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Imitation, Repetition, Tradition: Some Reflections on the Poetry of Ian Hamilton Finlay

Lila Matsumoto
University of Edinburgh

This paper examines a selection of Finlay's concrete poetry which uses imitation and repetition as both method and raw material. I suggest that the poems' evident pastiche of particular works and iteration of word units create a context whereby a pattern of human behaviour unfolds in whimsical and startling ways.

Repetition and imitation lie at the heart of Ian Hamilton Finlay's poetry. However, far from being derivative, his works are innovative precisely in their use of derivation to create sites of reflection for what is lost and gained in the movement between original and copy. Finlay (1925-2006) was a Scottish poet and artist who is today most widely recognized for his concrete poetry and for his sculpture and landscape garden, Little Sparta. [1] However, his activities were wide-ranging. In the 1950s Finlay produced short stories, plays, and lyrical poetry, and in the early 1960s he founded, with Jessie McGuffie, the small press Wild Hawthorn and the magazine *Poor.Old.Tired.Horse.* (1962-1967), which published a wide variety of poetry, both traditional and avant-garde, new and old. In the mid 1960s and onwards he created, with dazzling prolificacy, poems whose content and spatial context were intrinsically linked, in the form of booklets, cards, poem-prints, sculptures, and inscriptions, to name just a few. Finlay often returned to the same themes in his poetic and artistic career, using images and ideas taken from maritime activity, Neo-Classicism, World War II, and the French Revolution. In many of the works there is a conscious imitation of form from other sources, whether it be an artistic creation (Bernini's sculpture of Apollo and Daphne, Finlay tells us, is the source for his statue 'Apollo/Saint-Just') or an action in space (the letters in the concrete work 'wave rock' €embody the movement of water on a craggy shore). There is a conjecture made in Finlay's work that to be a human living in the world, one must be attuned to the repetition of images, phrases, and actions inscribed into civilization. His works, which convey these patterns in often startling and whimsical ways to the reader-viewer, suggest that to repeat and to imitate constitute the condition of life.

This essay will examine four concrete poems ranging across Finlay's poetic career, 'Le Circus' (1964), 'Acrobats' (1966), 'Fly Navy' (1976), and 'Creels and Creels' (1994), to offer some reflections on the ideas of imitation, repetition, and tradition in his work. All of these works use imitation and repetition in the poems' evident pastiche of particular works, and/or through imitative and iterative uses of the words comprising the poem. The works chosen here also illuminate two of Finlay's favourite settings for his poetry- the circus and the sea. Imitation and repetition in the works, I will suggest, draw attention to the metamorphosis which takes place in the act of copying, and also creates a context by which a pattern of human behaviour can be discerned. The genealogies of all four poems are apparent in their forms, which draw clear correspondences between elements of the poem and

what it is copying. The result of the copying, however, is never faithful to the 'original', and it is this fraught relationship between tradition and rendition that is the focal point of the works. Stephen Bann writes that Finlay's works are rife with 'moments of classicist sensibility' which is characterised by 'a sense of estrangement from the Classical' (11). The poems we will examine all exhibit this trait of divergence from traditions, while at the same time firmly rooted in and formally exhibiting a reverence for them.

In 1964 Finlay's Wild Hawthorn Press published a series of 'poem-prints', one of which was Finlay's 'Le Circus (or, Poster Poem)'. This poem-print was inspired, notes Alec Finlay, by 'the "poême-pancarte" pioneered by the French poet Pierre Albert-Birot in the 1920s' (25). Albert-Birot was a poet, dramatist and magazine editor; his magazine *Sons Idées Couleurs* (*Sounds Ideas Colours*) (1916-1919) published avant-garde work by the Dadaists, Futurists, and Surrealists. His 'poême-pancarte' 'Paradis' [fig.1], published by Wild Hawthorn Press in 1964, imagines a public notice-board as the site for a poem. The humour, of course, lies in the sign's advertised destination, and also the instruction to enquire with the angels at the end of the lane. 'Le Circus' [fig.2] similarly uses the idea of a public sign as humorous poetic material: the poster, evocative both in its 'old-fashioned' appearance and content, advertises a strange type of circus. There are three kinds of imitation in this work. The first is Finlay's imitation of Dada posters in its uses of different font types and non-textual elements, the interweaving of bright colours, and the variations in typographical arrangement. As with the use of directional cues (the hands pointing left and right) in 'Paradis', the poster connects the space of the poem to that of the reader's with spatial cues: 'on the left, a green blinker', 'on the right, a red blinker'. The second imitation is the fishing smack's mimicry of a circus pony, with its crew and the gear on board, or on its 'back', going through the 'hoop' created by the rainbow's arc. Thirdly, the poster itself imitates a circus: the words perform acrobatics within its parameters, entertaining the audience in their different guises, positions, and alignments.

We may venture to say that 'Le Circus' draws a relationship between Wild Hawthorn Press and the activities of the French avant-gardes in the early 20th century. In the purposeful imitation of Albert-Birot's 'poem-print' concept, and in evoking the typographical techniques of the Dadaists, the work suggests that there is a genealogical line connecting the formal experiments of Wild Hawthorn Press to the artistic and literary tradition of the historical avant-gardes. What may have been the motivation for this imitation? Hal Foster notes that this technique of reprising avant-garde devices of the 1910s and 1920s was a common technique among North American and West European artists in the late 1950s and early 1960s (4). According to Foster, the imitation of Dadaist aesthetics, in particular the 'embrace of everyday objects and a pose of aesthetic indifference', was a way for the mid-century 'neo-avant-gardes' to 'define the institution of art in an epistemological inquiry into its aesthetic categories and/or destroy it in an anarchistic attack on its formal conventions' (ibid). Albert-Birot's technique of appropriating an 'everyday object', the public sign, for the purposes of art no doubt appealed to Finlay. In evoking the form of Albert-Birot's 'poême-pancarte', Finlay's 'Le Circus' challenges, in the manner of 'Paradis', the ostensible categorical boundaries between the poster and the poem, the former serving a visual function and the latter, a verbal function. However, the anarchic

reaction to convention that Foster suggests typifies some 'neo-avant-garde' works is not made implicit in 'Le Circus'. Rather, what Finlay patently imitates here is the sense of play evident in many examples of historical avant-garde art, characterised by surreal humour and visual *bravado*. It is also noteworthy that although 'Le Circus' may pay homage to the French avant-gardes, the poem and the circus are situated firmly on Scottish waters, with the reference to a boat registration number from Kirkwall, Orkney. The parodic merger of Dada aesthetics with the image of a traditional Scottish fishing smack evokes in the viewer a sense of de-familiarity and delight: it is not too difficult to imagine that the poster is announcing the arrival of a Scottish avant-garde movement.
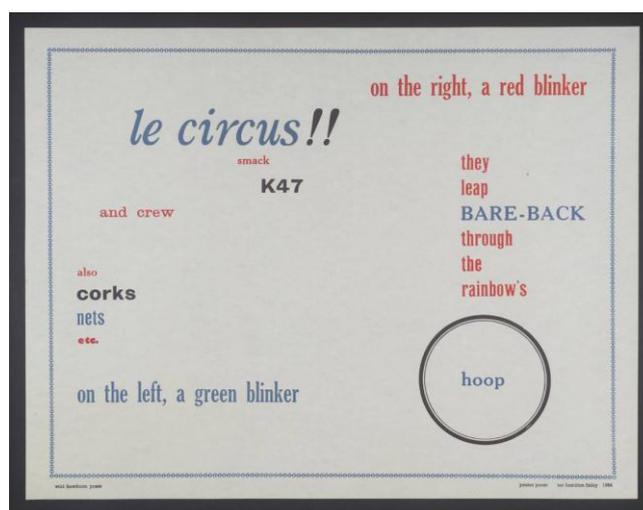
[fig.1]²   [fig. 2]

'Acrobats' (1966) [fig. 3] continues on the circus theme, and as with the work we have just examined, the words in this piece embody the actions they represent: the letters comprising 'acrobat', repeated over and over, leap and jump on the page (or on the wall, where the piece was first contrived). In order to read the word 'acrobat', the reader must perform visual gymnastics by either reading diagonally or zigzagging across the page, thereby imitating, and in a way becoming, the acrobat in question. Finlay commented on the work: 'Isolated, single letters are pattern but letters joined in words (as these are) are direction. Those in the 'Acrobats' poem are both, behaving like the real circus acrobats who are now individual units, now – springing together – diagonals and towers' ("Ian Hamilton Finlay (1964)" no pagination). Here Finlay is interested in how repetition can generate new objects, and provoke new ways of looking at and thinking about the 'original' word. The repetition of the word 'acrobat' is both content and context. The replication of the individual letters offers new visual patterns: reading from left to right, for example, each letter is repeated, like the lines of knitting, or soldiers at attention. Furthermore, within the particular arrangement of the letters, new anagrammatic words emerge which can be associated with acrobatics, such as 'bats' and 'robot'. Interestingly, Yves Abrioux notes that 'Acrobats' was originally conceived for a playground (146), suggesting that in this piece of repetitive words and letters, a playful attitude is essential in fully exercising the representational potential of a word.
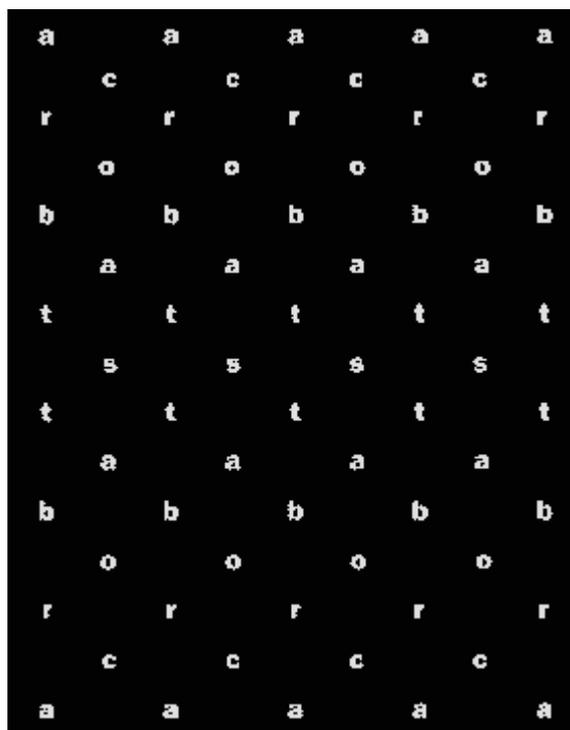
[fig.3]

The poem 'Fly Navy' bears the epigraph '*after Gomringer's "spring daisy"*', making transparent the original source of the imitation. Eugen Gomringer, often called the father of concrete poetry, created a series of 'constellations', which he described in his 1954 essay 'From Line to Constellation' as 'the simplest possible kind of configuration in poetry which has for its basic unit the word, [and which] encloses a group of words as if it were drawing stars together to form a cluster' ("From Line to Constellation" 67). 'spring daisy' is such a constellation: in the poem, three words are presented in every pair-variation.

spring daisy

daisy spring

spring fly

fly spring

daisy fly

fly daisy[3]

As with 'Acrobats', the poem generates possible interpretations via various arrangements of the same elements. In the process of clustering and in the positioning of the word within each match, different aspects or qualities of each word are activated. 'Spring' and 'fly', for example, can be understood as both noun and verb. Finlay's 'Fly Navy' imitates the form of 'spring daisy':

sail navy

navy sail

sail fly

fly sail

navy fly

fly navy

A transformation has taken place between the original and the iteration, although the construction of the poem remains the same. Gomringer's springtime scene, unpopulated by people, is replaced by a scene of nautical and militant activity. The substitution of 'daisy' with 'navy' suggests that we can draw an imaginative parallel between a fly setting off from the petals of a daisy, and a fighter plane taking off from a navy ship. If we formulate the fly as a symbol of decay, besmirching the springtime idyll, the navy is subsequently configured as a harbinger of death and destruction, despite the connotations of strategy and orderly bustle evoked in the poem. 'Fly Navy' is included in Finlay's booklet *Imitations, Variations, Reflections, Copies* (1976), which also contains two black and white photographs of a sculpture entitled 'Stone 'Fly Navy'', a model of a fighter plane with the words NAVY writ large on its side.[4] The photographs are essentially a rendition of a rendition of a rendition: Gomringer's poem, translated within a new context, is refigured into a sculpture which has been reproduced as photographs. Turning the pages of the booklet, and viewing the transformations in succession, the reader-viewer may discern what Walter Benjamin notes as the 'trace' of the 'changes [the work of art] has undergone in its physical structure over the course of time' (232). We see that each iteration retains the vestige of the original, and it is this movement of transformation between the original and the copy which is the basic material for the copy's narration. Edwin Morgan, commenting on Finlay's use of photographs alongside his poetry, writes that the photographs 'further objectifies the poem, and suggests also that the word and world are being, if not brought into one, forced to confront each other' (23). In 'Fly Navy', the confrontation of Finlay's poem and the photograph accompanying it produces a sense of uncomfortable recognition. In the metamorphosis between poem-on-page to sculpture, we cannot help but to note the incongruity of the navy plane's heavy, stone form, a far cry from the connotations of agility in 'Fly Navy' and the lightness evoked in 'spring daisy'. The viewer is left to ask whether the statue's failure to effectively embody the navy

plane's sleekness is a blunder on part of the sculptor, or an opportunity to acknowledge the utter strangeness of an artwork, both poem and statue, dedicated to the armed forces. Speaking of his work more broadly, Tom Lubbock noted: 'Finlay pointed to the way liberal society is utterly blank about what value to attach to the military force that underpins its existence, the way it has no doctrine of nature except as a (diminishing) resource' (Lubbock). The juxtaposition and relationship which Finlay has created between nature and technology in 'Fly Navy', whereas on the one hand comical, is on the other hand a sombre demonstration of the semi-pastoral associations of the armed forces we have grown accustomed to.

'Creels and Creels' (1994), we are told in the poem's postscript, is a rendition of Gomringer's constellation 'cars and cars' and Theocritus's *Idyll XXI (The Fishermen)*. As in 'spring daisy', Gomringer in 'cars and cars' configures words in various arrangements with each other. Unlike the former poem, however, permutations are repeated and are less strictly ordered. The sonic qualities of the word clusters conjure the jostling rhythms of urban transport and business:

cars and cars

cars and elevators

cars and men

elevators and elevators

elevators and men

men and cars and elevators

men and men

trains and trains

trains and men and elevators

trains and elevators

men and trains

men and men

cars and trains

cars and men and trains

men and men

men and men

Finlay's 'Creels and Creels' reads as follows:

creels and creels

creels and net-ropes

creels and men

net-ropes and net-ropes

men and creels and net-ropes

men and men

cobles and cobles

cobles and men and net-ropes

cobles and net-ropes

men and cobles

men and men

creels and creels

creels and men and cobles

men and men

men and men[5]

Here, like in 'Fly Navy', the structure of the poem is an imitation and a nautical re-treatment of Gomringer's poem. In a comical (or tragic) turn, the cars of Gomringer's cityscape are transformed

into creels on the docks, elevators into net-ropes, and trains into cobles. In this bizarre parallel-world, only conjured in the moment of regarding the poems side-by-side, the men of the city are likened to fish contained in the various implements used to catch and transport them. The comparison between the copy and the original heightens the sense of anxiety present in 'cars and cars' over the leaching of man's agency as he gives way to the rapid and mechanical movements of transportation.

In the transformation of scenery from city to harbour, the activities of man in each location are perceived as iterations of an intuitive human pattern of work and profit. Theocritus's *Idyll XXI (The Fishermen)*, which the work also imitates, clearly communicates this timeless pattern of behaviour. In this piece, part of a larger work which collects together thirty 'idylls', two fishermen friends converse at night in a cabin by the sea, one having woken from a dream in which he caught a golden fish. [6] His friend interprets the vision as such: 'Go seek the fish of flesh and blood, or you'll die of hunger and golden visions' (Theocritus 253). 'Creels and Creels' is therefore a seaside reproduction of Gomringer's observation of modern man's work ethic, via Theocritus's picturesque scene of historical traditional bonds: between friends, and between man and sea, the source of the fisherman's livelihood. The precariousness of the latter bond, however, is intrinsic in the form of the idyll, which presents an idealised and most likely unsustainable vision of contentment and hope.[7] Finlay's 'Creels and Creels' enacts an enduring human drama, recounted in Theocritus's idyll, of man against the elements. Yet whereas the idyll closes on a note of hope with the practical and encouraging interpretation of the fisherman's dream, the conclusion of Finlay's poem, like Gomringer's, is imbued with a sense of despondency. This is indicated by the poem's formal structure: after all the commotion on the docks involving the tools of the trade used in different combinations, what is left are 'men and men', moored on an isolated verse-island, bereft of tools and activity.

Jean-Luc Nancy writes, 'The pleasure men taken in *mimesis* is made up of the troubling feeling that comes over them in the face of recognizable strangeness, or in the excitement that comes from a recognition that one would have to say is estranged' (69-70). Recognizable strangeness: this is the aura that many of Finlay's works possess. The poems' structures are familiar to us: visual cues in 'Le Poster', for example, suggest its Dada inspiration, while in 'Fly/Navy, Gomringer's concrete poetry is conspicuously used as a model. Yet the copied results also give us the paradoxical sensation of unfamiliarity in the invitation to imagine Scottish fishing boats as circuses and navy aircrafts as flies. In the creation of a work claiming affiliation to another —an affiliation which Finlay always makes explicit— a relationship, often transgressing both historical and categorical boundaries, is created between the works. In some cases, as in Finlay's iterated word-poems as 'Acrobat', the shape of the repetition animates the original word, and transforms it from phonogram (symbol representing sound) to pictograph (symbol representing image). On other occasions, the copy, in laying emphasis on a particular feature through its imitation, heightens an unsettling feature of the original. In my reading of 'Creels and Creels', the poem's collation of Gomringer's poem with Theocritus's idyll draws associative links between the two works, while at the same time underscoring the riskiness which characterises any tradition of wealth-making, be it fishing or modern commerce.

The repetitive and imitative qualities in Finlay's work further suggest that the 'original' forms which the works recall are nothing more than copies themselves of a curve in the circular trajectory of human civilization, furbished by inextricable actions, characteristics, and circumstances. Much of Finlay's work, in taking the human condition as its raw material, memorializes these patterns in discrete ways, though leaving the commentary for the reader-viewer to formulate. In Finlay's booklet/card poem from 1989, for example, the phrase 'Order is Repetition' is inscribed on the front of the card, followed by 'Committee of Public Safety'. The inside is blank, and the back reads: 'as in rat-a-tat'. The poem evokes both Robespierre's Reign of Terror (the repetitive use of guillotines) and the machine guns of modern warfare (repetitive firing). Has either guillotine, machine gun, or any iteration of violent means ever created order that has lasted, despite repeated use? One may say that this poem seeks to fulfil Friedrich Schiller's proclamation for the function of art in rational society: 'Humanity has lost its dignity; but Art has rescued it and preserved it in significant stone. Truth lives on in the illusion of Art, and it is from this copy, or after-image, that the original image will once again be restored' (57). Finlay remarked in an interview: '[O]ur time does not try to understand itself at all, unfortunately, but times have always understood themselves through other times which provide a means of dramatising the issues of the present.' It is significant for Finlay, then, that imitation and repetition not only feature in human behaviour and actions, but are the traditional means by which the current situation, over the course of human history, has been comprehended. In this configuration, our estrangement from contemporary culture (that recognisable strangeness) is due not to our inability to see the similarities between our condition and other periods', but to our not casting a more self-critical eye at the present, with the past always in mind.

Notes

[1] Broadly speaking, concrete poetry is concerned with the poetic text's deliberate interaction with the space of the page (or whatever the medium may be), as well as exploring the visual and aural properties of the words. For more information, see Mary Ellen Solt's *Concrete Poetry: A World View* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1968).

[2] All poems by Finlay in this essay are reproduced with the kind permission of the Estate of Ian Hamilton Finlay.

[3] Both poems by Gomringer in this essay were translated into English by Jerome Rothenberg and published in *The Book of Hours and Constellations* (New York: Something Else Press, 1968), no pagination.

[4] The sculpture was created by Finlay and John Andrew, and the photographs taken by Norman Dixon.

[5] This poem was originally published as a card by Wild Hawthorn Press in 1994; as with 'Le Circus', 'Acrobats' and 'Fly Navy', this poem is included in *Selections: Ian Hamilton Finlay* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012).

[6] Attribution of the idylls to Theocritus has been debated.

[7] The etymology of idyll (from *eidos,* the diminutive form of the ancient Greek *eidullion*, meaning form or picture) recognises that durable happiness can only be represented, not experienced.

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Author Biography

Lila Matsumoto is a final year PhD student at the University of Edinburgh. Her dissertation explores two poetry magazines, Gael Turnbull's *Migrant* and Ian Hamilton Finlay's *Poor.Old.Tired.Horse*. Broader interests include modernist Scottish literature, Scottish literary history, and modern and contemporary poetry. Lila also publishes an arts and poetry magazine, *SCREE*.