

THE POET'S BLUEPRINT:  
THE PASTORAL AND THE AVANT-GARDE  
IN IAN HAMILTON FINLAY'S *POOR. OLD. TIRED. HORSE*

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the Scottish poet-artist Ian Hamilton Finlay's 1960s little magazine *Poor. Old. Tired. Horse.*, locating it within Scottish and international contexts, and analysing its role in the development of Finlay's work. The magazine opened Scotland up to new international developments, rejecting the nationalist dogma of the Scottish Renaissance movement led by Hugh MacDiarmid. It also built upon the networks established by such poet-publishers as Cid Corman, Robert Creeley and Gael Turnbull, making an important contribution to the international poetry scene of the 1960s. Often associated with the concrete poetry movement, *POTH* was in fact open to a number of avant-gardes as well as more traditional forms. Out of this eclecticism came Finlay's unique blend of the pastoral, the classical and the avant-garde, while the magazine's experiments with the visual presentation of poetry anticipated Finlay's later work.

KEY WORDS: *Poor. Old. Tired. Horse.* (*POTH*), Ian Hamilton Finlay, little magazine, concrete poetry, eclecticism.

RESUMEN

Este ensayo se centra en la pequeña revista *Poor. Old. Tired. Horse.* que editó el artista y poeta escocés Ian Hamilton Finlay durante los años sesenta del siglo XX, situándola dentro de su contexto escocés e internacional y analizando su papel en el desarrollo de la obra de Finlay. La revista permitió que Escocia se abriera a los nuevos avances internacionales y rechazara el dogma nacionalista del movimiento Renacimiento Escocés que lideraba Hugh MacDiarmid. También se basó en las conexiones establecidas por otros poetas-editores como Cid Corman, Robert Creeley and Gael Turnbull, contribuyendo así al panorama poético internacional de esos años sesenta. *POTH* se asoció en numerosas ocasiones al movimiento de poesía concreta pero la verdad es que estaba abierta tanto a las vanguardias como a otras formas tradicionales. A partir de este eclecticismo surgió la mezcla original que Finlay llevó a cabo de lo pastoril, lo clásico y la vanguardia, al tiempo que los experimentos de la revista con la presentación visual de la poesía anticipaba la obra posterior de Finlay.

PALABRAS CLAVE: *Poor. Old. Tired. Horse.* (*POTH*), Ian Hamilton Finlay, pequeña revista, poesía concreta, eclecticismo.

The cover of issue 13 of Ian Hamilton Finlay's magazine *Poor.Old.Tired.Horse* (*POTH*) is graced by a short poem by Mary Ellen Solt, "Bird," beautifully illustrated by the English artist John Furnival (*POTH* 13, 1965). In warm, brown ink, using smooth, rounded lines, Furnival draws a bird to the left of the handwritten lyric, with trees and hills in the background. Beneath the bird, running across the bottom of the page, is an urban environment, rendered in a contrasting geometric style. In one continuous line, Furnival links hexagonal shapes to form houses and rooftops. This marriage of the natural and built environment, folk art and constructivism, offers an attractive, if incomplete, summary of the different ideas and approaches brought together in *POTH*. For all his modernism, Finlay drew much inspiration from the pastoral, and *POTH* can be seen as part of a process of exploration that culminated in his life's work, Little Sparta, the celebrated neo-classical garden he created with his wife Sue at Stonypath near Edinburgh.

It is well established amongst commentators that Finlay's experiments with concrete and visual poetry began an investigation of materiality. As Ken Cockburn and Alec Finlay write, "his ability to create poem-objects, inscriptions and sculpture is the prime example of the possibilities concrete poetry represented" (Cockburn 19). Although concrete poetry was only one element among many in *POTH*, the magazine did explore, in more general terms, the visual language of poetry, making use of illustrations, typography, calligraphy and the spatial field of the page.

*POTH* also allowed Finlay to find a context in which to place his own work. Running over 25 issues from 1962 to 1967, *POTH* took its name from a line in Robert Creeley's poem "Please"—"This is a poem about a horse that got tired/Poor. Old. Tired. Horse." (Creeley 156)—and the American avant-garde had a considerable impact on the magazine.

As the Scottish poet and regular *POTH* contributor Edwin Morgan noted in 1968, the magazine represented "Finlay's own unformulated but formative view of the world of art" and a desire to "keep certain lines of communication open, in particular those from country to country, but also those between poet and artists, and those between present and past." Finlay himself has said that he was looking for "connections between... *apparently* different categories" and this is borne out in the magazine's eclecticism (*Lines Review* 26 42). Yet as Morgan acknowledges, this eclecticism, in retrospect "seems to belong so much to the spirit of the sixties as to have gained more unity and harmony than it appeared to possess at the time." He adds, *POTH* "certainly succeeded in its aim of opening Scotland out to new names and new ideas" (Morgan, *Wood Notes* 21). This essay will locate *POTH* within both a Scottish and international contexts, and analyse its role in the development of Finlay as a poet.

Ian Hamilton Finlay (1925-2006) was born in the Bahamas to Scottish parents but educated in Scotland. In the mid 1940s, Finlay spent a year at Glasgow School of Art, before joining the army. After the War, Finlay lived between Glasgow and London where he came to know the poets Hugh MacDiarmid, W.S. Graham and Dylan Thomas. The 1950s saw Finlay living in Perthshire and the Orkney island of Rousay, where he worked as a shepherd, painted and wrote (Finlay, *Dancers*, xiii-xiv). Rural life provided much of the inspiration for his early writing, in-

cluding the short story collection *The Sea Bed and Other Stories* (1958), a number of radio and stage plays, and many of the poems in *The Dancers Inherit the Party* (1960).

When Finlay came to poetry at the end of the 1950s, he was living in poverty in Edinburgh, and felt marginalised by the Scottish literary establishment. In a 1961 letter to Lorine Niedecker, Finlay wrote “all the Scotch poets say, you MUST write like THIS and THAT, and if you don’t you are *washed* and we shan’t speak to you” (Finlay, *Dancers* 11). Although they had once been friends, by the 1960s Scotland’s great modernist poet Hugh MacDiarmid had become a reactionary, dismissing Finlay and some of the more experimental young Scottish writers as “Teddyboy Poetasters” (MacDiarmid, 813). The older poet publicly denounced Finlay’s 1961 booklet *Glasgow Beasts an a Burd*, arguing that the working class Glaswegian dialect it used “is not the kind of Scots in which high poetry can be written” (MacDiarmid 687). MacDiarmid and his followers failed to appreciate how original Finlay’s fusion of the Scots vernacular with Japanese tanka forms was. Edwin Morgan defended the younger writers, accusing the Scottish Renaissance of beginning “to loosen its hold on life... the result... is a gap between the literary and the public experience which is surprising and indeed shocking” (Morgan, *Essays* 174).

Morgan and Finlay had become aware of each other as contributors to Gael Turnbull’s magazine *Migrant* between 1959 and 1960. Produced on a second-hand duplicator in Turnbull’s California garage, *Migrant* is very much part of the small press revolution. The magazine rejected traditional standards of ‘quality’ publishing, aiming to get the poetry out there, as cheaply and as efficiently as possible (Price). *Migrant* drew on the legacy of Cid Corman’s *Origin* and Robert Creeley’s *Black Mountain Review* as well as 1950s British little magazines such as WP Turner’s Glasgow based *The Poet* and John Sharkey’s *The Window*, and sought to reinvigorate a staid British scene through connections with the international avant-garde.

It is unclear how Finlay first heard of *Migrant*, but by the end of 1959 he was in correspondence with Turnbull’s British deputy Michael Shayer who agreed to publish his poems. It was through *Migrant* that Finlay became aware of the Objectivists and Black Mountain poets, and he soon recognised a kinship, writing to Turnbull: “Your new American poets, Creeley, Dorn, etc—I feel they are my brothers” (NLS, 5 July 1961). Through Turnbull, Finlay made contact with Creeley, Louis Zukovsky, Lorine Niedecker, and many others, soon building an impressive network of correspondents. *Migrant* the magazine closed in September 1960, Turnbull and Shayer feeling that it had served its purpose. An identity had been established, and the press would now concentrate on producing pamphlets by the roster of writers who had come through the magazine, including Finlay’s *The Dancers Inherit The Party* (1960) and Morgan’s *Sovpoems* (1961). These publications only enhanced the Scottish poets’ reputation abroad and helped put Finlay in a position from which he and his partner Jessie McGuffie could launch their own Wild Hawthorn Press in 1961. As Ken Cockburn notes:

Finlay’s agoraphobia... prevented him travelling, so his publications formed a crucial part of his engagement with the wider world. Both *POTH* and Wild Hawthorn Press emerged from a need to define an



art and aesthetics separate from MacDiarmid and his influence, and to create a “support structure” of like-minded practitioners, though... this was the opposite of closed and exclusive’ (Finlay, *Dancers* xvi).

In a letter to Turnbull, Finlay explained that the “idea is to publish *human* poetry, small books, well done, with good linecuts” (NLS, 22 July 1961). Finlay readily acknowledged McGuffie’s role in running the day to day business of the Press, and her earnings as a teacher helped subsidise their activities. In January 1962, Finlay wrote to Turnbull to say that McGuffie and a friend from the folk circuit, Paul Pond (aka Paul Jones of the pop group Manfred Mann), were starting “a monthly poetry sheet” called *Poor. Old. Tired. Horse.* (NLS, 29 Jan 1962). While the magazine never included any editorial comment, McGuffie herself described the project to Turnbull as an attempt to “counteract the terrible depressing kind of writing that always gets published here in Edinburgh these days. I want the series to be non-provincial, but Scotch or American or Wherever-from art, looking all beautiful with lino cuts too” (McGuffie, NLS July 1961). A free sheet inserted into *POTH* 3 (1962) declared that “The Wild Hawthorn Press believes in BEAUTY TRADITION EXPERIMENT” (*POTH* 3 insert). As Alec Finlay writes, Ian Hamilton Finlay had “no interest in experiment for its own sake, and, although *POTH* came to represent the new [concrete] movement, there was no poetic party line; rather, it extolled his timeless themes, the sea and domestic life” (Finlay *Selections*). Pond soon dropped out and *POTH* was edited by Finlay and McGuffie, and later Finlay and his second wife Sue.

A Scottish identity was important to Finlay, but, as he explained to Turnbull, he was opposed to MacDiarmid and his followers’ “intellectualism,” which he saw as “naïve and phoney and corny... They all want to be ‘big, ‘huge’, ‘important’—what is *beautiful* doesn’t matter to them at all.” Finlay admired MacDiarmid’s early lyrics for their beauty and economy, but felt that the older poet had lost his way. Still outraged from the *Glasgow Beasts* debacle, Finlay felt that MacDiarmid and the “academic snobs” who followed him were “not the side of man, and feeling” and loathed “MacDiarmid’s sneering contempt for people.” Of his own idea of an audience, Finlay told Turnbull, “I believe at heart, that people can really enjoy poetry—not just poets” (NLS, 7 April 1962). This reflects, in part, Finlay’s own interest in the emergent folk revival. Finlay was friends with the poet and folklorist Hamish Henderson, and his early poetry shows an interest in folk forms and rural life, as well as the popular Music Hall tradition (Alec Finlay, email to author, 10 Jan 2011). This is in marked contrast to MacDiarmid, who denounced folk-song as “the ignorant drivellings of swinish shepherds” (Calder: Henderson, intro) and saw Music Hall entertainers, as David Goldie notes, as “part of a cultural racket that panders unashamedly to a debased popular taste and thus makes the work of serious art impossible” (Goldie).

As a riposte to those who found the Glaswegian dialect uncouth, Finlay invited the popular newspaper cartoonist Bud Neill to contribute a poem and cartoon to *POTH* 7. Writing to Turnbull, Finlay noted that Neill was a “vernacular cartoonist, who the posh ones don’t like, but really, at odd times, can have a recognising quality that is delightful” (Finlay, NLS, 12 March 1963). Neill’s cartoon



depicts a lazy husband lounging on the beach while his wife holds a bawling infant. While the wife complains “AW, TOAMY—THE WEANS ERSE IS A’ SAUN” (“*Oh, Tommy—the child’s bottom is covered in sand*”), the husband dreams of being out on a row boat, “miles awa’/fae them/ bloody flies” (“*miles away/from those/bloody flies*”) (*POTH* 7 1963). This coarse Glaswegian humour was the perfect riposte to high-minded literary sensibilities.

*POTH*’s playful but pointed anti-elitism also saw it include a poem by the infamous Dundonian poet William Topaz McGonagall (1825-1902), affectionately described by Hamish Henderson as the “unchallenged prince of bad verse” capable of moments of “sublime banality” (Henderson 274-277). Both Henderson and Finlay were fans of MacGonagall, the former publishing an illuminating essay in 1965 on the folk-song roots of his “hobbling and broken backed” verse (Henderson 276). A 1962 feature in the *Daily Express* about *Glasgow Beasts* had compared Finlay to the Dundonian versifier. In a letter to Turnbull, Finlay commented “E. Morgan asks why [MacGonagall] is popular, and me, I’d say it’s because he really is the first stream of consciousness writer, the one who writes as one REALLY thinks. Also he is very Scottish” (NLS 1 May 1962). Finlay is perhaps being slightly facetious here, but nonetheless, he has a point: MacGonagall’s poems have a wonderful innocence, and his misshapen verse forms are inimitable:

‘Twas in the month of December, and in the year 1883,  
That a monster whale came to Dundee,  
Resolved for a few days to sport and play,  
And devour the small fishes in the silvery Tay. (*POTH* 7 insert)

The poem was presented as “AN AMAZING FREE GIFT!” and came printed on a separate insert, accompanied by a woodcut illustration, not unlike those used in *Glasgow Beasts* or *The Sea Bed*. With these two inserts, Finlay was making explicit the popular and folk elements in the “oddly homely,” as his son Alec puts it, avant-garde that *POTH* helped shape (Finlay, *Selections*).

Finlay also published poets who used forms of Scots that were closer to the spoken language than the dictionary derived Lallans of MacDiarmid. Among them were the Edinburgh poet Robert Garioch, who was treated coolly by MacDiarmid, but recognised by Edwin Morgan, among others, for the vitality of his language. Perhaps the most unusual contribution, however, is an elegiac poem in the Shetland dialect by Veng, “Da Lad at Deed Owre Young” (“*The Lad Who Died Too Young*”:

Da streen ida kirkyard we laid him doon,  
Brucks o da boannie man he might a been;  
Wi muckle speculation I da toon,  
An gairded teets ahint the window screen... (*POTH* 3 2)

*Last night in the churchyard we laid him down,  
The scraps of the handsome man he might have been;  
With great speculation in the town,  
And guarded looks behind the window screen...*



Another way in which *POTH* set about defining a new Scottish aesthetic was to publish overlooked Scottish poets whose style and subject matter were at odds with the high modernism of MacDiarmid. Among these were Hamish MacLaren (1901-1987), a naval officer whose poetic career ended with the Second World War. His best known collection was *Sailor with Banjo* (1929), which he described as “a narrative poem interspersed with lyrics” (Spillane). Finlay published three of MacLaren’s lyrics in *POTH*, including “Little Sea House” in *POTH* 15:

Little sea house,  
When I found you,  
The yellow poppies  
Were nodding round you.

Your blue slate hat  
That the four winds  
Came to tug at  
Over the tamarinds:

I remember it well:  
The Salmon nets drying—  
Laugh, violin shell,  
And cease crying.

For I will return  
Through the sea-haze:  
I am sailing back there  
Always, always. (*POTH* 7 7)

The number this poem appeared in was entitled “Boats tides shore fish” and features experimental and traditional poems that evoke fishing communities, a major preoccupation of Finlay’s. The traditional form, simple language and clear images of MacLaren’s poems are recalled in early lyrics of Finlay’s such as “Scene”—“The rain is Slant. Soaked fishers sup/Sad Ellipses from a cup” (Finlay, *Dancers* 212)—or “Island Moment”—“And the little herring barrel./The light just strikes it over/Islands and miles and miles of water/That tilts to the North Pole.” (Finlay, *Dancers* 198).

Several of the contemporary Scottish poets featured in *POTH* shared Finlay’s interest with island life and rural communities, including the Orcadian George Mackay Brown and the Hebridean Ian Crichton Smith. To define *POTH* purely in terms of its “Scottishness,” however, is limiting. An interest in the rural and domestic is not exclusive to Scottish poets, after all, and *POTH* highlighted such commonality with themed issues such as *Teapoth* (*POTH* 23 1967) and *Boats Shores Tides Fish* (*POTH* 15 1964). While *POTH* undoubtedly helped reinvigorate Scottish literature, this was not its sole aim. *POTH* belonged to the world.

*POTH* sampled widely from a range of modern European poets, placing figures from the first half of the century (Apollinaire, Mayakovsky, Trakl), alongside contemporary voices such as Gunter Grass and Hans Arp. One of the key transla-

tors was Morgan, whose interest in the Eastern-Bloc saw him bring translations of Russian Futurists such as Mayakovsky and Pankratov to early issues of *POTH*, as well as the contemporary Russian poet Andrei Voznesensky. Anselm Hollo, a London-based Finnish poet who had been a major contributor to *Migrant*, submitted his own work, as well as translations of Finnish and German poetry.

Americans such as Jerome Rothenberg, Dave Ball, and Cid Corman further extended the scope of work in translation, from the contemporary avant-garde to medieval Japan. The New American Poetry, as defined by Donald Allen's seminal 1960 anthology, was heavily represented too, with Jonathan Williams, Lorine Niedecker, Robert Creeley, Theodore Enslin and Ronald Johnson among the many prominent voices. South American and African poetry were also included. This rich mix shows *POTH*'s commitment to opening Scotland up to different international voices, reclaiming the internationalism of the early Scottish Renaissance for a new generation. It also maps an idiosyncratic path through modernist poetry, locating *POTH*, and its roster of emergent poet-translators, within the avant-garde continuum.

*POTH*'s most significant engagement with the international avant-garde, however, was to come with its embracing of concrete poetry. While concrete was not as dominant a feature of *POTH* as some may think—most of Finlay's own concrete poetry appeared elsewhere—its presence was nonetheless significant, not least for being the first Scottish publication to feature the form. Furthermore, concrete informed the magazine's approach in a number of ways, encouraging Finlay to experiment with the visual presentation of poems, and poetic form itself.

In Spring 1963, Finlay wrote to Turnbull of his attempts to write concrete poems:

I think I'll call mine 'thingpoems': I want them to be simple objects, gay or sad, and no more complex than potatoes. It doesn't seem a big departure for me, since I've been feeling toward it for a long time... I want to do it so they are just things, simple and good, an subtle in a subtle way, i.e., simple on top, but full of hidden life. (NLS, 12 March 1962)

The following month he told Turnbull "I feel that I have come—at least for the moment—to the end of poems that are *about*, and want to do poems that just are" (NLS, 29 April 1962). This suggests that Finlay was already familiar with Eugene Gomringer's definition of the concrete poetry aesthetic, *From Line to Constellation*: "In the constellation something is brought into the world. It is a reality in itself and not a poem about something or other" (Solt). In a widely quoted letter to Pierre Garnier from September 1963, Finlay set out his philosophical case for concrete poetry:

I should say—however hard I would find it to justify this in theory—that 'concrete' by its very limitations, offers a tangible image of goodness and sanity; it is very far from the now-fashionable poetry of anguish and self... It is a model, of order, even if set in a space which is full of doubt... I would like, if I could, to bring into this, somewhere the unfashionable notion of 'Beauty', which I find



compelling and immediate, however theoretically inadequate. I mean this in the simplest way—that if I was asked, “Why do you like concrete poetry?” I could truthfully answer “Because it is beautiful.” (Finlay, *Model* 22-23)

This interest in order brings Gomringer to mind once again: “restriction in the best sense—concentration and simplification—is the very essence of poetry” (Solt). The emphasis on order and moral goodness, meanwhile, reflects Finlay’s neo-classicism. Yet as Susan Howe argues, Finlay brings “sensibilities that are romantic and even religious” to his work, citing his preoccupation with the sea, “both word and thing” (Howe 5-6). For all his emphasis on order, beauty—particularly that associated with the natural world—is deeply felt in Finlay’s work.

Concrete poetry made its Scottish debut in *POTH* 6 (March 1963), its back page featuring three poems by the Brazilian Noigandres school: Marcelo Moura’s “sal/sol,” Pedro Xisto’s “aguas/glaucas” and Augusto de Campos’s “pluvial-fluvial.” While the rest of the magazine is printed in a traditional serif typeface, the three concrete poems are printed in the original sans serif font. A symbol of modernity, sans serif fonts also give the poems a classical coolness and uniformity of shape. The concrete poem is designed as an object for contemplation, and the openness of the form allows the reader to bring their own associations and interpretations. As Eugene Gomringer wrote, “The constellation is ordered by the poet. He determines the play-area, the field or force and suggests its possibilities. the reader, the new reader, grasps the idea of play, and joins in... The constellation is an invitation” (Solt).

Finlay published one of his first concrete poems in *POTH* 8 (1963), a number that pays tribute to the Russian constructivist poets and artists of the 1920s. In “Homage to Malevich” Finlay draws explicit connections between the constructivists and the concrete poets. His “black block” is a homage to Malevich’s “Black Square” paintings. Finlay referred to these “abstract word compositions” as his “suprematist” poems, as opposed his “fauve” poems, which, Alec Finlay notes, “recreated ‘sensed experience’” (Finlay, *Selections*). The latter are more epigrammatic in form and use colour to produce different effects. The two approaches are featured in Finlay’s first concrete book, *Rapel*, from Autumn 1963.

Finlay had also made contact with American poets engaging with visual and concrete poetry. The same issue also features a “concrete metamorphosis” of a poem by the Russian Tatlin by Jonathan Williams, and one of Mary Ellen Solt’s “Flowers in Concrete” poems, “White Rose,” subtitled here as a homage to Gonchorova. Solt’s poem, which is shaped like a flower, resembles earlier forms of pattern poetry, as well as the mimetic form of Apollinaire’s *Calligrammes*. However, in Solt’s poem there is no clear relation of form to content. As in a Gomringer constellation, Solt presents a shaped collection of words for our contemplation: ‘Say—today—no one—hears—tell—eternity—displays—no such—hear’—(*POTH* 8 4).

*POTH* 10 (October 1963), the first concrete number, presents historical examples of the form by Gomringer and Augusto de Campos, alongside new poems which take the form in different directions, from the abstractions of Robert Lax, to the typewriter poems of Dom Sylvester Houedard. As Alec Finlay writes, “from the beginning Finlay understood the [concrete] movement had many aspects and





possibilities" (Finlay, *Selections*) and *POTH* features some of his experiments with related forms and new developments. His contribution to *POTH* 14 (1965) is, on one level, a play on colour-object associations. The "correct" pairings—"blue sky," "red roof," "green field"—are systematically rearranged so we have "blue field," "green roof" and so on (*POTH* 14 2). The mismatched colours have a long, spear-like dash through them, while the "correct" pairs are left intact. Yet how incorrect are these alternative pairings? A "red sky" is familiar enough, and it is possible to imagine a "blue field" of flowers, or even a "green roof" of verdigris. And if we think like Finlay's beloved fauvists, then all manner of colour-object associations become possible. The reader is therefore invited to contemplate the poem on a visual and semiotic level. This extends to the poem's form. It resembles some objectivist poems in that it takes the form of seven lines, some made up of a single pair of words, others made of two pairs spaced well apart. In a mimetic concrete poem, we might expect to see the "sky" at the top, with the "roof" and "field" below, so as to represent a picturesque landscape. Indeed, Finlay does just that, placing "red sky" on the first line and so on. However, he confuses matters by, for example, placing "red roof" on the fifth line, with "green sky" to its right on the line below. As a result, the poem becomes a cubist landscape, its features seen from multiple angles. What at first appears to be an inscrutable arrangement of words and dashes is revealed to be a highly sophisticated play on linguistic and visual signs in poetry and art.

*POTH* 13 (1965) is subtitled "Visual—Semiotic—Concrete" and includes concrete and visual poems, alongside what the Noigrandres group called semiotic poems, where words are exchanged for symbols, with a lexical key revealing what these symbols stand for. Finlay's own experiments with the semiotic or code poem take Gomringer's conception of the poem as "play-area" to its logical conclusion: a game, or a puzzle, which the reader attempts to solve. "Semi-idiotic poem," drawn by John Furnival, takes the form of a 5 × 5 grid on which various symbols are arranged (*POTH* 13, insert).<sup>1</sup> The lexical key reveals that a white circle represents "buttonhole and flower" and a x-shaped cross represents "windmill and cancel." In an ingenious inversion of the homophonic play of his concrete poems, Finlay also presents objects which, when reduced to a stylised basic form, look alike: an "anchor and umbrella," and a "funnel and cloud." These are arranged, in different combinations and sequences, in the grid and it is up to the reader to make sense, if any, of the poem. The sequence of windmill, cloud and umbrella suggests a pastoral scene, as does the later appearance of a flower, but what are we to make of the black squares or the partially filled in crosses and squares? A windmill against a cloud? Or the cloud passing, being cancelled, allowing the flowers to grow in the sunlight? Like any good puzzle, "Semi-Idiotic Poem" is as delightful as it is frustrating.

Other poems in this issue go further than the semiotic poems in their attempts to challenge received modes of linguistic communication. Mary Ellen Solt's

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<sup>1</sup> Reprinted in Emmett Williams, *An Anthology of Concrete Poetry* (New York: Something Else, 1967).





“Moon Shot Sonnet” features no letters, and no key, only inverted T shapes arranged into “stanzas” (*POTH* 13, insert). One way of reading this is that it reclaims a traditional form for its visual qualities, while its subject becomes that which is suggested by the title and the poem’s rectangular shape: a rocket. Or perhaps she is projecting the sonnet into the future, envisioning a new kind of visual language. Solt’s abstraction invites the reader to explore the space of the page *and* outer space. In two untitled works by the Austrian Heinz Gappmayr any linguistic signs are obliterated by Malevichian black squares. In one, typewritten letters peak out the sides. It is just about possible to make out an “i” and an “n,” but these could just as easily be an “f” or an “m.” In the other a beam of white cuts into the square, revealing the tails of typewritten letters which become blurred as they move towards the blackness. (*POTH* 13, insert) Both subvert concrete’s “invitation” to the reader by suggesting the existence of a “poem” beneath the monolithic black block. The black block therefore acts as both a barrier, rendering any linguistic elements out of grasp, and an invitation, a blank canvas on which we can impose our own meaning.

In parallel to *POTH*, Finlay produced a number of innovative poem-objects for Wild Hawthorn Press, from postcard and poster poems, to kinetic books and fold-out standing poems. He would take these poem-objects a step further, however, with the outdoor works he produced with a number of collaborators. “All this is quite new, and I think no-one—not even the poets—has quite understood the possibilities. Far from being an end... it is really only a beginning... I think the garden, and the church, and the side of the block of flats, are the places for poems” (letter to Henry Clyne, 1966, *Selections*). At the 1967 Brighton Festival he presented poems on sandblasted glass, stone and metal, which were placed outdoors. Photographs of some of these appear in *POTH* 24 (1967) alongside some of the other concrete poetry installations, including Morgan’s poster-poems and the typographical columns of Hansbjorg Mayer, foreboding perspex tubes printed with abstract poems in dense typescript. While this issue, in effect, marks Finlay’s move away from concrete towards poem objects, it does suggest new paths. Gomringer’s aim of giving “poetry an organic function in society” was being fulfilled (Solt).

It is significant then, that the final issue of *POTH* (*POTH* 25, 1967), side-stepped concrete poetry for the kind of epigrammatic one-word poems Finlay would later inscribe on stone, wood and metal. This sub-genre of the short poem was a Finlay invention, a zen-like distillation of the monostich, or one line poem. The influence of concrete, should not be underestimated however. While one-word poems may seem more verbal than visual, their shape and layout contribute to their overall effect. The title of the poem could be of any length, but they were to be set out in a particular way. As he explained in a letter to his friend Kenelm Cox:

the one-word poem should be composed of a title plus one word.  
All (true) poems have form, and in this case one should see the title  
and the word as being 2 straight lines, which come together forming  
a corner; the corner is the form of this poem. Only, these corners  
must be so constructed as to be open (opening) in all directions.  
That is the paradox. (Finlay, *Model* 39)

Their form, as we see below, is very much a model of order:

The Boat's Blueprint

*Water (POTH 25, 1967 8)*

Placed in the centre of the page, surrounded by negative space, the form achieves the openness Finlay talks of. Like his concrete poems, Finlay's one-word poems are an invitation. The test of these poems was, for Finlay, whether they were memorable and resonant. This example certainly achieves such an aim. As Finlay explained himself, "the shape of the boat is determined by the nature of water, or he who understands water may calculate the appearance of the boat; further, water is blue, water is blue print (on white stones), water is clear and has lines on it, like a blueprint..." (Finlay, *Model 40*) As Finlay commented in a letter to Ernst Jandl, one of several poets he invited to contribute to the one-word *POTH*, the form has "haiku-brevity, without reading like a pseudo-Japanese poem. Or in another way, it is very close to the classical Latin epitaph or epigram" (Finlay, *Model 41*). Or, indeed, the Poundian epigram, or William Carlos Williams short poem. It should come as no surprise, then, that American poets responded enthusiastically to Finlay's request, with Ronald Johnson, Jerome Rothenberg, Jonathan Williams and Aram Saroyan among the contributors. Concrete poets, from Britain to Brazil, also submitted, as well as poets known for more traditional forms such as the Scots George Mackay Brown and Douglas Young. It seems appropriate that Gael Turnbull, who played such a pivotal role in Finlay's development, is also among the contributors to the final *POTH*. Finlay was less interested in one-word poems that were "merely witty" (Finlay, *Model 41*), but Edwin Morgan's playful objectivist tribute clearly amused him:

Homage to Zukovsky

The (*POTH 25 3*)

The form lends itself to the pastoral, and Ronald Johnson combines this with concrete-style word play to create different levels of meaning:

Moon-tree

Horn-beam

Mist-Tree

haze-1 (*POTH 25 2*)

"Mist" connects to "haze," of course, and the obscured tree also becomes a "Mist-Tree" or "mystery." The hazel is part of the birch family, like the hornbeam of the previous poem in the sequence. A crescent moon could be seen to resemble a horn, while the beam could represent moonlight.



Sean Latham and Robert Scholes are critical of the tendency to see magazines “essentially as aggregations of otherwise autonomous works, similar to literary anthologies. As a result, archivists have freely disaggregated periodicals, separating their ‘linguistic codes’ from what Jerome McGann calls their ‘bibliographic code’” the semantic elements of design, typeface, binding and so on (Latham and Scholes). These two signifying systems “work together to generate the overall meaning of a text” argues (McGann 12). In order to gain a “more global and more uniform view of texts and the processes of textual production,” as McGann puts it, a discussion of *POTH*’s bibliographical codes is necessary (McGann, *Textual Condition* 12). As McGann writes, “All texts, like all other things human, are embodied phenomena, and the body of the text is not exclusively linguistic,” (McGann, *Textual Condition* 12).

As we have seen, concrete poetry influenced Finlay’s approach to the visual presentation of poetry in a number of ways, and the later issues of *POTH* “became the epitome” of the magazine, as Alec Finlay writes, “each a unified design” (Finlay *Selections*). Just as concrete poems can be reduced to the formula content = form, perhaps we can also reduce these later editions of *POTH* to content = form = design. These numbers might not have achieved the total integration of meaning, form and design that Finlay’s innovative kinetic and sequential poem-books did, but they do represent a move away from the miscellany of the magazine, towards the unified form of the artists’ book.

Peter Brooker and Andrew Thacker make McGann’s bibliographic codes more precise “by discussing a particular subset, the *periodical codes* at play in any magazine” (Brooker and Thacker 6). Periodical codes encompass a wide range of features, including page layout, typefaces, price, size of volume, periodicity of publication, use of illustrations, “use and placement of advertisements, quality of paper and binding, networks of distribution and sales, modes of financial support, payment practices towards contributors, editorial arrangements, or the type of material published” (Brooker and Thacker 6). Those periodical codes relating to design are most relevant to this discussion, but it is worth briefly discussing the codes that refer to the magazine’s external relations too.

Throughout its entire run, *POTH* sold for “astonishingly unelitist” price of 9d (4p), regardless of the size or format of each issue. (Morgan, *Wood Notes* 21) The magazine was available directly from Wild Hawthorn Press, and was distributed internationally with the help of Finlay’s many publisher-poet friends. It was also available in Britain’s more progressive bookshops and galleries. Unlike some avant-garde publishers, Finlay and McGuffie were happy to promote their works in the mainstream press, albeit provocatively; a 1963 advertisement in *The Scotsman* newspaper mischievously quoted Hugh MacDiarmid’s appraisal of *POTH*: “utterly viscious and deplorable.” (Morgan *Wood Notes* 20) So while the magazine itself contained no editorial comment, Finlay and McGuffie used the public realm to reinforce *POTH*’s oppositional stance towards the Scottish literary establishment.

Unlike *Migrant*, *POTH* did adhere to basic standards of quality publishing. Furthermore, there was nothing in the design of the earlier *POTHs* to suggest an avant-garde or oppositional stance. Until issue 15, *POTH* used the same basic layout, with a typeset masthead and minimal use of illustrations or colour. The maga-



zine was, until the concrete number, *POTH* 10, a single folded A4 sheet, although some issues came with loose inserts. The reasons for this are practical, rather than aesthetic. Staples cost money and time, and the design choices were limited to the typefaces and templates the printers could offer. It was only with the advent of photo-offset printing technology that Finlay could finally experiment with modern design styles and illustrations (Finlay *Selections*), resulting in the more ambitious designs of the later numbers. The sheer variety of design approaches in the later issues of *POTH* is dazzling. As Edwin Morgan writes, “few magazines encouraged such a marked sense of anticipation from number to number... as soon as you decided that heavily portentous numbers devoted to the art theory (not even the art!) of Ad Reinhardt or Charles Biederman implied an equally unyielding or abstract literary commitment, you were presented with a ‘teapoth’ number rich in unportentous homely fantasy and charm.”

The Reinhardt number (*POTH* 18 1966) is a collaboration with the leading optical artist Bridget Riley, and each page shows his beautifully handwritten text wrapped around her large, stylised zeros. Susan Howe notes that Finlay sent the blank cards to Riley first (Howe 6), meaning that Reinhardt’s text is a response to her artwork, inverting the normal relationship whereby any illustrations would be a response to the content or theme of an issue. *POTH* 22 sets Biederman’s “art credo” in austere neues typographie on the recto, with stark black and white photographs on the verso. With both numbers, it is clear that the design complements the contents. Its successor, *Teapoth* (*POTH* 23), designed by John Furnival, is, as Morgan notes, altogether more cheerful, and while it uses modern typography, the typeface used is less stark, set in a warm red ink. Bringing together the homely and the avant-garde, the cover boasts a ‘T’ shaped poem by Ronald Johnson in celebration of the domestic pleasures of “spoons, shirts, chests, things” (*POTH* 23, 1967).

The homely and pastoral were more explicitly realised in hand-illustrated issues, such as *POTH* 15 “Boats shores tides fish” (1965), drawn by the Scottish artist Margo Sandeman, and *POTH* 20 “The Tug, The Barge” (1966), a collaboration between Finlay and Peter Lyle. The former features work by a number of poets, but these gain a sense of unity through the shared sea theme, and Sandeman’s graceful line-drawings and handwriting. In some respects it is *POTH*’s ‘folk’ issue, with traditional verse from Hamish MacLaren and Mackay Brown accompanied by Sandeman’s pastoral and sea scenes. Finlay’s own contributions combine his interest in folk themes and avant-garde forms, being found poems based on boat names and port registration codes, motifs he would use throughout his career. A short poem by Edwin Morgan, “Boats and Tides”—“row the sea/row it easy/Rothesay”<sup>2</sup>—is surrounded by Sandeman’s drawings of boat signs bearing registration codes such as ‘LH20’ and ‘OB326’. (*POTH* 15 4) ‘Green Waters’ finds the lyricism in the names of fishing trawlers, arranging them so as to create a sense of the changing environ-

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<sup>2</sup> Rothesay is a popular Scottish seaside resort on the Isle of Bute in the Firth of Clyde.



ment: ‘Constant Star/Daystar/Starwood/Starlit Waters/Moonlit Waters/Drift’ (*POTH* 15 5). Sandeman illustrates these poems with boats, moons and stars.

*POTH* 20, “The Tug The Barge,” was, like the two previous issues, a unified work created by one writer and one illustrator/designer. But while *POTH* 18’s Riley/Reinhardt number was resolutely avant-garde, and *POTH* 19’s Ronald Johnson/John Furnival collaboration deployed cutting edge typographical design, “The Tug, The Barge,” as its title suggests, was altogether more homely, yet it is arguably as radical as its predecessors. The cover design is in landscape format, and features a Finlay poem illustrated by Lyle (*POTH* 20 1). In comparison to Sandeman’s detailed folk-art, Lyle’s black marker-pen drawings, set against a white background, possess a child-like primitivism. This simplicity neatly complements Finlay’s pared-down lyricism:

The tug  
the barge  
          the water  
          the wind  
                  the sky  
                  the cloud

The boat’s hull is a rough tear-drop shape, topped with a square and a tube for the cabin and funnel. Each cloud is a single joined-up pen-stroke, while the water is represented by curved strokes and dashes. A yellow blob of a sun rises from the bottom left corner of the page. The following pages feature variations on this poem, and further faux-naive scrawls, as Finlay and Lyle work through a deliberately limited set of images. Although the style of execution is very different, this number is very similar to its apparently more sophisticated predecessors in that it focuses on the collaborative exploration of a single idea. It is considerably more charming, however, with a simplicity and openness that reflects Finlay’s best concrete poems.

As we have seen, *POTH* is not a magazine that can be tied to any one aesthetic or movement. Yet its eclecticism should not be confused with a lack of direction or discrimination. There were a number of contemporary trends which *POTH* chose not to cover, notably the Beats or the English pop-poets. Non-expressionist poetry was favoured, with the Objectivist/Black Mountain representing one line, and concrete poetry another. But to suggest the magazine or its contents lacked feeling would be quite incorrect: *POTH* resonates with luminous details and timeless images. *POTH* is testament to its creator’s interests, but it also captures a moment in cultural history.

In a Scottish context, *POTH* can be seen as a reclamation of the 1920s Scottish Renaissance’s modernist and internationalist values. Like the younger MacDiarmid, Finlay made a great effort to bring Scotland up to date with the latest international developments. But Finlay’s aim of reinvigorating the Scottish cultural scene was not tied into a nationalist political agenda. Early issues of *POTH* see Finlay attempting to engage with the aspects of Scottishness that MacDiarmid had rejected. Folk-art, popular culture and the avant-garde come together to create a new, heterogeneous vision of Scottish culture.



The post-war avant-garde was enabled by the small press publishing revolution, which, as Alec Finlay writes, “allowed Finlay to be in touch with new ideas and rapidly absorb new forms” (*Selections*). Finlay did have strong connections with particular schools, but, as Alec Finlay writes the “generous principles” of the small press revolution “had a more lasting impact than any particular variant of the avant-garde” (*Selections*). The international avant-garde we now recognise in all its variety was forged by little magazines and small presses in the 1960s.

This impact can also be measured in Finlay’s own work. *POTH* played a crucial role in his development as a poet and artist, as he absorbed new forms, experimented with the visual presentation of poetry, and developed his particular blend of the pastoral, the classical and the avant-garde. Rural imagery and folk forms became a vehicle for innovation, while concrete poetry led Finlay to a new form of lyricism. In its own playful, discursive manner, *Poor, Old, Tired, Horse*, was both a manifesto and a laboratory. Or, as a one-word poem might have it:

The Poet’s Blueprint

*poth*

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