

The Revolutionary Sixties: Poetry and Social Change

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Abstract: *The historian Eric Hobsbawm defined the sixties as a moment of collective intensity. In addition to the political changes, the decade created the material conditions for the emergence of a new kind of subjectivity, supported by shared cultural expectations. Poetry followed these subjective and social transformations through the expansions of literary forms and modes of exhibition. The objective of this article is then to examine how the poetic landscape of the sixties was shaped by this revolutionary energy. In order to do that, I am going to focus on three different locations: Northern Ireland (Belfast), Scotland (Glasgow), and Brazil (São Paulo).*

Keywords: *Poetry; poetic landscape; revolutionary sixties; social change.*

Quoting the feminist critic Sheila Rowbotham, the historian Eric Hobsbawm defined the sixties as a moment of collective intensity. According to her: “the energy of the external collective became so intense, it seemed the boundaries of closeness, of ecstatic inwardness, had spilled over on to the streets... I thus caught a glimpse of the peculiar annihilation of the personal in the midst of dramatic events like revolution” (12). In a symbiosis between personal and collective struggles, the quote reveals that the decade created the material conditions for the emergence of a new kind of subjectivity, supported by shared cultural expectations. In other words, the feminist claim that the subjective is political, enabled social transformations through the expansion of literary forms and modes of exhibition. The objective of this article is then to examine how the poetic landscape of the sixties was shaped by this revolutionary energy. In order to do that, I am going to focus on three different locations: Northern Ireland (Belfast), Scotland (Glasgow), and Brazil (São Paulo).

In the British Isles, the sixties were the period when post-war austerities were discarded. As a result, the general population benefited from a renewed welfare state in health, social security and education. The historian Tom Devine affirms that in Scotland, there was virtually no unemployment, the wages were rising and there was a greater exchange of consumer goods, especially cultural commodities, such as television, radio and record players. In Northern Ireland, however, the scientific developments and civil rights movements were destabilized by political and religious hostilities, which hampered the optimistic faith in social progress. In Brazil, the social upheaval was caused by João Goulart’s social reforms – ‘reformas de base’ – including bank and land reform, and a stronger state intervention in the economy. Afraid of the communist threat, military authorities intervened and governed the country for twenty-five years. Swiftly responding to these social changes, the poetry produced in Scotland, Northern Ireland and Brazil showed a restored surge of creativity. The Scottish Revival was predominant in the Edinburgh Festival of 1962, the Belfast Group gained strength in 1966 and the Concrete Poets were already publishing their first anthology in 1962.

In Northern Ireland, the Belfast Group, led by the poet and critic Philip Hobsbaum invigorated the artistic landscape of Belfast. The poets Seamus Heaney, Michael Longley and

Derek Mahon are the great names that belonged to the first generation of this group. Contrary to the idealised notion that poetry was an innate gift, the belief that poetic craft could be learned and improved led to a changed shift of perception. Such a configuration brought together older poets and revitalised the publishing market, which saw in them a new literary niche. The troubles, which was a direct consequence of the social changes and a more inclusive educational system, started in 1968, with the civil rights march in Derry/ Londonderry. Nationalists, in its majority Catholics, wanted to be in an independent republic, whereas the Unionists, in its majority Protestants, wanted to remain part of the United Kingdom.

The Northern Irish troubles were characterized by radical religious and nationalistic beliefs, which resulted in social distress and violence. While peaceful protesters were violently repressed by the British police, the Provisional Irish Republican Army (IRA) used equal cruelty in their terrorist attacks. Seamus Heaney, a future Nobel Prize winner, wrote about the marches and the episodes in a collection entitled “Whatever you say, say nothing”, of his volume *North* (1975). The poem “Summer 1969” is interesting in its approach because the whole history of the Troubles is seen through the lens of the Spanish history. The value of the poem stems from its connection to more universal histories and artistic experiments. From this point of view the first lines of the poem align two distant geographical places: Madrid and Belfast:

While the Constabulary covered the mob
Firing into the Falls, I was suffering
Only the bullying sun of Madrid. (140)

In addition to aligning his hometown with the town he happens to be in, Heaney is depicting his lyric voice as someone who understands the psychological effects of exile through the reification of this place. In addition to that, there is an alliteration of plosives and sibilants that is broken when Heaney mentions “bullying sun”. This literary device is probably the manner through which the poet formally expresses his coming to terms with opposites: plosives versus sibilants. Also, the metonymic view of representing Belfast through the Falls road, centre of the Catholic and Nationalist community, is revealing an elimination of opposites – for Heaney Belfast is represented by its Catholic constituents – he has poetically omitted the Protestants – most likely because this is not his community. Although displaced and distanced, Heaney knows exactly where he belongs. In view of his guilt, the next lines show how he tries to materialize the place where his mind dwells:

Each afternoon, in the casserole heat
Of the flat, as I sweated my way through
The life of Joyce, stinks from the fishmarket
Rose like the reek off a flax-dam.
At night on the balcony, gules of wine,
A sense of children in their dark corners,
Old women in black shawls near open windows,
The air a canyon rivering in Spanish. (140)

This is reached through the presentation of the life of Joyce in the fish market. This is a detail that transports the reader to the universe of *Ulysses*, episode 12, entitled “Cyclops” in which the hero, Leopold Bloom faces a prejudiced Fenian, anti-semitic Citizen who almost injures him with a biscuit can. Thus, the road that leads Heaney back home is not actually the

Spanish market, but the novelist's representation of the extremist points of view that his fellow countrymen assume. The reference to Dublin's Corporation Market interconnects sensorial perception with the city's frenetic mood. The second detail of the stanza is what brings the reader definitely to Belfast. When Heaney states the life of Joyce "rose like a putrid smell from the market, like a flax-dam", he is literally referring to the linen industries of Belfast. The flax-dam are the seeds that yield linseed oil, and slender stems from which a textile fiber is obtained. Through a series of associations, the poet intermingles cultural ideas and values up to a point at which Madrid, Dublin and Belfast become one. There is a gradation in the characterization of the place: the sense of children in dark corners, women in black shawl, starlit streets, until the poet reaches the Guardia civil, Civil that shine like poisoned fish. The ending returns to Joyce, and in this sense, to Dublin and Belfast, in other words, Ireland.

In this first part, the author compares Northern Ireland and Spain. Nevertheless, in the last two stanzas, he summons up both entities in a single symbol: *The Third of May 1808*, the canvas by Goya, which represents both the atrocities of war and the humanity of those who resist oppressive powers. The second stanza is where he inserts the evocation to Federico Garcia Lorca, apparently the first pure evocation to the Spanish universe. As Heaney states: "For my generation Lorca was the horizon always... poetry requires an inner flamenco, that it must be excited into life by something peremptory, some initial strum or throb that gets you started and drives you farther" (*Stepping Stones* 182)

Although the inner flamenco of the Spanish poet stirred his mind and perceptions, Heaney chooses as his own medium to go "back" and "touching the people" the virtual reality of television. Firstly, he goes back to the real through news reports, and then through an immediate retreat in the Prado museum.

'Go back,' one said, 'try to touch the people.'
 Another conjured Lorca from his hill.
 We sat through death counts and bullfight reports
 On the television, celebrities
 Arrived from where the real thing still happened (140)

The question still remaining is where is this place where "the real thing" is happening? The poet, through virtual glimpses of the city, constantly tries to come to terms with a sense of guilt. The reference to bullfighting is also something of an animal instinct, but it causes awe and horror, feelings that terrify the placid poetic subjectivity. The sense of paralysis in view of the slow, rhythmical death of the bull is similar to the vision of the war killings in Northern Ireland. Both are effects that neutralise perceptions of time and space and make the subjective voice long for escape. The third stanza of the piece is solely dedicated to the canvas "The Third of May 1808" and "The Colossus".

I retreated to the cool of the Prado.
 Goya's 'Shootings of the Third of May'
 Covered a wall - the thrown-up arms
 And spasm of the rebel, the helmeted
 And knapsacked military, the efficient
 Rake of the fusillade. In the next room
 His nightmares, grafted to the palace wall –
 Dark cyclones, hosting, breaking: Saturn

Jewelled in the blood of his own children,
Gigantic Chaos turning his brute hips
Over the world. Also, that holmgang
Where two berserks club each other to death
For honour's sake, greaved in a bog, and sinking. (140, 141)

The description of both canvases is an engagement in reversal: at the same time that the poet wishes to engage in a political activity, exteriorising his fears and terror, internally, he wishes to annul himself completely by engaging with art. If on the one hand his pity and terror is present, on the other hand, art neutralises these feelings and reigns completely. Thus, his escape to art is also paradoxically a way to keep his connection with the world open. As Steven Matthews concludes about Heaney, "Poetry's 'way in happening emerges as a model of active consciousness" (158). Because he is conscious of the importance of Goya to art and to art in times of war, Heaney, in the last stanza, gives a dramatic ending to the composition, reinstating the importance to Goya:

He painted with his fists and elbows, flourished
The stained cape of his heart as history charged.
(141)

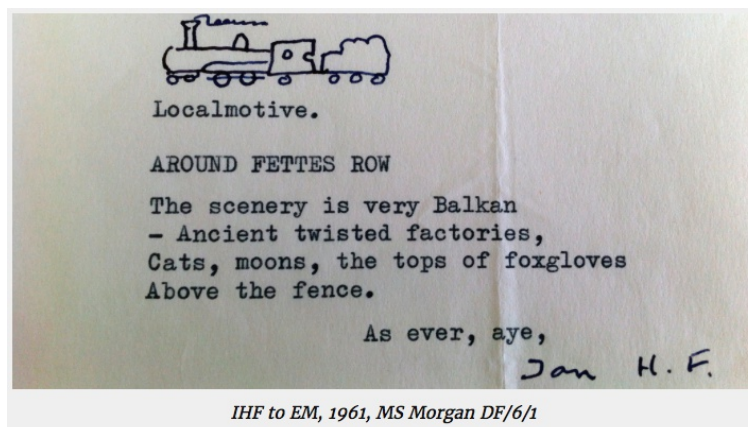
Through the excerpt the reader perceives the weight Heaney gives to Goya, mainly for the reason that the poetic stance wishes to emphasise how he imprinted his personal dilemmas and tones in the Spanish war against France. By stating that the poet "painted with fists and elbows", Heaney conveys he was not just an ordinary painter, but also an artist who showed that making art is a struggle, such as war. Hence, he has not just simply represented the conflicts, but also critically conceptualised the sensation of producing art at the moment his country had been compared to a battlefield. Through this last part, the poet also builds bonds of solidarity between Spain and Ireland because his experience becomes part of a greater whole whose effects and vibrations are seen and felt elsewhere. On the one hand, Heaney depicts his personal anguishes and antinomies, which are embodied in the structure of the poem – the poetic foot indecisively oscillates between ten, eleven and twelve and its stanzas follow the same pattern, having between two and fourteen verses. On the other hand, because those are symptoms of guilt, typical of someone who had left the battle field for the cool air conditioner of the Prado museum, his arguments are more emotionally bound than intellectual: they "call down among us certain disembodied powers, whose footsteps over our hearts we call emotions" (Yeats 157). Nonetheless, by being faithful to his emotions, he is true to the nature of the traditional lyric, and thus, representing the social anguish of the period.

Differently from the reinterpretation of history present in Northern Irish writers, Scottish poets were searching for a new language and tradition that would capture the modern culture and speed. Uninspired by the romantic outbursts of nationalism through the revival of the Scottish idiolect and language, new poets were exploring inventive avenues of thinking brought by recent media and technology. Edwin Morgan was one of the central voices of this creative resurgence by severely criticising the imposition of a certain view of Scottishness to young writers:

I am certain that Scottish literature is being held back, and young writers are slow to appear, not only because of publishing difficulties but also because of a prevailing

intellectual mood of indifferentism and conservatism, a desperate unwillingness to move out into the world with which every child now at school is becoming familiar - the world of television and sputniks, automation and LPs, electronic music and multi-story flats, rebuilt city centres and new towns, coffee bars and bookable cinemas... a world that will be more clean, more 'cool' than the one it leaves behind. (Morgan 174)

Morgan's partner and friend, Ian Hamilton Finlay was being published and intellectually stimulated by the enthusiastic disputes between the traditionalists and new avant-gardist writers. During the 1962 International Writers Festival of August, in Edinburgh, he witnessed simultaneously the dispute between the "Stalinist" Hugh MacDiarmid and his "Cosmopolitan" nemesis Alexander Trocchi and the breakthrough of his career with the successful reading of his Orkney poems (Alec Finlay 19). Allied with Morgan's cultural project, Finlay's *Poor Old Tired Horse* poetry journal gained importance as a "crucial outlet" (Finlay 20) for the spread of the new poetic experimentations. More than keen on exploring the visual possibilities of work with language, Finlay was, indeed, also attracted to the modern and contemporary *zeitgeist* of that historical period. In a letter to Edwin Morgan from 1961, he makes a revealing sketch about his interpretation of Scottish nationalism.



From the excerpt of the letter, available at the Glasgow University Archive website, it is possible to observe Finlay's identification with the pictorial nature of concrete poetry, since his "Local-motive" is complemented by a simple and rudimentary drawing. Additionally, this national place, for him, is not bucolic or transcendental, but modern and spearheaded by the rapid rhythm of the train. The pictographic nature of the poem is similarly reinforced by the quasi-raiku structure of the last three lines, which intermingles natural and non-natural elements of the landscape. Here, factories are ancient, and cats, moons and foxgloves occupy the same place above the fence – perhaps gazing at the locomotive while it makes its journey through the Balcanic mountains. From this simple illustration, it can be perceived that Ian Hamilton Finlay was imagining a new kind of poetry, one which would reify images in order to reproduce the modern fast paced sensibility, guided by television shows, advertisements and machines. In other words, Finlay was using a then contemporary perception to create his own artistic ethos.

While Finlay was struck by technology as a pictorial metaphor for his work, Morgan was using the scientific imaginary to write poetry. That view was reinforced with the retrospective article of 2006, "Poetry and Virtual Realities", when he discussed the role of science, and consequently, robotics to his literary universe.

The computer threw out challenges in many directions, in music and poetry, in chess, in cryptography, in linguistic analysis and translation. (37)

I was... interested... in the workings of the imagination, and in how scientific facts and discoveries could be opened out fictionally within a broader context of human experience. And at times I would use science-fiction proper, in that the basis of the fiction would be something not yet discovered or materialized, or something thought at present to be impossible. (40)

From the excerpts, it is clear the poet was looking at how the language of science could corroborate with the workings of the art. His version of a scientific language would stem from the experimentation with the words and the possibility of permutation and interchange. One of the poems in which this vision is clear is “Unscrambling the Waves at Gonhilly”, which was written to celebrate the first transatlantic telecommunication signals by satellite that were received in Goonhilly in Cornwall in 1962.

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t e l f i s h
d o g s t a r
s a r p h i n
d o l d i n e
t e l w h a l
n a r s t a r
s a r d o c k
h a d d i n e
d o g w h a l
n a r f i s h
d o l d o c k
h a d p h i n
d o g d o c k
h a d f i s h
d o l w h a l
n a r p h i n
h a d w h a l
n a r d o c k
t e l d o c k
h a d s t a r
s a r w h a l
n a r d i n e
d o g p h i n
d o l f i s h
s a r f i s h
d o g d i n e
d o l s t a r
t e l p h i n
s a r s t a r
t e l d i n e
s a r d i n e
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h a d d o c k
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d o g f i s h
t e l s t a r
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Playing with the name of the satellite, “Telestar”, Morgan composed a permutational poem with five different sea animals. In his words, that exchange added a sense of movement to the piece, suggesting “the voyage of the signals across the Atlantic” (40). More than combining science – and specially biology – to poetry, Morgan was effectively changing the epistemology of poetry as merely mimesis and creating a scientific-mimeses. In this new language, nature is not the source of inspiration anymore but rather, its comprehension and systematization. Another permutational poem is “The Computer’s First Christmas Card”, from the volume *The Second Life*, 1968 and which was exhibited at the art exposition “Cybernetic Serendipity”. In here, the poet changes the first letter of the trochaic verses to reproduce the minimalistic sounds and language of the computer, which is often abbreviated to its bare

minimum.

jollymerry
hollyberry
jollyberry
merryholly
happyjolly
jollyjelly
jellybelly
bellymerry
hollyheppy
jollyMolly
marryJerry
merryHarry
happyBarry
heppyJarry
bobbyheppy
berryjorry
jorryjolly
moppyjelly
Mollymerry
Jerryjolly
bellyboppy
jorryhoppy
hollymoppy
Barrymerry
Jarryhappy
happyboppy
boppyjolly
jollymerry
merrymerry
merrymerry
merryChris
ammerryasa
Chrismerry
asMERRYCHR
YSANTHEMUM

This version of Scottish avant-gard was not far from the experimentations carried out by the Noigandres group in São Paulo. Concrete poetry in Brazil represented the frustration with traditional forms of art. Inspired by the formal principles presented by the Exhibition of Max Bill's work at the Modern Art Museum of São Paulo (1951), concrete poetry sought to abolish the traditional verse and expand its spatial scope. With the end of the Vargas Era and the restoration of democracy, the Concrete group also reflected the rampant modernization of Brazil. With the promise of a social progress that would encapsulate fifty years in five, the government of Juscelino Kubitschek (1956-1961) sought to industrialize Brazil and modernise its economy for the international market. In addition, Kubitschek sponsored the most

ambitious architectural project in Brazilian history: the construction of its capital, Brasília, under the direction of town planner Lúcio Costa and architect Oscar Niemeyer. Their architectural project was called “Plano Piloto”, which served as an inspiration to the title of the first manifesto of Concrete Poetry, “The Pilot Plan for Concrete Poetry”.

It is in the “Pilot Plan” that the brothers de Campos and Décio Pignatari initiated their mimetic revolution, seeking to create a verbivocovisual poem – a term borrowed from James Joyce.

As ‘subdivisões prismáticas da Idéia’, de Mallarmé, o método ideogrâmico de Pound, a apresentação ‘verbivocovisual’ joyceana e a mímica verbal de Cummings convergem para um novo conceito de composição, para uma nova teoria da forma – uma organoforma – onde noções tradicionais (...) tendem a desaparecer e ser superadas por uma organização poética (...) da POESIA CONCRETA.¹ (Augusto de Campos 31).

Concrete poets established a fruitful dialogue with Germany, and, after five years of exchange, writers in the United Kingdom became aware of the importance of the work that was being made in Brazil. The very outset of the Brazilian and British creative exchange was mediated through a letter. According to Edwin Morgan and Alec Finlay, the first mentioning of concrete poetry from Brasil was published in *The Times Literary Supplement* of 25th of May, 1962, in which the Portuguese poet E. M. de Melo Castro drew attention to the Concrete movement of Brazil. In fact, Melo sent a letter in order to criticize an article of the previous issue, “Poetry, Prose and Machine” which failed to mention the *Noigandres* group.

This letter was persuasive enough to encourage Edwin Morgan and Ian Hamilton Finlay to get in touch with the poets from Brazil. Finlay, on the 14th. of June of the same year, wrote to Augusto de Campos asking for his contribution to fifth number of the poetic journal *Poor Old Tired Horse* (P.O.T.H). Without hesitation, Augusto de Campos replied to Finlay, offering the poems he requested and the *Noigandres* anthology, which included the Pilot Plan for Concrete Poetry. At the same time Augusto de Campos contributed to the development of the journal edited by Finlay, he also used the letter as a medium for the circulation of the poetic project spearheaded by the group in Brazil.

The Brazilian poems were published on P.O.T.H. in March, 1963, entirely in Portuguese and differed enormously from the volume as a whole. While many of the poems published on the fifth number of the journal were still based on traditional verse, the pieces by Augusto de Campos and Pedro Xisto spread and surpassed the frontiers between languages and offered an organic interaction between form and image. In other words, they were concerned the visual aspect of the verbivocovisual paradigm.

At the same time Finlay was in contact with Augusto de Campos, Edwin Morgan was also in contact with him. Edwin Morgan, on the 6th of March of 1963, wrote to Augusto de Campos, sending him poems and asking for his critical opinion of his work. There is a striking shift in tone here, while Finlay was inquisitive and eager to learn from Augusto, Morgan was validating his view as a pioneer of the movement. Unfortunately, my research could not yet trace Augusto de Campos’s reply to his letter, but I am quite sure it would have been about the use of language and spatiality, a dear theme for early Augusto de Campos’ poetry.

On 8th of August, 1963, (soon after the publication of *P.O.T.H*) Morgan wrote another letter to Augusto de Campos, thanking him for sending the poetic Journal *Invenção* number two. Even though there is still an absent letter, it is clear that the *Noigandres* group had

invited both him and Ian Hamilton Finlay to publish their work in *Invenção* number four. Moreover, Morgan comments on the lay out of his own poems. In addition to the Scottish poets, the volume presented poems by Eugen Gomringer, Vladimir Mayakovsky, among others. This mutual publication of Brazilian poets in Britain and the British in Brazil produced a much wider web of interactions, which would surpass discreet manifestations. In the same letter, Morgan states:

I am enclosing a few poems and translations... Two translations of poems by yourself — which I am trying to get into print, together with some other versions, in our *Times Literary Supplement*, a somewhat conservative organ — but we shall see. (2015, 100).

Soon after, Morgan also writes to Finally reaffirming his wish to publish his translations of the Noigandres group on the TLS.

Did you get from Augusto the new *Invenção* with our poems in it? The whole magazine is interesting and well-documented too. They're a go-ahead lot in São Paulo. Concrete poetry should be published and discussed, but how is it to be done in this country? I sent translations of the Brazilian concretists to TSL many months ago, but have had no reply. (2015, 101)

From Morgan's stark interrogation about how to discuss avant-gard poetry in Scotland, there is a blatant criticism to the present then, state of the art and culture in his environment. As Eleanor Bell argues, Morgan "was being driven by a growing commitment to a changing nation, its urban culture and its literature, and appalled by the second-rate and backward looking art", which would not reconsider the rise of new medias. The answer that Morgan was so desperately searching in Scottish poetry, he found in the Brazilian Concrete movement.

Additionally, Morgan's fondness of socialism directed him to a political reading of Brazilian Concrete Poetry. Even though social commitment was a current feature in the movement right from the start, the Brazilian critics dismissed such an ideological aspect of their art. However, Morgan stated he was struck by the variety of approaches of Concrete Poetry in Brazil, because they could incorporate effects of satire, irony and direct commitment. He also highlighted that the poem "Cuba Sim, Ianque Não" [Cuba Yes, Yankee No] was a masterpiece, and that it bore comparison to the African American engaged poetry of that time.

I am struck by the great variety of approach, from the most abstract and patterned to the committed (I like very much your *Cuba Sim Ianque Não*). It is good to keep the concrete method capable of doing different things from effects of pure place, relation, and movement to effects of satire, irony and direct comment. (Morgan, 2015: 101).

This poem, which enormously impressed Morgan, was called "Cubagrama". However, instead of being a simplistic anti-North American poem, Campos produced a political message on a multidimensional level. Extremely ahead of its time, the poem deconstructed both capitalist and socialist ideologies through a complex disposition and fragmentation of words.

From the previous examples, it is possible to draw a parallel between great social changes and artistic innovation. Even with the social distresses, Northern Irish poets responded to the transformations of the period with a historically reconfiguration. Concrete Poetry, on the other hand, both in Scotland and Brazil represented the search for an artistic presence that would be meaningful and true to the period. In their different attempts and intercultural dialogue, the Noigandres group and the Scottish revival left a distinctive mark in the period. In short, through their revolutionary form and art, they blurred the boundaries between personal and collective, enacting then, the greatest feminist contribution to cultural studies.

Note

¹ The ‘prismatic subdivisions of the Idea’ by Mallarmé, the ideogrammatic method by Pound and the ‘verbocovisual’ presentation by Joyce and the verbal miming by Cummings converge into a new compositional concept, to a new theory of form – the organo-form – in which traditional notions (...) tend to disappear and be overcome by a poetic organization (...) of CONCRETE POETRY. (Augusto de Campos 31)

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