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## ARTICLE

# 'a common idiom ... call it a place'

Tom Jones

University of St Andrews, GB  
[tej1@st-andrews.ac.uk](mailto:tej1@st-andrews.ac.uk)

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Building on recent studies of the relationship between visual poetics and eco-poetics, this essay argues that language conceived of as systematic is an important consideration in the work of Thomas A. Clark. Beginning with readings of some of his meta-poetical work from the early 1970s, the essay suggests that the overt interest in poetic language as a system analogous to an ecosystem continues into Clark's later writing, though in a less overt, more ephemeralized manner. The essay explores ways in which Clark conceives of poetry as anti-entropic activity in a language system.

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**Keywords:** Thomas A. Clark; language systems; ecosystems; eco-poetics; minimalism in poetry

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a common idiom  
carries through  
complex articulations  
call it a place  
  
it was not your  
intention to bring  
all your resources  
here but you do<sup>1</sup>

In the body of commentary and analysis that is growing up around the work of Thomas A. Clark commonplaces may be found. This essay is organised around two of them: the first, that Clark's work is highly conscious of the page and the book as units of expression, so that being on the page, in the book, moving through the book, navigating the page, are integral to reading the work; the second, that experience of the page and book stand in some relationship to experience of place or environment. My contention in the essay is that these features are best related to an

ongoing interest in language and environment as systems or structures. That interest is particularly evident in Clark's earliest and more overtly defamiliarising publications, but also significantly informs his practice as a more minimal – I will later suggest the term 'ephemeralized' – poet. Before launching that argument fully I will amplify some of the concerns attributed to a poetry that is conscious of itself as an environment.

The features of Clark's work noted above bear comparison to other poets working in what Mandy Bloomfield has recently called 'British Open-Field Poetics': Ian Hamilton Finlay, Harriet Tarlo, Maggie O'Sullivan. Bloomfield defends these poets from the charge that they produce merely ambient ecomimesis, a 'rhapsodic immersion in an idealised nature'.<sup>2</sup> Situating these poets in a tradition that runs from Mallarmé through to William Carlos Williams, Bloomfield notes the importance to them of essays by Eugen Gomringer ('From Line to Constellation') and Charles Olson ('Projective Verse'). They are practising a critical ecomimesis which 'entails a "stance toward reality" that radically unsettles the subject's distanciation from "nature" and places the human in an ecological relation, as an object among other objects'.<sup>3</sup> These poets, that is, make us critically aware of the construction of page and book space, just as they make us critically aware of the construction of place through all kinds of human intervention, physical and metaphysical. Reading their work, we do not immerse ourselves in the reassuring identification between reader, poem, poet and place; rather, pages, books and landscapes come to seem produced by various historical and contingent relationships between agents and objects. Bloomfield doesn't mention Clark, but her genealogy for and characterisation of the attitudes of Finlay, Tarlo and O'Sullivan hold for his work also. Moving over, in and through Clark's pages and books a reader is conscious of being in a place meaningfully analogous to a material geography, and conscious that it is a constructed place cut through, sometimes at the surface, sometimes a little deeper, by human social, political, and cultural activity.

That Clark's work is aimed at something other than a rhapsodic immersion in an environment is clear from the project of cultural transformation of space summarised in his text *On Imaginative Space*. This text proposes initiating cultural

transformation through a performance, or, in linguistic terms, a performative: an announcement, a declaration, an imperative to reimagine the value and function of shared spaces. The text proposes to remedy a misleading picture of material reality as replete and resistant: reality can be known better and more actively as permeable and open to transformation through practices of composition, through the making of space:

places are not as they appear to be but as they are imagined or declared to be.

A simple announcement can open new demographic possibilities [...]

Matter, a density without space, separate and ungiving, is a fiction we have taken as our model of facts.

What we think of as reality is neither literal nor virtual but imaginal, an array of images, invested with fear and desire, which we are constantly engaged in composing. [...]

Imaginative space is not the cul-de-sac of daydreams: it is not a temptation but a practice. [...]

Imaginative transformation should be considered as preliminary to a corresponding transformation at the level of materials and events.<sup>4</sup>

Imaginative performance and practice are continuous with material reality and events – not an alternative to them. Affect-laden images compose our reality, and they are analogous to more nuanced descriptions of matter than the myth of 'a density without space, separate and ungiving' to which we often still resort, even though we are aware that what we call matter is a complex set of relations between energy, mass and volume. The generation of places is a human practice of composition within an environment and is therefore non-trivially comparable to poetry.

Clark is clearly interested in imaginative space as both analogous to and continuous with 'real' space, and in poems and books as environments. The open field, with its heritage in Black Mountain and Concrete poetics, is a good way to understand what is happening on the pages of Clark's books, and it primes readers for the pronounced visual aspect of his work.<sup>5</sup> I will offer a brief and selective view of 'Projective Verse' by Charles Olson and two essays by Eugen Gomringer to suggest the relevant

context for reading Clark. Olson says 'the poem itself must, at all points, be a high-energy construct and, at all points, an energy-discharge'. A projective poem is one that allows its content to determine, by extending itself into, its form, and which honours the swift progression from perception to perception that does, or should, guide negotiations with reality as much as the construction of poems. The syllable and line are the materials the breath forms into units. Paradoxically, the mechanism of the typewriter permits a truer representation of breath than ever before. Although the perceiving consciousness is clearly central to projective practice, Olson wants a poetry capable of being an object, and of being amongst objects, which means 'getting rid of the lyrical interference of the individual as ego, of the "subject" and his soul, that peculiar presumption by which western man has interposed himself between what he is as a creature of nature (with certain instructions to carry out) and those other creations of nature which we may, with no derogation, call objects'. The spatial organisation of the page by the typewriter makes possible an epic and dramatic poetry of humans in their environment, a poetry that will take its form from its content.<sup>6</sup>

Eugen Gomringer presents concrete poetry as a practice congruent with the tendency of modern languages towards condensation. In its short form, the organisation of concrete poetry demonstrates a shift 'from line to constellation'. The constellation is an arrangement or composition of elements that encourages readerly play amongst the composed forces. It is not an imitation of an environment, but something brought into being:

The constellation is the simplest possible kind of configuration in poetry which has for its basic unit the word, it encloses a group of words as if it were drawing stars together to form a cluster.

The constellation is an arrangement, and at the same time a play-area of fixed dimensions.

The constellation is ordered by the poet. He determines the play-area, the field of force and suggests its possibilities. the [sic] reader, the new reader, grasps the idea of play, and joins in.

In the constellation something is brought into the world. It is a reality in itself and not a poem about something or other. The constellation is an invitation.<sup>7</sup>

Longer concrete texts allow one to 'talk about the accumulation, distribution, analysis, synthesis and arrangement of linguistic signs, of letters and of words', but the 'conventional distribution' of signs is but one possibility amongst others in the structural organisation of elements from which systems evolve in the poem.<sup>8</sup> The concrete poem is a non-mimetic object composed from words and potentially other facts of linguistic structure to allow play between forces.

Mary Ellen Solt also emphasises the roles of structure and play in the concrete poem: 'the pure concrete poem extracts from language an essential meaning structure and arranges it in space as an ideogram or constellation – as a structural word design – within which there are reticulations or play-activity'.<sup>9</sup> She engages in a comparison of the projective and concrete philosophies of composition. Both see 'formal innovation as a present imperative [...] to bring language in line with present human necessities'. Both practices 'are concerned with the atomization of the word, with the syllable'. Both practices are open, but Solt distinguishes what it means for them to be open. Projective verse:

is called "open" verse because the poet is restricted by no formal rules except those which arise from the necessities of [the poet's] perceptions, thoughts and feelings in relation to the breath, which controls the line. The concrete poem is also said to be "open," but that means open to the formal possibilities inherent in particular linguistic materials.<sup>10</sup>

Concrete poetry's openness is material rather than psycho-physiological. The compositional practices of concrete poetry are structural and systematic, whether at the reduced level of the constellation or in the more sustained form that acknowledges 'conventional' forms of relation between linguistic elements. The poet is a composer of structurally organised forces, from which systems evolve, inviting the reader to

participate in the creation of a new object in the environment. While the visual aspect of the poem is important in these descriptions of projective and concrete poetics, it does not displace the structural or systematic: it adds the visual to the range of systematic and structural elements with which the compositional practice may work.

What Clark has to say about imaginative space should also serve to prime readers to the continuing and vital importance of language in the poetry and in the environments the poems suggest. That is, there is a temptation to think the visual aspect of Clark's poems as a diversion or even liberation from aspects of language structure that are, in other kinds of writing and reading practice, considered highly or solely determining. But linguistic organisation has not been supplanted by visual organisation in Clark's work. It seems obtuse to say that Clark's are poems in language – that what is on the page, that which is organised into constellation or field, remains language, even if it has pronounced visual and material properties of which readers aren't always or even often conscious in language. The analogies of constellation and field are ways of understanding and extending the means by which language is and can be organised, rather than an alternative means of presentation that somehow exempts itself from linguistic or other systematic organisation. System, structure, syntax – these aspects of language have been and remain vital in Clark's work, just as they are in projective and concrete poetics.

To return to the phrases with which this essay opens, the 'common idiom' that will be called 'a place', I want to suggest that various shades of the terms 'common' and 'idiom' are in play when reading Clark. Not wilfully extrovert in diction or syntax, his might be called a common poetry: 'In general use; of frequent occurrence; usual, ordinary, prevalent, frequent. Having ordinary qualities; undistinguished by special or superior characteristics; pertaining to or characteristic of ordinary persons, life, language, etc.; ordinary'. (OED A.II.10.a, 11a) That commonness is the grounds for a poetry that is also common by being:

Of general, public, or non-private nature. "Belonging equally to more than one" (Johnson); [...] pertaining to the human race as a possession or attribute. Belonging to more than one as a result or sign of co-operation, joint action, or agreement [...] Of or belonging to the community at large [...]; public. (OED A.I.1.a and b; A.I.2; A.I.5a)

The common idiom will be plain and ordinary, and permit us to hold it in common. It is going to be called a place; but we shouldn't forget that it is an idiom. And this common place encountered in the poems as an idiom is not an idiom merely in the sense of it being 'A form of expression, grammatical construction, phrase, etc., used in a distinctive way in a particular language, dialect, or language variety; *spec.* a group of words established by usage as having a meaning not deducible from the meanings of the individual words'. (OED I.3) This 'idiom' is also the more expansive concept of 'A language, especially a person or people's own language; the distinctive form of speech of a particular people or country'. (OED I.2.a and b) The idiom is a language with principles of organisation that are not merely spatial but also temporal, syntactic, categorical/classificatory, performative and so on. The contention of this essay is that conceiving of the page or book as an environment or place is to conceive of it as an ecological system. Thinking of this environment as systematic makes it more rather than less like language. As I shall try to show, Clark presents poetic activity as a way of recuperating the energy lost, as entropy, in the movement between levels in a natural system, such as an ecosystem or language. Further, language as a system is an important, perhaps the chief medium for the negotiation between people that constitutes imaginative and real transformation of life, as the oblique inhabitation of the landscapes of some of Clark's poems demonstrates, and as I hope to demonstrate in the rest of this essay.

Works from earlier and later in Clark's writing demonstrate the persistence of language as structure and system in the body of work that encourages the poem, page or book to appear as a place or environment. I will look first at works from the 1970s that are composed in a less common idiom, and which will, I hope, draw out some of the harmonics not so easily heard in the later work. Clark is one of the poets represented on the LP *Experiments in Disintegrating Language: Konkrete Canticle*.<sup>11</sup> In his contribution to the sleeve notes Clark states a position:

I am interested in the poem as legitimate magic, i.e. science. The business of the poem is to insinuate perceptibly into the mind. The extent to which it will succeed is in exact relation to the precision of its structure. Plain, unadorned speech, of course, is structured [...] These poems are magic in that



they acknowledge correspondence. There are laws. We are not separate from the instances of space. Speech is articulation.

The necessary elements of the critical, environmental open-field poetics are here: the poet is in space, not separate from it. Speech is articulation in that it defines the speaker in a particular space, and in a particular relation or set of relations to that space. Articulating these relationships, or laws, is the science of poetry, its legitimate magic. Success in articulation is through structure, the kind of structure that allows poetry 'to insinuate perceptibly'. Structure is not necessarily or only metrical, stanzaic, stochastic, and so on; it is also just the structure of '[p]lain, unadorned speech', the kind of structure that is evident in phonology, grammar, pragmatics, the structure that is more found than given.

One poem Clark performs on the record, the text of which is given in the sleeve insert, is a 'Spell for Sarah'. It manages its perceptible insinuation by playing with word order and grammatical category, making us realise their co-dependence (in English), by putting text through permutations.

sleep naked among soft flowers	dove growing slowly in you	face turned towards the sun	two eyes merge in one
the folded petals of love	naked among soft flowers sleep	growing slowly in you dove	turned towards the sun face
eyes merge in one two	folded petals of love the	among soft flowers sleep naked	slowly in you dove growing
towards the sun face turned	merge in one two eyes	petals of love the folded	soft flowers sleep naked among
in you dove growing [slowly]	the sun face turned towards	in one two eyes merge	of love the folded petals

The poem is made from five units of five words each. There are four columns and five rows, creating 20 positions. The five units first take their place in columns 1–4 of row one, and column 1 of row 2. The cycle then begins again, from column 2 of row 2, through to column 3 of row three, but with the first word being moved to the end of the unit. Lineation is also adapted. Units are of three lines, with words distributed across the lines in the following sequences in each permutation: 2-1-2; 2-2-1; 1-2-2; 2-1-2. In performance, the units are first read left to right, then a second time top to bottom. (I have supplied in square brackets a word missing in the sleeve note text that would be expected and figures in the performance.) The drive to complete the sequence of permutations is stalled by the lack of the final permutation of each five-word unit: they go through only four of their five possible variations in this sequence. This hesitation or questioning of completion is a subject to which I will return shortly.

The common language becomes uncommon here through its rearrangement or derangement. Each of the five units in their first presentation are grammatically legible, with verbal forms, imperative, participular, indicative, in four of the five units. As the rearrangement of materials proceeds, there is deformation of the grammatical legibility, coupled with the promotion of other forms of connection to prominence. The fourth unit, for example, from the second occurrence onwards, loses the sense of two eyes merging in one, but places 'one' and 'two' next to each other. The order of cardinal numbers becomes more apparent as the grammatical legibility decreases. Likewise, sonic and typographic features can come into prominence. Towards the end of the fourth row the group of letters 'l', 'o', 'f/v' becomes salient by collocation: 'of love/the folded//soft flowers'. The shared lettering encourages reading across from one unit to the next, supported by the participation of all these terms in the lexicon of lyric eroticism. '[S]leep' in the first unit is an imperative, but may become, in its second iteration, a noun, with sleep found naked among soft flowers. The process points up the paradigmatic relationship between grammatical categories in strings of terms. If a reader is keyed in to the arrangement of the language on the page, she is not for that reason any less categorical or typological when processing

the language. Indeed, one may be hypersensitive to the paradigmatic aspect of the discourse precisely because there are ambiguities and 'errors' in categorisation. The sleeve note says of this piece that it 'is a love poem, a field of relationships. It has some of the perfection of context I take love to be. Consciousness too can only arise through context, so again we have recognition [as with 'Some Flowers', also featured on the LP], and, perhaps, the roots of consciousness in love'. The poet's consciousness takes place in the act of composition, of making the place of the poem by working with the system of the language.

*Statements*, also from 1971, advertises the LP and/or the reading series to which it was related.<sup>12</sup> *Statements* includes the manifesto poem 'A Move to Poem, Vehicle Sir Thomas Browne'. This poem is one of several from this period in which seventeenth-century writers inform Clark, with *some particulars* (also 1971) including an epigraph from Robert Burton, and poems drawing on Robert Herrick, William Byrd and Izaak Walton.<sup>13</sup> Clark says he has read Browne vertically.<sup>14</sup> He uses sections 12–14 and 16 of the text, in which Browne talks of the visible world being a hint at the divine scheme, a series of clues or hieroglyphics. The words from Browne highlighted in bold, lineated as they are, with the exception of the penultimate and antepenultimate phrases, which combine phrases across a 'line break' in Browne to make a single line, and justified left, make up the opening lines of Clark's poem:

[Section 12]

*Beware of Phil-*  
*osophy*, is a precept not to be received in too  
 large a sense; for in this Mass of Nature there  
 is a set of things that carry in their Front (though  
 not in Capital Letters, yet in Stenography and  
 short Characters) something of Divinity, which  
 to wiser Reasons serve as Luminaries in the  
 Abyss of Knowledge, and to judicious beliefs as  
**Scales and Roundles** to mount the Pinnacles and  
 highest **pieces of Divinity**. The severe Schools

shall never **laugh me out of the** Philosophy of Hermes, that this **visible World** is but a Picture of the invisible, wherein **as in a Pourtraict**, things are not truly, but in equivocal **shapes**, and as they counterfeit some more real **substance in that invisible fabrick**.

[Section 13]

That other Attribute wherewith I recreate my devotion, is His Wisdom, in which I am happy; and for **the contemplation** of this only, do not repent me that **I was bred in** the way of Study: the advantage I have **of the vulgar**, with the content and happiness I conceive therein, is an ample recompence for all my endeavours, in what part of knowledge soever. [...]

[Section 14]

**There is but one** first cause, and four second causes **of all things**. Some are without efficient, as God; others **without matter**, as Angels; some without form, as the first matter: but every Essence, created or **uncreated**, hath its final cause, and some positive end both **of its Essence** and Operation. This is the cause **I grope after** in the works of Nature; on this hangs the Providence of God. To raise so beauteous a structure as the World and the Creatures thereof, was but His Art; but their sundry and divided operations, with their predestinated ends, are from the Treasure of His Wisdome. [...]

[Section 16]

[...] Surely the Heathens knew  
 better how to joyn and read these mystical  
 Letters than we Christians, who cast a more  
 carelesse **Eye on these common** Hieroglyphicks,  
 and disdain to **suck Divinity** from the flowers of  
 Nature. Nor do I **so forget God** as to adore the  
 name of Nature; which **I define not**, with the  
 Schools, to be the principle of **motion and rest**,  
 but, that streight and regular line, **that settled  
 and constant** course the Wisdom of God **hath  
 ordained the actions** of His creatures, according  
**to their several kinds**. To make a revolution  
 every day is the Nature of the Sun, because  
 that necessary course which God hath ordained  
 it, from which it cannot swerve but by a faculty  
 from that voice which first did give it motion.

Browne uses various artistic and textual metaphors for the relationship the perceptible world bears to the ideal world: nature is an 'universal and publick Manuscript', for example.<sup>15</sup> In manipulating these sections of Browne's text, Clark is working with a dominant metaphor of natural theology and physico-theology: the book of nature. The open-field poetic of which he might be said to be part could be thought of as a switching of the current within this metaphor, so that books are conceived of as natures.

But Clark is also writing against Browne, who distances himself from the common or vulgar – those who have not the art properly to contemplate nature. Browne thinks of nature not as motion and rest but as the straight and regular line of God's providence. Clark picks up on Browne's use of the image of the line, saying 'the line is/chief bearer of/information/here'. But it is not Browne's straight and regular line. It is a line that comes from reading against the grain of the text

in question – both physically, moving down rather than across the page, and metaphysically, as providence will be rethought as an energy charge. In both cases the poetic line becomes a détournement of the line of providential direction.

– to begin, the line is  
chief bearer of  
information  
here  
the text is Sir Thomas Browne's  
frustrated somewhat  
by Chinese torture  
read vertically rather than horizontally  
"excavated" perhaps  
the stance is shape  
that we are here not involved in metaphysics  
but rather this vulgar, these common  
stasis kinesis, silence enunciation, light dark  
something in the english air relevant not only to poetry  
  
the pieces are essential to the Fabrick,  
that they are so often "chanced on"  
is in the condition of seeing  
[...]  
their stumbling to coherence is the man's  
  
our Scales then are  
line, word, syllable, letter-form  
each of these composed of elements which are  
variously analogous (having relation to  
some point in the human spectrum)  
or pure (without reference to  
anything outside themselves)

the poem is the tension between  
the analogous and the analogous  
the pure and the pure  
the analogous and the pure

In this manifesto poem – and I am reading it here more as a manifesto than as a poem – Clark asks nothing less than how language works: how does it show us something behind the immediately perceptible form of things? The vulgar and common answer he works towards makes a series of binaries essential pieces of the 'Fabrick' of language: 'stasis kinesis, silence enunciation, light dark'. The first opposition is that of rest and motion, the definition of nature Browne refused in favour of straight providence. Clark takes his own experience of chancing upon language, using found texts, or embracing the contingencies of a natural language, as a model for how language means, how people mean: the stimuli of the environment are chanced on and organised into coherence in speech.<sup>16</sup> Language is good for thinking the environment because they are both in us and outside us at once: the words that become ours were already there outside of us, and it is in composing or articulating that the relationship between ourselves and the other things that are there is made and remade. Having a language, having an environment is realising that blur of the internal and external in an act of articulation.<sup>17</sup> So the articulation relevant to poetry is not distinguishing one thing from another, but shaping one thing in another.

Several elements of this model of poetry as a kind of an organised and organising human relationship to environment, or a system, would have been available to Clark in contemporary texts on systems theory and cybernetics, the study of 'extensive parallels between the operation of animal nervous systems and the feedback control systems of machines'. Organisms are distinct from their environment but constantly draw upon it, at the molecular level, and shape it into their own form. This imposition of order onto the environment is negative entropy – the tendency towards order rather than chaos and loss that is said to be characteristic of biological and social, as opposed to physical, systems.<sup>18</sup> The picture of the poem that emerges from Clark's sleeve note and manifesto poem is a picture plausibly informed by recent synthetic

or synoptic work in biological, social and information science from a systems perspective. The first, unnumbered page of *Statements* features a top-level statement from Clark:

state'ment, n. 1. Act of stating or presenting, orally or on paper. 2. That which is stated; recital; account; relation. 3. Com. An abstract of an account showing the balance due.

1 is the creative moment, the engagement, descent into matter. 2 the work, the embodiment of said moment, its articulation. Any mere verbalization [sic] "orally or on paper" must be accepted as 3.

To give shape is to insist. The drive to completeness, that is central to any creative act, abhors the pause. Yet the commitment of drive involves a morality which sometimes needs rear-guard action. Any good work, in so far as it questions kinetics, will set up a time-lag in which the work itself is threatened. That this threat is actual (socially in the reactionary freeze, cosmically in the second law of thermodynamics) often stimulates the artist to some tactical response. Such tactics reply to a climate. They are a qualitative move against quantitative [sic] entropy. It needs stress: – they are by no means a translation of the work.

Thomas A Clark

October 1970

Clark is again considering the moment at which poetic consciousness takes material form. The work is driven towards completeness, but its quality is in questioning that drive. Such questioning takes the form of a temporal lag that itself threatens the work: potential audiences for the work may be lost in the lag, the space that seems to open up between poetic consciousness and the material form of the work; or the work may simply lose heat in the process of energy being transformed from consciousness into material form. The artist's intervention is a qualitative recuperation of the quantitatively lost energy that occurs in making, whereby the loss of energy through a change in form is recouped as the energy of questioning the drive



to completion. The poet, by engaging in the work of producing quality, slows the kinetic energy of the poem, but produces at the same time a supplementary energy, that of the perceptible arrangement of the language. That is, the transfer from poetic consciousness into language material may be entropic, but the social and biological order composed by the activity of the poet is anti-entropic. The poem is a temporal and material art form that conjures away entropy.

The 'scales' that enable transition from surface to deep structure for Clark are 'line, word, syllable, letter-form'. These material features of language structure are the hieroglyphs the poet studies, as Browne studied the forms of nature. The material features can be considered in their pure materiality, or as relating to a human world; they have system-internal properties, and properties that relate them to their users. Clark seems to propose an idealised form of verse:

the only verse which is free  
 is that in which all the elements  
 are allowed their fullest articulation  
 while at the same time  
 exploring all relational possibilities  
 within the structure  
 the verse should be objectified  
 kept innocent of aesthetic intention  
 in fact a functioning ecosystem

[...]  
 the aim of the poem is, entirely,  
 to yield up the range of its being  
 it contains in embryo several possible language structures  
 which only continued perusal of the poem  
 will fill out  
 the poem is that structure which carries thru  
 from organisation to discharge of data

without energy-loss  
ie  
the poem must articulate the range of  
what it is to be human

Here is a view of the poem as ecosystem, as structure, as the relational possibilities of every element in the system, possibilities realised in a temporal succession of encounters with the language, and yet without any loss of information. The information that poems contain is precisely the information that makes us what we are, the hints and clues to our own secret nature we find in letters, syllables, words and lines, one that is here understood in a perfectly hard-matter manner as the lapse of a certain period of variously marked time between the coming into being and passing out of being of an organism. In the readings of Clark's poems that follow I will try to show how the hints and clues of letters, syllables, words and lines can disclose what is otherwise concealed.

Ecosystem is proposed as an analogon for poetry. In ecological science nearly contemporary to the writing of Clark's text the 'total flow of energy and materials through the ecosystem is a prime example of the almost incredible interrelatedness of its constituent parts'.<sup>19</sup> The standard work on natural ecosystems from which I take this citation, however, presents energy loss as one of their necessary features. Insolation, solar radiation from the sun entering the ecosystem, creates the conditions for the existence of plant life. But with the move from each level of consumption within the grazing food chain – from plant life to herbivores to primary carnivores and so on – and also in respiration, energy is necessarily lost in very large proportions. The second law of thermodynamics relates to energy loss, and states that 'when energy changes from one form to another, some of the energy is lost to the system as useless heat, or entropy. It is not destroyed; it is simply rendered unavailable'.<sup>20</sup> Clark, then, imagines the poem as a utopian ecosystem, one in which entropy, through drops in productivity in the trophic levels of the food chain or through respiration, is unknown. In thinking this way Clark echoes contemporary techno-utopians. R. Buckminster Fuller proposed that human intellect could and would recover that lost

energy by, in effect, refusing to consider the world as a closed system, out of which energy might pass:

Of all the biological antientropics, i.e., random-to-orderly arrangers, man's intellect is by far the most active, exquisite, and effective agent thus far in evidence in the universe. [...] The Law of Conservation of Energy says, "Energy may neither be created nor lost". The physical universe is a finite system. Earth is a finite sphere. The surface of a sphere is a unit area; any closed line such as a circle or a triangle, set upon a sphere, subdivides the whole sphere's surface into two sub-areas – i.e., the two areas on *both* sides of the line.<sup>21</sup>

Human intellect will bring the ecosystem into greater order, reducing the energy it loses. Such losses are only ever apparent, or losses to one part of the system, as the truly systematic conception of the world is as one immense system, a system in which any energy loss is an energy gain.<sup>22</sup> Reconceiving 'lost' entropic energy as still part of the finite system of the world is the motivation to technological revolution in Fuller's utopian vision. Clark's poem as time-lag questioning the drive to completion and thereby recuperating the energy lost in its taking material form is not a distant parallel.

In 1971, then, Clark was arguing for a poetry that was environmental in as much as the environment is a system and language is a system, and poetry is the operation of that system that insinuates perceptibly – that makes readers aware of its own structuration. Poetry is when our own biorhythms insinuate perceptibly into consciousness through a temporally sustained encounter with the living structure, the ecosystem, of language. This is a picture of system or structure that refuses to think of the system or structure as distinct from the events that constitute it, take place in it, dispose it, subvert it. It is also a vision of system or structure that resonates intensely with both the accepted and the non-conformist scientific thinking of its moment. One might even look to the environmental and technological utopianism of Fuller for a way of understanding the movement in Clark's work away from this auto-critical poetics towards a mode that will inevitably be thought of as minimal. Fuller describes

the general tendency of the process that will produce technological revolution: 'Doing vastly more with vastly and invisibly less is known technically as *ephemeralization*'.<sup>23</sup> One might think of Clark's later work, to which I will now turn, as an ephemeralization of the overt, meta-poetic insistence on system and structure seen in his work of the early 1970s: it tries to do vastly more with vastly and invisibly less.

The perceptible insinuations of poetic systems that are also places continue to be felt in highly economical poems from the late 1990s onwards, published by Moschatel, the imprint run by Tom and Laurie Clark.<sup>24</sup> Such works play on the hiddenness of literary and visual forms, their availability only to certain patient forms of attention. This is still an immanent world, as in 'Vehicle to Poem', one in which something more must be read from or into the apparent form of things:

Every text is a twilight where  
 a world of forms and references  
 is not immediately granted...  
 (1998)

As well as being the mode of performance of these texts, ephemeralization is occasionally also their theme. They achieve the perceptible insinuation of the earlier manifesto-type writing by rendering only just visible the work that the minimal intervention performs in the language system. The environment, the place, the language are bare presences, but their evocation is transformative. This poem is printed in a blue font, with the exception of one word, 'island', which is printed grey:

I say island and out of the forgetfulness where my voice  
 banishes any contour, inasmuch as it is something other  
 than known harbours, musically arises, an idea itself and  
 lonely, the one absent from all maps.  
 (after Mallarmé, 2003)

Such works also revive the mimetic possibilities of page space in more subtle ways than earlier, again seventeenth-century, visual poems such as George Herbert's 'The

Altar' or 'Easter Wings'. One of a series of meta-poetical poems cues in an environment and a mode of occupying it – the meditative walk in or through a wood – with just one word, 'clearing', in the way that other poems and books work with the fold, the leaf, and other figuratively proximate domains for books of poems:

between stanzas  
 there is a small space  
 or clearing  
 in which to  
 linger for a moment  
 before moving on  
 (*little poetics 2*, 2009)

Clark's occupation with language as systematic or structural by no means excludes pragmatics (whether construed as an orientation towards use rather than abstract structure, or a tendency towards negotiation). He writes a poem after a remark of Wittgenstein, found at *Zettel* 173:<sup>25</sup>

words have meaning only in the stream of life  
 (*after Wittgenstein*, 2013)

Wittgenstein is in this remark responding to claims that certain propositions reveal intuitive or *a priori* knowledge by saying that such propositions only ever appear in the specialised circumstances of metaphysical discussion: they are never produced in the stream of life. What, then, do such propositions reveal about human life beyond or outside the context of specialised metaphysical discussion? What do they show about the life of the mind and language outside that context? Propositions that are only used in such contexts are not very good candidates for exemplary statements of basic or intuitive knowledge. Clark's poem celebrates Wittgenstein's insistence that language is always in life, vivifying the dead metaphor of the stream of life by making an ambiguous or polyvalent paper surface imitate its space. The poem is printed over the fold of one sheet of card: is the surface a cover or a sheet or a page or a book?<sup>26</sup>

This series of miniatures demonstrates the longevity for Clark of the thought of language and environment as systems, systems always displaced and set in motion by use. Clark is still thinking of language and environment as systems of differentiation and communication of energy through events in *Yellow & Blue*. The landscape and the poem are animated by the same forces – the moving air, as wind or breath, that makes us see and hear full rhymes, half rhymes, eye rhymes, internal rhymes and their more distant cousins:

in stillness the hills  
 bulabhal chaipabhal  
 bolabhal bleabhal  
 are resting bells  
 then a wind blows  
 bulabhal chaipabhal  
 bolabhal bleabhal  
 through the syllables<sup>27</sup>

There is hardly a word in this poem that isn't animated by the composition that makes some material features of the language salient. The run from 'still' to 'hill', from 'bell' to 'blow', and on to 'syllable' is complicated by the Gaelic names of four Scottish hills. The Anglophone reader might know that 'bh' sounds as 'v' in Gaelic, but that does not eliminate the eye-rhyme '-bhal', 'bell', 'syllable'. The imposition of schemes of pronunciation native to one language onto another, the relationship between languages in an environment – a contested environment like the Scottish Highlands, or pretty much any other – also introduces a political register to this work with its hints and cues of letters and syllables.

In *Yellow & Blue* page space/geographical space is not the only parallel between language and environment. There is, for example, a parallel between language and crystals: occurrences of feldspar and mica are called 'word gems', great finds for walker and poet alike. Geodes, crystals inside rocks, make an appearance. There is also a reference to inclines in the land. Lastly in this sequence of references, the

elements are brought together, suggesting, perhaps performing the deep complicity of language with phenomenological experience, even with physiology, to produce meaningful environments:

little crystals  
in the ear  
adjust to  
pressure  
as the earth tilts  
over<sup>28</sup>

Crystals in the ear help people to maintain balance when their heads are moving. The ear orients people in the environment. The crystal in the ear and the crystalline words are both forms of active orientation in space. They are echoes of inner and outer worlds – hints, cues or hieroglyphs – just as the crystals encountered in the movement through the environment might be the hints as to its geology.

Elsewhere different consonants are associated with landscape features:

roots rocks boulders  
stops and labials  
gutters and runnels  
dentals constrictives<sup>29</sup>

And the landscape is presented in parallel with stories and tunes that are places of 'communal negotiation' now 'brought under authority/of gentry and clergy'

the wells and the burns  
the fruits of labour  
the moor and the machair  
the stories and tunes  
a quality of welcome  
the spaces of custom

of communal negotiation  
brought under authority  
of gentry and clergy<sup>30</sup>

The action of the poem is attempting the restitution of communal negotiation in a space upon which a hierarchy has been imposed. The closed geographies of parochial and estate administration with their resident authorities, the local priest and landlord, attempt to enclose the common space of the landscape, a space of resources, but also of labour, cultivation, culture, and negotiation. It is the act Clark and his readers undertake together in successive animations of the system or structure of the poem that is itself the model for this restitution, opening up new negotiations, presenting new stories and tunes, offering new welcome.<sup>31</sup>

I noted above the continuity of imaginative performance and practice with material reality and event. Language is a or the medium of these performances and practices. It is the activity of language in the page and book space that makes imaginative transformation of that space possible. To ask a question of the passage from which I started out, how does a common idiom become a place?

a common idiom  
carries through  
complex articulations  
call it a place  
  
it was not your  
intention to bring  
all your resources  
here but you do

One answer is by the mood of a verb: 'call it a place'. Is it the optative or the imperative mood? Are we invited or commanded to call this common idiom a place? The idiom carries through complex articulations, which is not quite the same as carrying them out, but we feel nonetheless that the idiom achieves the complex articulations.



The idiom carries them as a tune carries over distance or is carried by a performer. The common idiom is a place we share; it is the place we did not mean to bring our resources to, but found we had. These resources are the attention we have as readers – our interpretive resources. This sort of readerly attention is that which transforms the space of the text, and which constitutes the preliminary act of imaginative transformation that will have real transformative consequences for other places and actions. The stanzas tell us we have brought our resources into the common place, we have made them public, equally available to all. I hope to have shown that Clark's earlier occupation with language and environment as structure and system has not disappeared in the later work, but ephemeralized as the poetry attempts the same kind of anti-entropic magic with vastly and invisibly less.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Thomas A. Clark, *The Hundred Thousand Places* (Manchester: Carcanet, 2009), p. 69.
- <sup>2</sup> Compare Lytle Shaw: on the immersive: 'the turn to place, and later site, allowed postwar poets and artists not just to dive into (and remain within) a luminous world of immersive specificity; instead, when they poked their heads up, as they often did, a poetics of fieldwork also enabled them to rethink their relations to neighbouring disciplines – historiography and ethnography above all – and to critique and recode those fields more luminously and immersively than was possible through the pure pursuit of deracinated particulars, by now the Monet water lily poster of the poetic vocation'. Lytle Shaw, *Fieldworks: From Place to Site in Postwar Poetics* (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 2013), *Modern and Contemporary Poetics*, ed. by Hank Lazer and Charles Bernstein, p. 4.
- <sup>3</sup> Mandy Bloomfield, 'Landscaping the Page: British Open-Field Poetics and Environmental Aesthetics', *Green Letters: Studies in Ecocriticism* 17: 2 (2013), 121–36 (pp. 127, 129).
- <sup>4</sup> Thomas A. Clark, *On Imaginative Space* (Cairn Editions, 2013; first publ. Eindhoven: Peninsula Gallery, 1998).
- <sup>5</sup> See Ian Davidson, *Ideas of Space in Contemporary Poetry* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), p. 139: 'Because it implicitly questions the referential nature of language, visual poetry can bring together poetry from different languages relatively easily. Words become visual objects and are interpreted as such. Their meanings, and their syntagmatic and paradigmatic relationships to other words within the language system, become only one function amongst others'.
- <sup>6</sup> Charles Olson, 'Projective Verse', in *Modern Poets on Modern Poetry*, ed. by James Scully (London and Glasgow: Collins, 1966), pp. 271–82, citations from pp. 272, 280.
- <sup>7</sup> Eugen Gomringer, 'From Line to Constellation' (1954), in *Concrete Poetry: A World View*, ed. by Mary Ellen Solt (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1968), p. 67.
- <sup>8</sup> Gomringer, 'Concrete Poetry' (1956), in *Concrete Poetry: A World View*, pp. 67–8 (p. 67).
- <sup>9</sup> Mary Ellen Solt, 'A World Look at Concrete Poetry', in *Concrete Poetry: A World View*, pp. 6–66 (p. 59).
- <sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 47–8.
- <sup>11</sup> (Arts Council of Great Britain, 1971) AC 1971. Other poets featured include Charles Verey, Neil Mills, Paula Claire, Bob Cobbing, and Michael Chant. I would like to thank Julie Johnstone for facilitating

a visit to the Thomas A. Clark archive at the Scottish Poetry Library, Edinburgh, for showing me this LP, and for pointing to the availability of the recordings and part of the sleeve notes on ubuweb. See <http://www.ubu.com/sound/konkrete.html>.

- <sup>12</sup> Thomas A. Clark, Neil Mills & Charles Verey, *Statements: An Advertisement for Experiments in Disintegrating Language* (London: South Street Publications and Logopolis, 1971). The sleeve notes to the LP refer to a reading series under the name 'Experiments in Disintegrating Language'.
- <sup>13</sup> Harriet Tarlo, 'Recycles: The Eco-Ethical Poetics of Found Text in Contemporary Poetry', *Journal of Ecocriticism* 1: 2 (July 2009), 114–30 (pp. 127–8) has suggested that found-text poetry might have an eco-poetic and eco-ethical aspect, being part of a questioning of the commodification of language.
- <sup>14</sup> I have not found an edition of *Religio Medici* which produces precisely this poem down a margin or other consistent contour of the page, but cite here from *Sir Thomas Browne's Religio Medici, Letter to a Friend &c and Christian Morals*, ed. by W.A. Greenhill (London: Macmillan, 1881), pp. 22, 25, 27–8, which provides the same spellings and capitalisations of words as Clark's text ('Roundles', 'Pourtraict', for example), and also some of its effects of lineation ('stance in that invisible fabrick'). The passages from sections twelve and thirteen can be produced by making a step-wise movement down one line, and slightly to the right. The production of Clark's selection from section 16 from this edition is less neat.
- <sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, section 16, p. 27.
- <sup>16</sup> William Hazlitt, 'On Poetry in General', in *Lectures on the English Poets* (London: Dent, 1910, repr. 1951) p. 1 offers a definition of poetry not far from that which I'm attributing to Clark here: 'The best notion which I can give of poetry is, that it is the natural impression of any object or event, by its vividness exciting an involuntary movement of imagination and passion, and producing, by sympathy, a certain modulation of the voice, or sounds, expressing it'.
- <sup>17</sup> See on this point Eric Prieto's précis of recent phenomenological accounts of place, that of Jeff Malpas in particular, in *Literature, Geography, and the Postmodern Poetics of Place* (Houndmills, Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2013), p. 25: 'Human subjectivity, in this view, arises not in opposition to material reality but as an expression of material reality, and place is, in this sense, the point at which the consciousness-environment nexus takes shape and can be best understood'.
- <sup>18</sup> John F. Young, *Cybernetics* (London: Iliffe Books, 1969), p. 49 for the quotation and see pp. 15–6: 'although a living body maintains itself distinct from its surroundings, it does this by taking atoms and molecules from the surroundings and organising them into a living shape. Mathematically, this characteristic of life can be called negative entropy. The entropy of any system increases as it becomes more disorganised, decreases as it becomes more organised. [...] Living organisms all have the property of taking up randomly distributed matter and organising it into a logical, living shape'. See Ludwig von Bertalanffy, *General System Theory: Foundations, Development, Applications* (London: Allen Lane, The Penguin Press, 1971), p. 33 for the organisation characterising biological and social systems.
- <sup>19</sup> W. B. Clapham, Jr, *Natural Ecosystems* (New York: Macmillan, 1973), p. 54.
- <sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 19.
- <sup>21</sup> R. Buckminster Fuller, 'Geosocial Revolution', in *Utopia or Oblivion: The Prospects for Humanity*, intro. by Stephen Mullin (London: Allen Lane, The Penguin Press, 1970), pp. 187–237 (pp. 189, 210).
- <sup>22</sup> See, in a related vein, Piotr Sadowski, *Systems Theory as an Approach to the Study of Literature: Origins and Functions of Literature* (Lewiston, NY; Queenston, Ontario; Lampeter, Wales: Edwin Mellen Press, 1999), p. 19. 'To divide one system from others is in fact tantamount to dividing reality into two systems, of which one is the object of the current inquiry while the other is all the rest, that is, the environment'.

<sup>23</sup> 'Geosocial Revolution', p. 213.

<sup>24</sup> The works cited in this paragraph are discrete publications, often on a single card or folded sheet. Untitled works are referred to by year of publication only.

<sup>25</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Zettel*, ed. by G.E.M. Anscombe and G.H. von Wright, trans. by G.E.M. Anscombe (Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 1970), pp. 30e–31e: '172. Understanding a musical phrase may also be called understanding a *language*. 173. I think of quite a short phrase, consisting of only two bars. You say "What a lot it's got in it!" But it is only, so to speak, an optical illusion if you think that what is there goes on as we hear it. ("It all depends *who* says it.") (Only in the stream of thought and life do words have meaning.)'

<sup>26</sup> Variation in the colour of the font produces an additional effect of quasi-categorical sorting. A grey font is used for 'words', 'meaning', 'in the stream' and 'life'; a green font for 'have', 'only' and 'of'. All of the poem's nouns are in grey; but not all of its non-nouns are in green. The prepositional and articular qualification of the third noun ('*in the stream*') turns out of the way of the most immediately visible pattern. If there is another way of describing the alternation between font colours, I have not found it. Any system will have redundancy as well as productivity, and this small system makes its readers ask which of its features can be identified as one or the other.

<sup>27</sup> *Yellow & Blue* (Manchester: Carcanet, 2014), p. 21.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 32, 33, 42, 43.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 49.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 77.

<sup>31</sup> For a reading of a comparable poet in comparable terms see Neal Alexander, "'Where lives converge': Peter Riley and the Poetics of Place", in *Poetry & Geography: Space & Place in Post-war Poetry*, ed. by Neal Alexander and David Cooper (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2014), pp. 134–47 (and especially p. 138 for the parallel between page space and environmental place).

## Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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