

This review is taken from **PN Review 284**, Volume 51 Number 6, July - August 2025.

on Mary Ellen Solt

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Mary Ellen Solt, *The Collected Poems of Mary Ellen Solt*, edited by Susan Solt (Primary Information) \$24

Concrete Flowers

Mary Ellen Solt is best remembered as the editor of the 1968 anthology *Concrete Poetry: A Worldview*, the most authoritative of the various compendiums of concrete poetry that appeared during the late 1960s. As her daughter Susan Solt notes in an afterword to the present volume, that anthology, which includes a series of lucid prose statements by its editor, remains Mary Ellen's 'signature work of scholarship'.

The poem adorning the cover of *Concrete Poetry: A Worldview*, Solt's telegraphic acrostic 'Forsythia' (reproduced in the present volume), might seem to signal gentle dissent against the hard-edged linguistic abstraction that held sway across much of the book's contents. Concrete poetry in the classic sense had been coded as minimalist, anti-expressionist, perhaps above all non-pictorial. Yet here was a flowing, floral paean preserving both the rhythm of demotic speech and the figurative possibilities of visual poetics.

The title word 'FORSYTHIA' is spelled out in serified capitals across the base of the visual frame, with a further word blossoming upwards from each letter: 'Forsythia Out Race Springs's Yellow Telegram Hope Insists Action'. beyond the terminus of each word, the opening letter reaches still further upwards in a wavy petal shape, repeated in between iterations of its morse-code equivalent, a coded reference (literally) to the metaphor of the forsythia as a telegram, breaking the news of the returning sun. This beautiful poem was part of a series, *Flowers in Concrete*, first published as a portfolio of letter-pressed posters

in 1966 by the Fine Arts Department at the University of Indiana, where Solt spent most of her life, teaching while raising a family with her husband, the historian Leo Solt.

In 2010, a special issue of *OEI* magazine was dedicated to Solt's critical writing. This made clear that Solt's concrete poetics was rooted in a deep scholarly appreciation of William Carlos Williams's work – latterly a close friend – in particular of his emphasis on word placement as a means of transcribing the North-American demotic. This was quickened by Solt's technical musical training and love of classical performance. As Susan Solt notes in her afterword, 'this gave her unique insight through musical structure into Williams's search for the American idiom... Her musical lexicon and her ear for tempo and rhythm infused both her linear and concrete poems.'

If the 2010 publication revived Solt's status as a critic of concrete and post-objectivist poetics, the present volume does the same for her largely lost poetic oeuvre. And the results are a joy to behold. Solt appears here as a poet of musical dexterity, subtle formal daring, and abiding faith in the cyclical rhythms of nature and redemptive possibilities of human connection. Among other things, it would be possible to focus on the myriad ways in which Solt adapts concrete and post-objectivist idioms to the complexities of female experience.

In the very first poem in the collection, 'With Child', Solt whimsically embraces before violently expelling the woman-as-nature metaphors that came as a burden of pregnancy: 'if I am the sky where a / wing beats / the sea where a // fish swims / in my forever / why is it I / want to vomit / the thing'. Elsewhere, in 'Child with Magazine', which reads, in sum, 'Mommy, / what does / L I F E / spell?', the author is surely nodding to a famous concrete poem by Décio Pignatari in which the four letters L, I, F, and E form the basis of a kinetic permutation poem. That piece is here restaged, as it were, in a domestic sphere where life, through replete with creative possibilities, also comes freighted with invisible labour and the exigencies of child rearing.

In her 1985 prose piece 'Notes on a Letter from William Carlos Williams', Solt records her determination during the early 1960s to 'make poetry of my woman's life'. But to reduce this collection to ballast for revisionist histories of avant-garde poetics would be to do it a disservice. We should also acknowledge, for example, the ways in which Solt's concrete poetry responds to contemporaneous semiotics, as in non-semantic sequences such as 'Marriage: A Code Poem'. Contemporary politics make an appearance in the witty and acerbic placard poems of *People Mover: A Demonstration Poem* (1968), where downward-

facing A's and exclamation marks become incendiaries raining down Yankee justice on the citizens of Vietnam. Elsewhere, as in the hand-lettered 'Dogwood' sequence and the late sequence 'Kairos', envisaging Mary's journey to the birthplace of Christ, a mystical and – we sense – deeply humane spirituality makes its mark.

Perhaps above all, these are poems about nature and the elements: rain, snow, waterfalls, stones making ripples in ponds like parentheses (as in 'Untitled [so swift]'). Solt's work is at its most enchanting when a lucid visual pictography evoking scene and atmosphere is combined with a Williams-esque feel for the page as score: where visual form becomes both rhythm and diagram. Then, truly, she flowers in concrete.

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