder to maintain.) I don’t know why, but it seems important to point all of that out. Mainly because people can’t tell: “Oh, you made this on a computer?” they ask. And

I’m forced to say “no. No computers in any of it.” And then it becomes a polemic (for them), which it isn’t (for me). These preferences and discriminations have been with me all along. Did I choose wisely? Often, I’m not sure. But that’s a bit of what I’m poised on: the brinksmanship of that severe divide. Born of a generation that was awash in computers, but long before their obnoxious wholesale domestication. Once upon a time, not too long ago, I had the choice of opting out. Anymore, that choice no longer exists. And the planet doesn’t seem to be better for it, in my opinion.

MB: Which is your favourite of your own concrete poems, and what inspired the poem? How did you make it? What is most appealing about it now?

GM: I’ve been most satisfied with the typewriter poems I’ve been making as of late, a book of typewriter poems that will come to be known as *Clean Sails* [to be published by New Star this year]. But these are also the culmination of over 20 years spent trying to write a decent typewriter poem. Biologically, because I’ve tried for so long, I’ve become better able to write them as I’ve aged. On the downside, I don’t have 20 years for every genre I attempt. But my modest aim of the past few years has been to become the best typewriter poet on the planet.

MB: Obviously, typewriter poetry has a long history in concrete poetry (Houédard, bissett, bpNichol, etc.). Do you find yourself thinking about these earlier writers as you work on your own poetry? Do you find yourself consciously conferring with them, in a sense?

GM: dsh all the way. And he more than any other, to the (lately, especially) exclusion of the others, many of whom are very good. Instinctively I knew, at 13, that dhs's work had been made on the typewriter. Somehow this impressed me. And in making this impression, little did I know then that all these years later I would continue to be impressed. As I am. Dom Sylvester Houédard is the typewriter poet I think about every time I pitch a clean sail. He is really becoming, in my maturity, one of the major figures of my life, one I will continue to study and champion until my own big dirt nap. He is the typewriter poet on the planet who first carried his experiments just a little bit further out than anyone else, before or since. dsh made the typewriter DANCE where everyone else was still learning to crawl. I was 30 years old when I clued in to this arcane literary factoid, and with it, the knowledge that "concrete is world literature" finally sank in. From there it was not a great leap to infer from this the mercenary knowledge that if dsh was the best, one had only to make typewriter poems better and one could (possibly) enter for oneself this "world literature" everyone jockeys for position within. Of course, it's not 1971 anymore, and no one really knows for sure, do they? Typewriters are gone for good, aren't they?

MB: Your continued development of typewriter concrete is exciting. What is it about the typewriter that you find particularly appealing?

GM: Call me crazy, but I've always equated typewriters with writing. I like typewriters because they are sufficient unto themselves. As writing machines they require very little but do they ever give a

lot. In life, there are too few things that the same can be said of: camels, clothespins, canvas. I have 17 such machines currently. And I only add to the arsenal when a new model brings something to the table that the others do not. Case in point: I have an Underwood 5 that I bought used for 20 dollars just a few years ago. It's a giant of a machine, solid, sturdy, imposing—the sort of typewriter one might write a Russian novel on. 20 bucks in 2010! What's not to love?

MB: You mentioned to me a typewriter project you're working on in which you are remodeling them. Can you describe that a bit more and what about it excites you?

GM: It's called "prepared typewriter," after Cage. Which is to say the typewriter as in-house living sculpture: I've shaved down parts of the characters on a few machines using a dremel. It struck me as the most expedient way of instantly modifying letters and creating a means of generating my own mutilated and/or mutant alphabets, as it were. Plus, sculptures that help me to make poems—are you kidding?

Without getting into a harangue about it, I think of "bleeding edge" as a sociological rather than technological phenomena, unlike the internet, which thinks it a technological and not a sociological phenomena. Bleeding edge in this sense is concerned more with content than it is with form. It's bleeding edge to use a typewriter in 2013 for a variety of reasons. First of all, find one. Secondly, procure ribbons for it. Third, try it on for size. We make it look easy. But I can assure you there are far simpler ways of landing yourself a quick trip to a padded cell...

MB: Do you conceive of visual poetry having a particular role in literary and/or visual art communities and histories? What is it? What does visual poetry achieve that other forms can't?

GM: Concrete poetry plays a role in our communities and histories always, in all ways, even if only vicariously, through its many agents who are, more often than not, involved in those communities and who participate in those histories, under different rubrics, often enough while wearing different hats. One aspect of my own thesis is that concrete poets always lead interesting lives. And every single one of them—even the worst of them!—somehow manages to do this. So a more-than-cursory study of concrete poetry is sure to thrust one into contact with a whole lot more than just concrete poetry. There are many communities and many histories to choose from, should anyone care to risk involvement.

Concrete poetry is best at demonstrating itself as a place where “form and content are one,” as Öyvind Fahlström put it, or as “a model, of order, even if set in a space which is full of doubt,” as the famous Ian Hamilton Finlay quote goes. It may be little more than a modernist antique at this stage of the game, but that is enough, that is plenty. What's more, this “plenty” is far and away better than the carloads of space junk that seems to cut the mustard these days...but alas, I digress. ‡