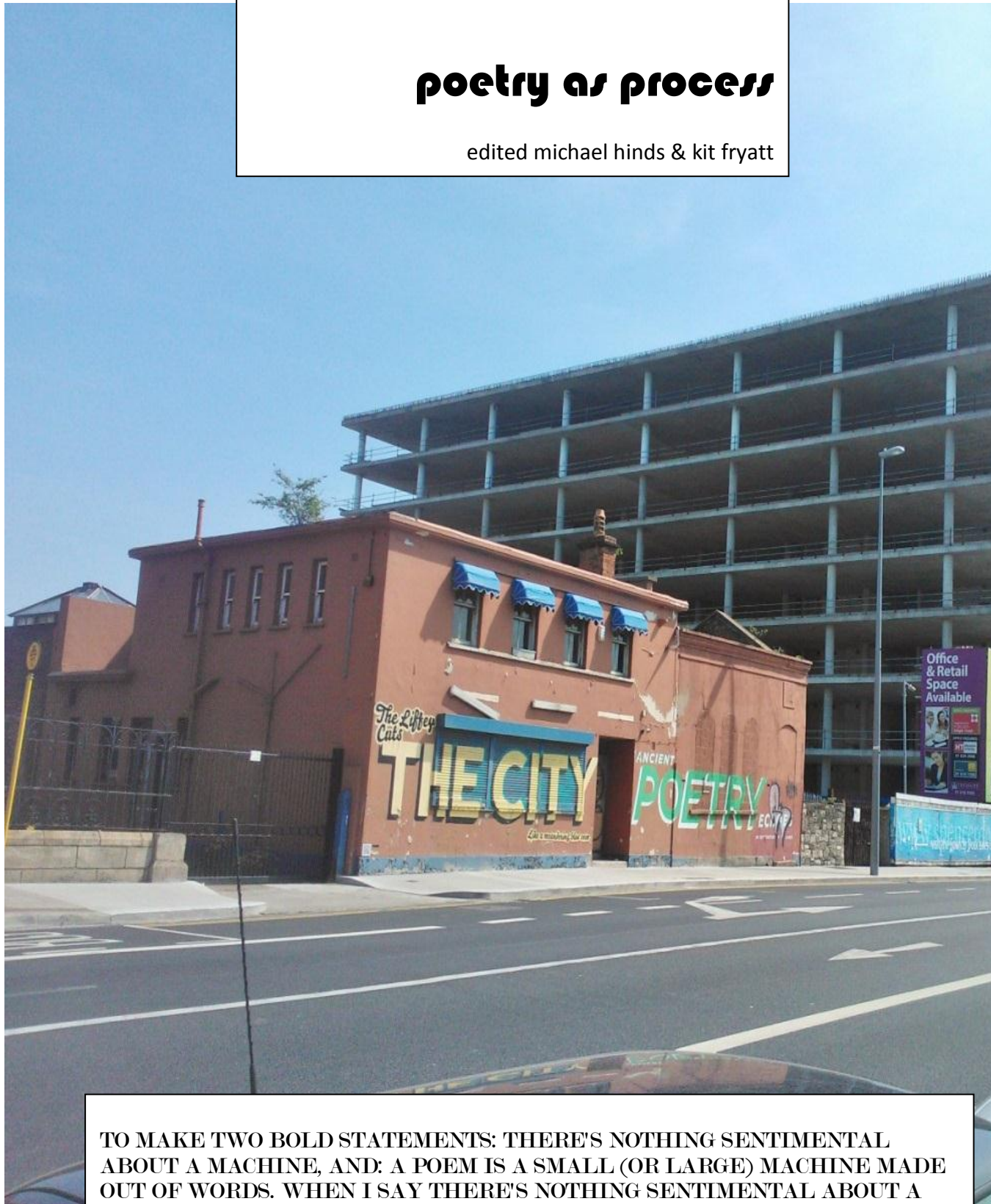


POST IV:

poetry as process

edited michael hinds & kit fryatt



TO MAKE TWO BOLD STATEMENTS: THERE'S NOTHING SENTIMENTAL ABOUT A MACHINE, AND: A POEM IS A SMALL (OR LARGE) MACHINE MADE OUT OF WORDS. WHEN I SAY THERE'S NOTHING SENTIMENTAL ABOUT A POEM, I MEAN THAT THERE CAN BE NO PART THAT IS REDUNDANT.

PROSE MAY CARRY A LOAD OF ILL-DEFINED MATTER LIKE A SHIP. BUT POETRY IS A MACHINE WHICH DRIVES IT, PRUNED TO A PERFECT ECONOMY. AS IN ALL MACHINES, ITS MOVEMENT IS INTRINSIC, UNDULANT, A PHYSICAL MORE THAN A LITERARY CHARACTER. – WCW

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editorial

The latest issue of POST will also be its last, in that all of the latest issues of POST have been its last. *Poetry in Process* proves that you can't keep a dirty old dog like poetry quiet. In June 2010, The Irish Centre for Poetry Studies held a one-day event entitled *Poetry in Process* that featured happenings from Aodhan McArdle, a lunchtime reading of Frank O'Hara's *Lunch Poems*, papers from emerging scholars, plus readings from Kei Miller, Dave Lordan and a dark-browed *equipo* of Mantuans. A couple of the papers have found their way, three years later, into this issue of *POST*. Sophie Mayer's precision reading of Margaret Tait, and James Heaney's stirring response to Rafael Alberti, both allow us to recapture some of that day's vibrant temper.

On that day, we also showcased work-in-progress by postgraduate students from The Irish Centre for Poetry Studies, and this issue features articles by three graduates of its Masters Programme. Amanda Bell proves herself to be a scholar of gravity and commitment in her piece on Kathleen Jamie, Annette Skade manifests her own considerable poetic skill in responding to Basil Bunting as a maker, and Maurice Devitt guides us through the bookbuilding-process of Charles Bernstein in his *Girly Man*, poetic constructivism that represents a pragmatic pacifism in response to the terrors of 9/11. Maria Proitsaki (a welcome returnee to *POST*) offers a report on a still-unfolding process, the *hooha* between Rita Dove and Helen Vendler (and arrivistes) on that famously overtrodden battleground, the American Poetry Anthology. But why make an anthology, unless you want to have a fight? *POST* IV features an essay by a real contender, as Maurits Knots announces himself in these pages as a critic to follow and cherish; he not only shows us how really to read Adorno, but also how to read Ezra Pound Soviet-style, taking in Busoni and Chopin on the way. Alex Runchman keeps his guard up in reviewing *Young Poets: An Australian Anthology*, a book proposed to us for review by our colleagues in the University of Canberra's Institute of Poetry Studies. Keep them coming. There are too few reviews in this issue, we concede; the next issue should correct that. Having said that, this issue does show a lot of new voices emerging into poetry studies, showing independence of thought and clarity of purpose, each of them reflecting on a different process and stressing its vitality. That energy means that we might manage a few more last issues yet. Our last word falls to a young American poet with hundreds of versions of Sappho on his mind. He has given us one. For which we are truly grateful.

michael hinds & kit fryatt

the irish centre for poetry studies

maria proitsaki

aesthetics versus politics in american poetry:

the implications of the helen vendler versus rita dove controversy

During late October to early December 2011, a number of e-mails sent to the Af-Am Lit discussion group by poet Reginald Harris brought into focus the beginnings of a controversy that *The Chronicle of Higher Education* came to characterize in terms of “bloodteething.” It surrounded the publication of Rita Dove’s *Penguin Anthology of 20th Century American Poetry*, which was fiercely criticized by Helen Vendler in a review published in the November 24, 2011 issue of *The New York Review of Books* and entitled “Are These the Poems to Remember?” Following Dove’s sharp response to this criticism in her piece “Defending an Anthology,” that appeared in the same publication soon afterwards, and as supporters of Vendler’s and Dove’s perspectives joined in, a heated debate started to unravel: it regarded aesthetics, but also ideological principles and politics involved in determining what is good, or lasting, American poetry, and by extension poetry worth including in an American poetry anthology. Inevitably, already from start, canon formation issues were touched upon as the discussion evolved particularly around Dove’s privileging works of allegedly dubious quality by contemporary non-white poets at the expense of canonical names/works, which were largely expected to be included in the anthology but were not.

The issues brought into light caught a broad attention because Dove and Vendler are well-respected literary authorities and it was surprising to see them locking horns. If editing a major anthology of poetry comes close to donning the responsibility of canon formation, Dove did it from a solid ground: she is an accomplished American poet, a Pulitzer Prize winner, and the Poet Laureate of the United States from 1993 to 1995. Moreover, with several published collections of poetry, her poems anthologised widely, and her *Selected Poems* deemed by Harold Bloom as one of fifteen works by African American writers to be “possible future canon works” (“Black Writers and Harold Bloom’s Literary Canon” 25), she had arguably achieved the literary status likely to be required in order to come into question as an editor of such a work. Furthermore, she had already been involved in similar contexts, having served as the author of the column “Poet’s Choice” for *Washington Post* and edited the anthology *The Best American Poetry 2000*, featuring, among other, Natasha Trethewey, the current Poet Laureate of the United States. At the other end, with her authority as an acknowledged literary critic and professor of English at Harvard University, Vendler was a legitimate reviewer for the anthology, especially as she could also be counted as a Dove scholar, one who had paid attention to and had a generally approving take on the early work of Dove. But Vendler’s negative review of the volume was so unsettling that it left African American poets like Harris “seething” and engaged many others, from influential literary insiders to devoted poetry lovers, who took to more conventional publications to express their views, or shared and discussed related issues in the comment corners of the blogosphere, siding sometimes wholly, sometimes partly, with either Vendler, or Dove,

contributing with a variety of viewpoints, and producing a bulk of ideas concerning contemporary American poetry. This debate has been on-going and the controversy remains unresolved.¹

The fact that the debate is current—the polyphony has all but ebbed, and a plethora of insights continue to be added still—would render any attempt to provide a comprehensive account of the case ambiguous, if not vain: mapping the turns and the different directions the discussion has taken, and tracing the opinions aired would inevitably prove lacking and unjust. My focus here lies thereby on the initial phase of the affair, along with what actually preceded it, rather than on how it kept progressing. I have considered the first responses to the anthology, namely the texts that appeared in the period immediately around its publication, from mid-September 2011 to January 2012, along with older sources, my scope being to explore the factors that possibly influenced Dove in editing the volume in the manner she did, but also to review the implications of her choices, in the light of Vendler's attack, against the role of an anthology in a larger literary/historical context.

The idea of canon formation permeates the discussion: while Dove and Vendler would probably agree that poetry can transcend racial categorization, Dove's approach highlights that socio-historical and economic factors have regularly intervened when it came to the kinds of aesthetics that were appreciated and promoted. This, in turn, left the poetry that was not aligned with western literary standards marginalized and the poets who wrote this kind of poetry unacknowledged. As Dove, who was originally fostered in the western tradition, sought for a more inclusive canon, she earned accusations of corrupting it: her diversion disturbed settled assumptions about good verse. But it also revealed the intolerance of those invested in the existing restrictive canonization structures.

Indeed, when Dove appeared to be "shaking up the canon" (Teicher), Vendler took upon her the role of its defender, dismissing as "breezy" the chronological introduction to the volume and accusing her of applying "no principle of selection" for inclusion, or exclusion, of works and poets, many of which Vendler found questionable ("Are These the Poems"). She targeted especially what she saw as Dove's racial categorisation of the poets: Dove's extensive inclusion of younger black/ethnic poets with no solid credentials, at the expense of more broadly acknowledged, or worthy to be acknowledged, white ones—in Vendler's own words, her "introducing more black poets and giving them significant amounts of space, in some cases more space than is given to better-known authors" ("Are These the Poems"). This came along Vendler's main argument that I would sum up as being that many of the included poets are not likely to stand the test of time and take thus space from those who prevailed as well as that many of the poems are basically too simple, being as she put it "short poems of rather restricted vocabulary" ("Are These the Poems"). But even though Vendler saw herself fit to define the literary qualities of the work of these poets better than Dove, the question would be whether hers is a valid accusation and if so, what the possible consequences might be; moreover, would they be so irreversible that such an attack could be justified? To me, what was at stake seems to go beyond the mere defense of poetry.

¹ Important contributors to the debate include, among other, Marjorie Perloff and Evie Shockley, who published pieces concerning high versus low culture in *Boston Review* on May 18, 2012 and June 6, 2013 respectively. Perloff's was the opening piece of a *Boston Review* symposium the topic of which was the critique of binaries (and where Shockley was involved as well, as one of eighteen respondents). The discussion around aesthetics versus politics is perhaps even expanding further as the case of the review of *Angles of Ascent: A Norton Anthology of Contemporary African American Poetry* written by Amiri Baraka and published in *Poetry Magazine* in May 2013 might indicate.

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To begin with, the highly dismissive tone in which this attack was charged, although it involves an accomplished literary critic and appeared in a sober publication, is quite unnerving. Linked to that, also the position from which Vendler was speaking is peculiar: as if she guarded a field of privilege, where she had previously welcomed the young Dove, but now disappointed by the more mature poet, she feels entitled to trash her attempt to include more ethnic poetry in the canon. In fact, in a conversation with Jericho Brown, Dove lifts this very perspective:

I don't know if this line of attack is a sign of despair or fury on part of some critics who define themselves as white -- whatever that means in our mongrel society. Are they trying to make a last stand against the hordes of up-and-coming poets of different skin complexions and different eye slants? Were we -- African Americans, Native Americans, Latino Americans, Asian Americans -- only acceptable as long as these critics could stand guard by the door to examine our credentials and let us in one by one?

But already in the introduction to the anthology, Dove had drawn attention to the fact that those who came to "lay the framework for modern poetry that informed most of the poetic trends specific to the United States of America [. . .] were all Caucasian males," as was then "by design, membership in the cultural elite," pointing also out that "[f]or the most part, minority expression was obliged to identify itself in relationship to the establishment" (xxxiii).

The heat of the attack aside, it is not very easy to discern whether Vendler genuinely laments the intrusion of low culture on high culture or expresses the anticipation of an unwelcome expansion of the margins towards the center where the periphery wins legitimacy by rolling over to more prestigious spots. "[T]he topic of race seems to occupy the core of Vendler's arguments," as Chitown Kev notes, and her resistance materializes through unsophisticated head counting and blunt rendering of identities: "Multicultural inclusiveness prevails: some 175 poets are represented. No century in the evolution of poetry in English ever had 175 poets worth reading, so why are we being asked to sample so many poets of little or no lasting value?" And further: "Of the twenty poets born between 1954 and 1971 (closing the anthology), fifteen are from minority communities (Hispanic, Black, Native American, or Asian-American), and five are white (two men, three women). Dove's tipping of the balance obeys a populist aesthetic voiced in the introduction" ("Are These the Poems").

But if Dove is indeed the one opening the door to a whole new set of poets, which Vendler seems to wish to guard against, one should move from the dynamics involved in resisting the change, as exemplified originally in Vendler's review and later on in the rhetoric of those espousing her line, to what informed and enabled Dove's choices during the formation of the anthology, but also even beyond that process and, moreover, consider whether this "tipping of the balance" was avoidable in the first place. Here Dove's hybrid and I would argue ever shifting sensibilities deserve further attention, as they may constitute the key to this change.

In her own work, being a Black woman has been a lens through which Dove perceives the world, but one which is rendered quite transparent and may thus not be detected by the reader as she repeatedly ventures into diverse thematic areas. In the preface to her monograph on Dove, Therese Steffen admits that she initially did not know that the poet was African American and that the fact escaped her even after her first hasty reading of *Grace Notes* (1989). Steffen notes the occasional indications of Blackness in some poems but also (misleading) references to other colors, as "lemon," along with a variety of sites that

house the poems in that volume. She also identifies “a linguistic and thematic diversity with which [she] was familiar through Henry James” and recognizes “the international theme revisited and revived in an exquisitely crafted language whose poignant visual vigor created landmarks of its own” (vii).

Much of Steffen’s commentary on *Grace Notes* holds for Dove’s work in general. The poet does not really move beyond her personal experience, but her verse bears testimony to her ability to engage in explorations of a wide variety of thematic, cultural, geographic, and historical locations, where Blackness loses its relevance: the great majority of the poems in her *Museum* with titles like “The Ants of Argos,” “Tou Wan Speaks to her Husband, Liu Sheng,” “The Cooper Beech,” “Boccaccio: The Plague Years,” and “Exeunt The Viols” deal with foreign places and people, cultures other than the African American, and other times. Vendler’s own commentary on the way Dove deals with the issues of race in *Thomas and Beulah* is enlightening: “Dove solves the ‘color question’ in *Thomas and Beulah* by having everyone in the central story be black, so that daily life is just daily life” (*Soul Says* 161-162), she notes.

Dove has acknowledged the impact her identity as “a Black and a woman” has had on her work finding it inevitable that her perceptions may be traced in her writings. Still, she has viewed her identity as one she “just happen[s]” to have and has renounced forcefully the idea of allowing “political considerations and racial or gender partiality” into her work, unless her arguments “happen to fit the situation of [a] particular character” (Taleb-Khyar 358-359).² For her, the wider scope of her thematic choices has never involved a rejection of her identity; on the contrary she has recognized the relevance of her experience and the (underlying) role it plays in her choice of themes while she has also identified some kind of ethic imperative to engage all aspects of her humanity toward representations of life “in all its complexities” (Lloyd 22).

For Dove then the impact of her Blackness has been less distinct and remained less pronounced, or has been left completely out of her texts. Blackness never gained exclusivity regarding her concerns and/or thematic choices and Dove has not felt obligated to narrow her poetic explorations to match what might be the perspective expected of a Black person. Instead, she has consistently brought diverse influences into her verse: literary works she has come to appreciate through her (western) education have influenced her and provided sources of inspiration, along with historical events and geographies of locations that have little to do with the specificity of Black experience. In her poem “In the Old Neighbourhood” which opens her *Selected Poems* the poet revisits the bookshelves of her childhood home and enumerates their contents, works she read as a child, including *Romeo and Juliet*, *The Illiad*, Brenda Starr, Justice League of America, *King Lear*, *Othello*, *Macbeth* (xxiii). “Artistically,” the poet has asserted, “I want to use all my heritages—sonnet and free verse and oral tradition, Shakespeare and Langston Hughes, classical music and jazz” (McDowell 34).

This blending of cultural influences is not hard to trace in Dove’s works: she uses the sonnet form extensively in *Mother Love* (1995), written at a time she had been reading Rilke’s *Sonnets of Orpheus* (Byrne) and her influences by western musical traditions and dance (she has played the cello since childhood and is an enthusiastic ballroom dancer) find their way into her *American Smooth* (2004) although many of the poems in the volume deal with African American experience. Moreover, in *Mother Love* she draws her inspiration from

² See also Vendler, “Interview” 488.

the Demeter and Persephone myth and rewrites it in a modern setting, while her play *The Darker Face of the Earth* (1994 and 1996) is a revision of the story of Oedipus, following loosely the format of a tragedy, complete with its chorus interventions, though set in a southern plantation during slavery.

In a paper entitled “Black Aesthetic and Beyond: Aesthetics and Ideology in the Poetry of Nikki Giovanni and Rita Dove” (published in *Moderna Språk* in 2008) I suggested, if a little hesitantly, that the degree of acknowledgement Dove has enjoyed may be related to the way in which her relaxed pose regarding her Blackness surfaced in her writings. Vendler herself, one of the first critics to pay attention to Dove’s work, shows back in the early 90’s that her appreciation of Dove’s poetry is greater when the racial issue is left aside: “More than any other contemporary black poet, Dove has taken on the daunting aesthetic question of how to be faithful to, and yet unconstrained by, the presence- always already given a black American- of blackness” (“Rita Dove: Identity Markers” 88). In his work on Samuel Delany, Jeffrey A. Tucker notes how Delany reacted to Vendler’s readings of Dove’s poems: Vendler judged “‘the best poem’ in Dove’s first volume, ‘a poem of perfect wonder,’ to be ‘Geometry,’ in which Dove ‘has not a word to say about the fraught subject of blackness’” (29). In Delany’s view, Tucker points out, “Vendler’s praise on Dove’s ‘Parsley’ is because the poem displays sympathy for both a white dictator and his black victims and [. . .] she contends that in *Thomas and Beulah* ‘The things that make Thomas unhappy are not his blackness and his oppression by whites—not at all.’” Delany’s reaction to this claim could indeed figure even in the current context: “‘Who in the *world*’ Delany asks ‘is Vendler talking down to like that?’” (italics in original 29).

Regarding the work of others, beyond her recounting the authorship of white along with Black poets as her influences and naming for example a poem by Langston Hughes along with one by Cavafy as her favourite (Kornbluth), Dove had the chance to showcase the poetry she admires during the Jan 2000 to June 2002 period, when she wrote the “Poet’s Choice” column for the *Washington Post’s Book World*. Posting weekly, she revisited the works of a great diversity of poets, including some non-contemporary ones and of other nationalities, both men and women. There, if one could dismiss how odd rendering identities to individuals with less English sounding names, or hyphenated ethnicities might be, the division of identities of American poets is quite even, with about half whites (including Jewish), around a quarter of them being men and a quarter women, and 10 respectively 15% male and female ethnic poets, including African American. In fact, the numbers could be viewed as perfectly balanced, the inclusion of a slightly higher number of contemporary female ethnic poets (here including Canadian and Irish) compensating for the all-male non contemporary ones, for example.

While the “Poet’s Choice” project may show an awareness of the need to be inclusive, already in 2004 Dove’s sensibilities were changed enough to be watchful and bothered by the absence of such inclusion in mainstream anthologies. In her “Letter to the Editor” in the June/July 2004 issue of *Poetry*, the poet mounts an attack on the two reviews of Garrison Keillor’s *Good Poems*, published in the April issue of the journal, pointing out the striking misrepresentation of Black and other ethnic poets in the anthology, which passed unnoticed by the reviewers. “I know that I’m considered more of a ‘non-militant’ writer,” Dove asserts, and continues: “As I get older, however, my patience wears thinner; I’ve grown weary of having to point out what should be obvious to anyone with sense and sensibility” (249).

Following the demonstration of such a stance, being entrusted *The Penguin Anthology* project could be viewed as an opportunity for Dove to correct the abovementioned

misrepresentation, which others did not seem to even note, something she actually also draws attention to in her introduction:

There is no denying that men ruled not only government and industry throughout the twentieth century but held sway over culture as well, including the politics, economics, and trends of poetry. Outside of the privacy of the home, the environment was mostly male; exceptions were permitted only as long as they didn't threaten the status quo. [...] For much of the twentieth century—even in the allegedly progressive USA—women were expected to remain a few steps behind their men. They were not the only discriminated group, of course; racial minorities also had to take a backseat on the bus that was in no hurry to leave the good ole times behind. (xi)

Here, I maintain, falls the inclusion of Melvin B. Tolson, even his overrepresentation by fourteen pages, to Wallace Stevens's seven and to W.H. Auden's two (that attracted the fury of Vendler but also the puzzlement of others), as Tolson's poetry had been overlooked in other anthologies, something which Dove did not believe was justified. Dove's admiration of Tolson may be down to her own poetry bearing similarities to his; but she had written about the narrative techniques in Tolson's "Harlem Gallery" previously, in fact as early as in 1985, and had also contributed with writing the introduction to an edited volume of his poetry in 1995. Given her scholarship on his work, Tolson is then to Dove as inspiring and important as Wallace Stevens is to Vendler, and this was her chance to bring critical attention to his work. The truth is that, whatever his merits, Tolson would quite likely be excluded, or his inclusion minimized, by Vendler, or those who share her views, if they were editing the anthology, only on the premise that Stevens's poetry deserves more place. Dove attempts to correct this by placing her choices along those given names, her tampering with their space suggesting that previous omissions, upon economic and socio-historical factors, may have deprived us of worthy works of literature.

The above is particularly important in the light of Michael Leong's response to Vendler's idea about what constitutes "lasting value" or "staying power" of a poet, which might apply to Tolson's limited exposure and the effect it might have had regarding how appreciated he is today: "Time does not somehow magically canonize poets. Poets have staying power because they are anthologized, taught, and written about by critics and scholars such as Vendler herself and her recourse to 'the passage of time' and the natural metaphor of 'wheat' and 'chaff' is disingenuous." He insightfully continues:

As Roland Barthes has taught us, ideology is nothing more than an effort to pass off the constructed as natural. The process of winnowing—the exposure of grain to the wind (or a current of air) so that the chaff can be blown away—requires a natural process as well as the intervention of the farmer's hand. Poets do not "seep back into the archives" like water; poets are neglected and forgotten. (Leong)

But in the case of *The Penguin Anthology*, the picture is complicated further by the issue of negotiating publication rights fees (often per individual poet/poem) where copyright restrictions applied, which she also brings into focus in the introduction: "Due to budgetary issues, some major poems—and even a few poets—were perforce eliminated. The closer I came to our new millennium, the more unrealistically some permissions fees skyrocketed, and the almighty dollar finally decreed that I whittle down my choices." "Alas" the poet laments, "the legacy of the dead can still be enslaved by the living. I wish I could have asked Allen Ginsberg himself, whom I'd met late in his life and came to know as a magnanimous man, what he thought of this" (li).

However little the copyright issue may have affected the list of the included poems, it ironically did help to “tilt” the balance a bit, at least the way Vendler has meant it—Ginsberg and Sylvia Plath, for example, were left out. Still, questioning that kind of policing of culture is not the direction Vendler takes in her criticism, even though it would be a valid concern in support of her own position and starting such a discussion would be needed: the aggressive control of publication rights has an impact on the representation of poetry in affecting the choices of individual editors. Dove asserted that her “original choices included several middle-period poems, but rights problems prohibited their final inclusion” (“Defending an Anthology”), something which Gabrielle Daniels brings into focus in an e-mail to the Af-Am Lit list “I believe what Dove says about her inability to get permissions from the Harper-Collins folks, if not from Ginsberg's estate, for the right price. Unfortunately, Harper-Collins is owned by Rupert Murdoch. Nobody wants to talk about how pervasive corporate ownership is of creative and intellectual property?”³

Instead, Dove's critics debate multicultural (and thematic) inclusiveness as set against the quality of the verse (Olson), Dove's choices being characterized as “at times more a cross section of cultural diversity than of literary achievement” (Bass). What is focused upon is whether her choices of the work of especially younger poets are aesthetically sound (Bass, Olson), while her overall methodology is being attacked with the claim that her “selection criteria appear obscure and incoherent” (Monaghan). Her omissions they list and they question, then either tend to link them to personal taste, “[h]ers is a personal anthology with a scholarly title” writes Amit Majmudar, or deem them the reason why the anthology is “deeply flawed” and ultimately “unusable” (Archambeau).

But the point is whether this anthology really fares outside the perceived role, or purpose, of an anthology. “Anthologies are curious repositories. They're a lot like museums. They have that hushed quality of solemnity and canon. Whatever is in them on display bear the weight of historical importance” writes John Olson. I would similarly suggest that an anthology is a privileged text that is meant to be aligned to and feeds the literary canon in that it maps what might be worth reading of the work that has been written, but also of the work that is to come. It is a text that follows and sets trends, showcases what there is, and inspires. At the same time any anthology produced by a certain publisher, whatever its aspiring scope and title, cannot be perceived as more than what it actually is: *The Penguin Anthology of 20th Century Poetry* is only a Penguin anthology and thus it cannot be rendered the exclusivity of a master text destined to inform the generations to come about the American poetry of our time. Furthermore, while it tells about the time it is produced in, an anthology cannot be other than subjective and political. It took, for example, a while for the Norton anthologies to include more than tiny samples of the work of African American writers, although numerous great texts written by African Americans had been around. In the meantime, the Norton volumes were used to educate new generations of students and future scholars.

³ A discussion about the steep Harper-Collins fees has taken place in *Samizdat Blog* following Archambeau's comment that “Penguin is by no means an under-capitalized venture, and people at the press must have known that glaring exclusions like this would seriously hurt the academic market for the book” (n. pag.). Fred Viebahn, Dove's husband, engaged in the discussion providing information about the negotiations around publication fees and a last minute withdrawal of rights on the part of Harper-Collins, which came to affect Dove's choices and of course also the reception of the anthology.

The formative aspect of an anthology is then one of the aspects that define its function. In that respect, the *The Penguin Anthology of 20th Century Poetry* might be introducing the poetry of people who appeal to Dove's sensibilities, as she warns in her introduction (I), and who would not attract the attention of some more mainstream literary scholars, like Vendler, but the damage of introducing poets not worth considering is minimal, or the responses of readers are to be underestimated. Daniels asserts: "I will read people I don't normally read, and perhaps one or two will get my attention, and I will follow them. It's a matter of personal taste and aesthetics as well as politics."; several online comments following posts on the anthology⁴ further capture the excitement of poetry readers to acquaint themselves with new poetry suggested by Dove, reaffirming perhaps her intention "to give a sense of what was going to happen" (Teicher).

Furthermore, in this context, that Dove may point to new poets is part of exercising her authority in the literary field and even though hers happen to be a more pronounced non-white perspective than Vendler would like to see, that her assessment could be gravely flawed is debatable. As mentioned above, Dove was after all the first to promote the work of Tretheway, in *The Best American Poetry 2000*, where she was, still unknown, one of several poets included. Notably, Tretheway is only the third African American woman poet to become Poet Laureate, after Gwendolyn Brooks (1985-86) and Dove herself (1993-95), an indicator that the representation of non-white women poets in powerful cultural posts is still scarce. And while in the Penguin anthology there is still a possibility that Dove lifts yet a few more deserving poets, Vendler seems to take issue with the fact that they are likely to be exactly minority poets. As Christina Sharpe puts it, "the sounds [. . .] in this anthology that Vendler hears most often in the 'minor' poems, in the 'minority' poets, and the 'minority' anthologizer, are simplicity, noise, and needless complaint" (Sharpe).

Still, if Dove's choices cause, or expose, tensions due to her matching simpler poems from the late decades of the century to those more elaborate ones from its first half, then the anthology falls in place well, as the fabric of literary history has never been smooth. Literary history is nothing but a series of shifts in aesthetics due to changed socioeconomic conditions, and the dynamics of gain and loss of power of different groups along with changing tastes due to a variety of reasons. The idea that certain texts are not sophisticated enough to be considered literature is not novel; popular modes of expression have always caused reactions, or even found fierce resistance—and that even though some were informed by emerging sensibilities and captured changing times. At the same time, the western canon is not free from works that were simply the outcome of all-white camaraderie, the texts of mostly male plus the odd female insiders in literary circles and other privileged spaces. There are also examples of authorship spotted with racist portrayals, or embracing racist ideologies, admittedly the products of a certain time and promoted in a certain historical context, but which nevertheless came to define the western literary heritage.⁵ Moreover, numerous works written under the influence of alcohol,

⁴ Howard Rambsy counts "the importance of blogs and twitter for raising awareness about news and relevant issues in contemporary poetry" as one of the "upsides" of the Vendler/Dove debate ("The Upsides of the Vendler/Dove Debate"). In "Some Observations Concerning Recent 'Debates' About African American Poetry" he notes how "without social media and blogs, we would not be in positions to follow the many responses that people had to those initial reviews".

⁵ While the fascist sympathies of Ezra Pound are well known, there is still controversy around the views of William Faulkner, see David Davis and Arthur Kinney (265-278).

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opiates, amphetamines, among other,⁶ have been celebrated as pivotal in expressing explorations of human experience.

In view of the above, embracing the matter of fact language of the everyday, of people who are likely to be navigating multiple cultural and linguistic fields, can surely not be deemed major disgrace. Surely, poems exhibiting “restricted vocabulary,” as Vendler put it (“Are These the Poems”), are also sites of (certain kinds of) human experience. As testified in Brooks’ poem “We Real Cool,” nothing says that verse needs to be written in elaborate and/or grammatically correct English in order to be authentic and powerful:

We real cool. We
Left school. We

Lurk late. We
Strike straight. We

Sing sin. We
Thin gin. We

Jazz June. We
Die soon. (*The Penguin Anthology* 185)

Though Brooks’ wording may be deemed poor, her highly ironic voice is sharp: her elliptic language conveys most accurately the sense of abandonment that characterizes the life of urban African American youth in her time, but also today. The same goes for Sandra Cinsero’s poem “My Wicked Wicked Ways” (*The Penguin Anthology* 523-24) the first two lines of which Vendler chooses to isolate, to make her point that contemporary ethnic poetry is undeserving: “This is my father. / See? He is young.” Set in context, these two lines are linked to “Here is my mother. / She is not crying,” which start the second verse of the poem and also to the poems concluding ones:

This is me she is carrying.
I am a baby.
She does not know
I will turn out bad. (*The Penguin Anthology* 524)

The texture of the experience the poet tries to communicate here materializes exactly in the simple, prosaic language she uses, alongside the use of the future tense versus the present/present continuous of the descriptions of the photograph, and a subsequent total lack of poetic grandeur. This is a plain story, which could turn out to be a happy story, only it did not, due to infidelity first and then perhaps due to other circumstances that eventually made the mother cry and led the baby “turn out bad.” There are things, after all, which a poetic language cannot carry adequately, where the poetic is found exactly in defying poetic language: Lorna Dee Cervantes “To My Brother” (*The Penguin Anthology* 521-22), its title followed by “and for the lumpen bourgeoisie,” begins with “We were so poor.” The poem contains also “We paid our bills. / We were brilliant at wishing,” statements which, in my view, could hardly be expressed more poignantly in any other (more elaborate) manner.

⁶ John Keats, Graham Greene, W.H. Auden, Dylan Thomas, Edgar Allan Poe, Jack London, William Faulkner, Tennessee Williams, Ernest Hemingway, F Scott Fitzgerald, John Cheever, John Berryman, Jack Kerouac, the list is long of authors renowned for their heavy drinking and/or use of other substances.

The above being said, and although a lot of contemporary poetry readers will find these poems of Cinseros and Dee Cervante's, among other, accessible (and the life circumstances depicted there less alienating than anything they find in Wallace Stevens, or T.S. Eliot, for example), these poets do not write accessible poetry—if accessibility is quality denominator—throughout. Also the poems of Louise Erdrich, represented in the volume by "Indian Boarding School: The Runaways" (*The Penguin Anthology* 528), from where Vendler fetches a line written in "demotic style," "Home is the place we head for in our sleep" (*Are These the Poems* n. pag.), are far more often obscure, due to her observing Native American cultural bearings, than they are transparent:

Our brushes cut the stone in watered arcs
and in the soak frail outlines shiver clear
a moment, things us kids pressed on the dark
face before it hardened, pale, remembering
delicate old injuries, the spines of names and leaves. (*The Penguin Anthology* 528)

Still, the tension the integration of these new voices may entail is inevitable as the overall shift in aesthetics it causes is hardly avoidable. The opposition to a changing definition of poetry contains thus an opposition also to what fuels this change, namely the riot of non-mainstream/non-white cultural perspectives the new aesthetics is aligned to, which have historically been deemed uninteresting and their diversifying potential was thereby contained. "More poets and greater varieties of styles and cultures actually did come with the expansion of civil rights, media technologies, and literacy for everyone, not simply 'elites,'" notes Kev, and continues: "[a]fter all, one could argue that the expansion of those rights for women, immigrants, racial and ethnic minorities, and sexual minorities is the American story of the 20th century, in large part". This is indeed a change in progress, one that has been optimized and accelerated markedly with the use of new media, which has rendered visibility to new groups of writers/poets who would otherwise be left unheard of.

But following the literacy, equal rights, and general demographic changes in The United States, "[a] greater democratization of 'the canon' is in order" (Kev). So, revisiting the premises which govern processes of vain categorization of poetic works along with taking steps to relax the margins and embrace the expression of ethnic sensibilities in whichever form they may materialise, even hip hop, spoken word, and rap, as poetic expressions of no lesser quality, is perhaps rather imperative. Sharpe observes that "[n]either Vendler nor Dove in the review, anthology, and defence of the anthology imagines the inclusion of spoken word, hip-hop (see Howard Ramsby II) and other forms of contemporary rhyme and verse that speak to a broad range of audiences across race, sex, and class." She also insightfully proposes that "[t]he inclusion of rap might further change the tenor of the conversation, opening up in important ways the debate over what counts as poetry".⁷

That the changing geography of the cultural domain leaves some, especially of those who are entrenched in old power structures, uncomfortable is not so remarkable, as it involves yielding privilege. Quite predictable is also that less polysyllabic modes of expression are targeted, to build defense positions. Noteworthy is however that in this case the move is enabled through the use of "the master's tools," as Audre Lorde would have it (112), by an already integrated and empowered poet from the periphery, one who does not enjoy inherent, but endowed status, due to her original conformity with mainstream aesthetics; and this I believe, is exactly what creates the controversy in the first place.

⁷ See also Ramsby, "Recent Rap as Poetry Debates, Conversations."

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POETRY AS PROCESS

sophie mayer

origins and elements: on margaret tait's disappearing trick

I. I Found a Book on How to be Invisible¹

I discovered Margaret Tait in the dark: not in a bookstore, but in a cinema. At the Cinematheque in Toronto, air-conditioned in the dog days of summer, there were Orcadian visions of turf, sharing its tough fragility with and through 8mm film kept carefully in cans in a doctor's disorderly study. It was only in 2004 that her short films, made between 1951 and 1998, were re-released into circulation, on an international touring programme curated by London's LUX, who also released selected shorts on DVD. Prior to that, the films had lived in Tait's house, painstakingly edited over decades into short films – yet they had also travelled, in the filmmaker's lifetime, on a circuit that stretched from New York and Moscow. While the Orkneys are considered remote, historically they were part of a sub-Arctic shared culture trade route, something that Tait recalls in her resolute centring of herself on the main island.

Unlike Hugh MacDiarmid, with whom she made a film, Tait was not part of Scots revivalism. She concludes her long poem 'The Trow o' Windhoose', which describes 'the black jelly trow hanging over Scotland / Sense of sin / That kills nightly,' by saying that

For the whole of Scotland I would like to kill that trow.
For the sake of the wholeness of people's hearts
I would like to take an axe and kill that trow. (Tait 1959, 2; 3)

Yet her films and writing are steeped in Orkney: not draped in the nostalgic plaid of theme-park 'tradition' of the trow, but concerned with its cultural present as it includes both past and future. *The Grassy Stories*, a chapbook collecting stories written for her nieces, nephews and godchildren about Orkney, ends with 'An End in View,' in which the island's adults realise that the youth both want, and need, to head to the mainland. It inverts the presumption on tradition usually attributed to marginal cultures. ' "What you mak yoursel will be the latest," said old Timmo. 'Couldna be newer than you have it when you've just made it' " (Tait 1959b, 30). In 'The Song Gatherer,' from her other short story collection *Lane Furniture*, a young musical ethnographer is disappointed when his informants on the island sing inferior versions of traditional airs, and prefer to sing jazz. Joseph's insistence that folk music is ' "ancient" ' disappoints his informants, who perform for him a song they've composed, and – when he dismisses it – conclude ' "We hev to get wur songs fae some piece," said the old woman, "or make them up wursells, for we haena any folk music" ' (Tait 2012, 140).

Folk culture as a constant process of transformation and invention is both the substance and subject of Tait's writing and filmmaking; influenced by Federico García Lorca,

¹ All section headings are from Kate Bush's song, 'How to Be Invisible' (2005).

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she refers to her work as ‘folk-poetry or blood-poetry’ (qtd. Neely 2012, 12). MacDiarmid misunderstands this when he concludes his account of visiting Tait’s studio with the thought that:

One of Dr Tait’s black-and-white 16mm films was commissioned by Orkney Education Committee and shown in a circuit of rural community halls...

Studios like Dr Tait’s [in other countries] work closely with Government and scientific research organisations and with societies for the dissemination of science. In several countries such bodies suggest topics, and give advice on technical matters, some even write the scripts. (416)

His desire to reappropriate Tait’s work for Scottish nationalism locates her as a public servant rather than an artist, a stenographer of local life. Tait did make a multipart series called *Aspects of Kirkwall*, funded by local government, which were screened in rural communities in the islands. MacDiarmid, like Joseph MacBayne the song gatherer, requires that Tait act as a vessel through which local knowledge might circulate within public fora, and scientific knowledge might improve rural locales; Tait’s films, on the other hand, form a kind of non-elite ‘coterie’ publishing, focused on a circulation within a community. And when Tait had an opportunity to make a short film with MacDiarmid, she portrayed him not as a national hero, but as a playful, almost childlike figure hopping along the Edinburgh pavement. Refuting an insistence on bringing the margins to the centre, ‘Tait films him on the very edge of things, and alively so’ (Smith 2004, 17).

Despite her interaction with the great man of Scottish letters and the circulation of her films during her lifetime, Margaret Tait is (portrayed) as forgotten – lost – invisible. The binary of margins and centre reasserted itself. Her (dis)location in Edinburgh and, later, Orkney, apparently removed her from the metropolitan cultural circuit centred on (and in) London, where her films were shown in the 1970s as part of the Poem Film Film Poem series at the National Film Theatre, curated by Peter Todd. Her first, and only, feature, *Blue Black Permanent* (1992), made when she was 74, received press attention precisely for the filmmaker’s age. In recent years, her short films have re-entered circulation, within the context of a renewed interest in both gallery-based artists’ film and video, and outsider art. Yet Tait’s work fits neither category: she trained at the Centro Sperimentale di Cinematographia in Rome, where she was influenced by neo-realism; to portray her art as naive underestimates her skill and training, or presumes that – as a woman, and as an Orcadian – virtuosity is not available to her.

Poet Rod Mengham, reviewing LUX’s DVD of a selection of her short films for *Art Monthly*, comments that:

Tait never used film as a medium for the transfer of information... The imagery is circular, with the same motifs reappearing in several works, yet is always held in place quite specifically on each occasion. What separates one work from the next in the viewer’s mind is the fundamental but elusive experience of rhythm and structure.

This structural emphasis takes a form that is found only rarely in film but which is familiar to readers of poetry... The poetic sequence offers the closest parallel to the way several of Tait’s longer compositions are segmented, with each component section being given its own title. The modular structure both relieves and sharpens concentration... [the camera] reflects the kind of experience of a particular place in all its granularity. (2007, 39)

Mengham’s observation at once highlights Tait’s skill in the application of poetic composition to cinema, and the interconnection of her intermedia practice.

One of her loveliest shorts, *Land Makar*, is almost a precursor to the grounded humour and temporal meditation of Agnès Varda's *The Gleaners and I*. An apparently simple documentary about a female farmer, *Land Makar* shows an older woman riding a tractor in her fields; she reminds the viewer that there is an older woman behind the camera and, in doing so, doubly redefines *makar*, the name given recently to the poet laureate of Holyrood (Edwin Morgan, and now Liz Lochhead). Both the farmer and the filmmaker are *makars*, as they are both poets (*poiesis*, making).

Tait is a 'makar' in her direct physical connection to every aspect of her filmmaking, and in the way in which her practice is deeply embedded in her everyday life and in the landscapes of her homes in Edinburgh and, later, the Orkneys. The shift across domestic and artistic practice is reflected in a shift across media, and a different temporal scale of making. In composing her film of Gerard Manley Hopkins' 'The Leaden Echo and the Golden Echo' she gathered film sequences beginning in 1948, 'returned to now and again, and completed in 1955,' as the credits say. This combination of patience and distraction is presented unusually honestly, foregrounding artistic practice as a collage, and as a way of thinking through itself. To say that Tait was a practising poet and short story writer as well as a filmmaker is therefore to dis-integrate a continuous practice. Although MacDiarmid encountered her as solely a documentary filmmaker, Tait's career, richly attested in two recent collections – Peter Todd and Benjamin Cook's *Subjects and Sequences: A Margaret Tait Reader* and *Poems, Stories and Writings*, edited by Sarah Neely – bridged film and poetry, documentary and invention, realism and allegory. She self-published three collections of poetry (the first of which was reviewed, ambivalently, by Edwin Morgan) and two of short stories.

As Ali Smith points out, Tait has never been anthologised as a Scottish, Orcadian and/or woman poet. Her interdisciplinary practice may be one reason; to be a woman moving between both fields was more unusual still: Neely compares Tait to Maya Deren, the American avant-garde filmmaker who was also a dancer, and who attracted Anais Nin to appear in her film *Rituals in Transfigured Time* by writing her a poem. Unlike Deren, who was both sociable and a socialist, participating in social networks as both a party giver and party member, Tait was distinctly unpubbable. ' "All very nice and Milne's bar ish and Abbotsfordish. I'm not up to it at present, not equal to it," ' she wrote of a meeting with some Glasgow poets (qtd Neely in Tait 2012, 20). Although she set up an office for Ancona Film on Rose Street, close to the meeting place for the Rose Street Poets (including MacDiarmid and Norman MacCaig), Tait preferred to spend time alone, driving around Scotland. Neely contrasts her with Stella Cartwright, who appeared in Tait's film *Palindrome*, and also played the (expected) role of muse to the male poets of Rose Street, despite being a poet herself. Her lack of engagement bespeaks both an individual commitment to solitude and gendered barriers to full participation in the 'scene,' where women were expected to be wives or muses, not writers. Yet not to participate in the scene was to be excepted from publication, review and promotion.

Tait's dissenting relation to artistic and personal relation to publicness is given a quasi-cinematic expression in 'The After Memory Supplies Also Later Allusions,' in which the speaker drives away from an inn on Christmas Eve, where one customer is taking tea:

The brightness of the bean was far too bright,
The darkness of the night received me and deceived me.
The disappointed person in the empty room
Was too alone

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The silence in the public place was too alert. (Tait 1960, 20)

It's exactly this conundrum of 'too' that Tait addresses in her sole feature, *Blue Black Permanent*, in which she explores the vexed self-absenting of the woman artist from a socio-cultural network that implicitly devalues and excludes her experience, and attempts to define an alternative space for aesthetic practice, and imagine how it might achieve equal value (the film's title, taken from the bottle of Quink ink on Tait's desk according to Michael Romer, underlines the connection between writing and filmmaking [Romer 2006, 8]). Both Barbara, who is an artist making her way in 1980s Edinburgh, and her mother Greta, a poet writing in 1950s Orkney, are figures for Tait's practice. Michael Romer notes that the film 'allowed [Tait] to create her own descendants, and recreate herself' (2006, 12). He also notes that it both conceals and reveals Tait's own poetic practice, ascribing her poem 'Storms,' from *Origins and Elements*, to Greta's hand.

Romer makes an awkward but interesting distinction about reading Tait's work autobiographically: 'Margaret's work is characterised by artistic reticence rather than licence. Using her poems as sources of information respects her desire for privacy because a poet gives implicit permission to use any autobiographical elements in a published poem' (2006, 8) In particular, *Blue Black Permanent* insists on this risky visibility, as a gendered issue, querying whether a woman can appear in public giving 'implicit permission' to be used. In her poetry, she determines a distinction between an 'erotic' nakedness — a visibility, whether sexual or textual, that invites the aroused gaze of the Other — and a nakedness for the self:

It isn't entirely erotic the need to stretch and preen oneself.
There's a wish for nakedness which is not erotic at all,
Limb-wisdom and a wish to face things squarely.
The wish or need is felt in the muscle and skin
And it's to do with a necessity, deep in the soul,
For honesty. (O&E, 1959, 5)

Tait's writing does 'stretch and preen' itself, but not for the other; as her direct address, colloquial tone and use of free verse suggest, her poetry 'wish[es] to face things squarely' out of 'necessity.'

Her commitment to 'honesty' makes her a profoundly analytic poet – but not a theoretical one, in the academic sense, as her honesty commits her to thinking with vernacular language and materials. In, 'Cave Drawing of the Water of the Earth and Sea,' whose title is an evocation of vernacular practice as an ancient, but inventive, tradition, she asks:

What is all theory but an abstraction of criss-cross
Lines,
As the girl proudly said her painting was?
Who the hell cares about criss-cross lines?
An abstraction from a boat scene
With the boatiness gone
She described it as a 'further development from her
working drawing'
But the drawing had been alive. (Tait 1959, 43; Tait 2012, 53)

Lily Briscoe, the final narrational focus of Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*, is here the

subject of Tait's scorn; the distinction between Tait's enunciation and Woolf's formal approach and heightened language in capturing 'moments of being' is evident, even though they are both fascinated by presentness.

Tait's sparseness contrasts with Modernist influence persisting post-war, not least in the work of Edwin Morgan, who reviewed *Origins and Elements* for *New Saltire* 2 in a group review entitled 'Who Will Publish Scottish Poetry?' (Tait's response to which was, clearly, 'I will'). He refers to her poems as 'sometimes prosaic and wilful' and attributes the 'scientific' poems to MacDiarmid's influence rather than her own training (1961, 51). His comment that she 'still has to master the inner rhythmical life of a poem' marks a resistance to Tait's demotic delivery, and her employment of long lines to trip the reader's thoughts – and her equal refusal of the revival of rhyme and metre by contemporaneous poets such as Sir John Betjeman. Without abstracting it, Tait's poetry is searching for new relationships to time after Einstein – but also new, 'wilful' relations to language.

Her wilful prosaicness has led even Neely to treat her poetry as a sketch or rehearsal, as Deren's seems to have regarded her work, rather than fully-formed artistic achievement *sui generis*. Whereas Deren gave up writing both poetry and short fiction once she began making films, Tait's archive contains rafts of undated drafts and fragments produced after her chapbooks that, as Neely remarks in her introduction, may be observational poems or planned shot lists for short films, or both (Neely 2012, 12-13). Similarly, Tait's chapbooks contain a number of epigrammatic fragments that may or may not be part of the longer poems that they follow: often distinct in subject matter and tone, yet untitled, these fragments are as distinctive a trait of her poetic practice as her descriptive shot wish-lists are of poetic practice. 'Tait's exhaustive listing is all part of the rough material with which she worked... but for Tait the process is as important as what comes out of the process,' so the 'rough material' and finished texts could be said to have a similar status. (Neely 2012, 17). This intriguing form – the poem as both made object and trace or plan of making, and indeed oscillating between the two states – is both a key material practice *and* a symbol of Tait's approach as a whole.

II. Find a Pinch of Keyhole

The published poems are a process in themselves, but also record of that process, in both cases hingeing on Tait's dual training as a medical doctor and a cinematographer.

With this dual virtuosity, Tait's poems think through the most comprehensive and (in that it is) constantly changing integration of vision and speech in British poetry since William Blake. Her poems often consider the scale of attention at which the invisible – for example, the atomic, or the archaeological – is transposed into visibility, and the effects of such a focus on the normative field of vision. 'There's a whole country at the foot of the stone / If you care to look,' opens 'The Scale of Things' (Tait 2012, 85). Echoing Blake's search for Heaven in a wild flower, she writes in 'Now':

I used to lie in wait to see the clover open
Or close,
But never saw it.
I was too impatient
Or the movement is too subtle,
Imperceptible
And more than momentary
...
Cinematographically

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I have registered the opening of escholtzia
On an early summer morning.
It gave me a sharp awareness of time passing,
Of exact qualities and values in the light,
But I didn't see the movement
As movement.
I didn't with my own direct perception see the petals moving.
Later, on the film, they seem to open swiftly

...

But I didn't see them moving open.

My timing and my rhythm could not observe the rhythm of their opening. (Tait 2012, 43-44)

Neely includes a note entitled 'Time,' which reveals that 'Now' is based on a cinematographic experiment Tait conducted; in keeping with her emphatic interest in process – and in process as an aspect of the everyday – in her account of the experiment, Tait notes that she was also able to make herself breakfast and tidy up in the gaps between setting up shots (Tait 2012, 149-50). She concludes this note with a self-deprecating quotation: '(Cf. T.S. Eliot 'I have measured out my life in coffee spoons.' !).'

Both modernist poetry and the scientific method are thus domesticated, and gently mocked in this note, as they are in the voice of the poem. The conversational syntax and rhythms of the poem give it a transparency and simplicity that resonates explicitly with Blake's 'Auguries of Innocence,' while the title is evocative of Gertrude Stein's poetics of a 'continuous present.' There is a sense of a child's perception of time, light and movement being recalled by an adult, wherein the 'exact qualities and values' of that remembered perception are at once layered under and filtered through the mechanical and technical exactitudes of f-stops and light metering that echo in the polysyllabic single word line 'cinematographically,' and the scientific *qualia* that Tait suggests in moving from clover to the Latinate escholtzia, the California poppy. Yet by placing the camera and the eye at a tangent mediated by her use of poetic language, Tait teases apart the lyric cliché of the poet's heightened perception as expressed by Blake's augury of innocence.

Attentive to the 'atoms...exploding throughout our atmosphere,' as the poem continues, Tait unfurls her filmic perception, which was rooted equally in her training as a doctor and a filmmaker. As the title *Origins and Elements* suggests, Tait was a natural philosopher, perhaps the first in British poetry since Samuel Taylor Coleridge; for her poetry, the film camera, telescope and microscope were ways of observing, questioning and measuring the world. Her key interest is in the nature of the visual and visible. As Mengham observes, the

measure and pace [of her films] are contemplative, which has the effect of transferring the responsibility of primary attention from the filmmaker to the viewer. Clearly, Tait is the one who has chosen the subject matter and who has positioned the camera, but the scope given to the individual viewer for subjective exploration of each scene is pivotal (39).

By looking within the framework of scientific precision, and by seeing its limitations, Tait shapes an individual style of looking, yet a trait of that style is that it moves beyond the self; or rather sees that the (seeing) 'self is only a threshold, a door, a becoming between two multiplicities' (Deleuze and Guattari 1988, 249).

III. Fold Yourself Up

Tait's key interest was not in making her work or self visible (as the word visibility is used in contemporary cultural and identitarian discourse), but in engaging with visibility as a subject. The Imagists, too, on whom Deren wrote her M.A. thesis and from whom she devolved elements of her film theory, sought to capture the present in the vision of a flower; but their commitment to visuality is pictorial and rests on a stable sense of the

human as measure of (sublime) perception. UnRomantically, Tait's poems refuse the separation and hierarchisation of observer and observed, wherein the observer's intellection interprets and guarantees the visible world. Inquisitive and aware, they examine the relations – as altered by both quantum physics and new visual technologies – between observer and observed.

Her poems' fascination with observing the process of observation creates shifts of scale from the microscopic to the macroscopic, as in 'Now.' As the title of 'The Unbreakable-Up' suggests, Tait's poems insist that the micro and macro cannot be separated from one another. At the heart of the poem, she states that:

Human beings who form concepts in their minds
Are somewhere between those extremes of vastness
And infinitesimality. (Tait 2012, 47)

Her poetic process is, likewise, 'somewhere between those extremes,' and thus shifts the nature of the human subject and speaker, who is at once part of the class of 'Human beings' and set apart by her analytic mind. To form concepts in one's mind (as the speaker does) is to recognise one's intermediate, not to say indeterminate, nature: a being-in-process that echoes the shot list/poem overlap identified by Neely.

Tait called her chapbook imprint 'Interim edition,' citing her work 'somewhere between.' That lower-case 'e' is suggestive of a stage in the publishing process rather than the name of a chapbook press. Several of the poems in each chapbook had been previously published in *Voice of Scotland* and the *Orkney Herald*, but Tait's Interim gathering-in has suggestive similarities with Emily Dickinson's fascicles in their mediation of the private world of the notebook and public-ation. The Dickinson comparison originates with Tait, who write:

Emily Dickinson shut herself in a room
And wrote about her pain.

She wrote too about joy (Tait 1959, 5/Tait 2012, 35).

'[J]oy' has no possessive; nor does the room: while the pain is self-focused, owned and internal, Dickinson is neither Woolf's bourgeois sister with 'a room of one's own', nor is she entirely a confessional trauma poet. 'She wrote too about joy.' The privacy of that writing, and the joy in it (both writing and controlled circulation), may have resonated with Tait. When leading writer and editor Helen Hunt Jackson approached her about publishing her work, 'Dickinson is purported to have replied to her, "How can you... [p]rint a piece of your soul!"' (qtd. Holland 1994, 139).

IV. You Cut Along the Dotted Line

The cover of *Subjects and Sequences*, Tait's second chapbook, refuses to separate poetry and film. It is composed of a number of strips black-and-white positives, confirming Mengham's association of Tait's sense of poetic and filmic sequence. Tait's compositional process in film is associative rather than narrative, and her editing rhythmic, creating its own temporality to which the viewer is asked to assent. She refused to edit her film *Orquil Burn* when advised to do so by seminal documentary-maker John Grierson, who felt it was over-long. She refused to 'make it into a tak-tak-tak natty little short film... It is a made thing, set like that on purpose, but its form is distant or unfinished perhaps' (qtd. Neely 2012, 12). In refusing to cut the film, she cut herself off from Grierson's support, and thus from the contemporaneous documentary and Scottish film-making community.

Despite – or, perhaps, more profoundly, because of – her emphasis on process, and her confidence in claiming unfinished forms for her work, Tait was also confident about

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finding a responsive audience, not only within the avant-garde circles in London where her work appeared post-1970, but closer to home. In 1954, she took advantage of the Edinburgh Festival to arrange nightly screenings at her Rose Street studio, where 'the Rose Street children began to accost [her] daily in the street with "Is there any films tonight, missis?"' (Tait 2012, 157). She observes that it was only viewers 'who had the upside-down sophisticated state of mind which [she] associate[d] with a certain type of suburban film society member, hack reporters, and the sort of smart alec who must always be in the know' who struggled with her films (158). 'It is,' she concluded, 'as if they had difficulty in understanding anything straightforward and clear' (ibid.).

She insisted on the straightforward integration of her work with both folk and modern everyday culture. In *Subjects and Sequences*, she analogises herself as a 'Pavement Artist,' in a metaphor that overlays filmmaking and poetics as both being arts of framing (1960, 30-32/2012, 68-69).

I chalk it out on the ready squares.
Only the colours out of the box
Are available.
If you walk
And scrape your shoe on the finer lines
I do them over, with emphasis.
But a sort of blur
Is the result of too much walking
And, in the blur,
Exaggeration and some distortion,
Result of making too often the journey. (Tait 1960, 29/Tait 2012, 68).

The pavement, found space (as the page and the film frame are), offers her a scale and frame – but it is also a public space in which critical 'scrape[s]' can blur the poet's 'finer lines'. Encounters with audience can lead to '[e]xaggeration and some distortion' in order to reach them better.

She escapes the journey by imagining herself as a ghost:
Spilling of the ink-pot,
Tearing of the page,
Intruding with blundering fingers
In the micro-picture gauge. (ibid.)

The rare outbreak of full rhyme rhymes her poetic and cinematic practices even as she gleefully threatens to wreck them, wrecking her amphibrachic metre with that blundering 'blundering'. Prosaic, no; wilful, yes. Having become a ghost, she turns to and addresses her own ghosts, towards whom her will to make and show is directed. She addresses them *within herself*, inviting them to attend her cinema:

I am all of my ancestors
...
Doers and undoers
Lodge here under my high heath
Where I light my fire.

I lit the light-house for you
To guide you in the mirk.
You'll see the regular flashing,

You'll count,
And by the known timing,
By recognition of the formula once learned,
You'll know it's me

It's myself, this mazy thing,
This unattachable me,
This floating, footless creature,
This last word in what shouldn't be. (Tait 1960, 31-32 / Tait 2012, 69)

The regular flashing of the lighthouse establishes the cinematic interval – the gap of black leader between frames that enables the 'flicker effect' to produce the optical illusion of moving pictures. That *gap* allows the reader/viewer, who has become part of the ancestral crowd of *makars*, to 'count': to be valued, and to enumerate rationally.

Through this polymorphous, ancestral self, the poem suggests a new lyric I: indeterminate, multiple, at once inscribing and de-inscribing itself, absent and present, ghosted by its own ancestors. Film's absent presence in the poem makes the reader aware that 'I', the enunciative source of the lyric and the hidden source of the film, is 'the last word in what shouldn't be.' Silencing Grierson and other critics and 'upside-down people', Tait is determined to have, and to be, 'the last word in what shouldn't be,' a complicated double negative. 'Be', the poem ends, after declaring that it 'shouldn't.' That captures the paradox, not of Tait's aesthetics or poetics, but of her poetics in relation to public-ation and audience. She lights her fire, not to draw the reader/viewer closer, but to warn them to keep their distance from the impossibility of a woman writer and filmmaker.

V. You Think Inside Out

Reading Mary Shelley's story 'The Invisible Girl,' Sonia Hofkosh argues that Shelley writes herself into the story as the 'invisible girl' discovered by the narrator, who he believes must be either a ghost or fey (she is, in fact, alive and well, and saving herself from sexual disgrace). Women, says Hofkosh, are expected to 'shrink to fit into a conventional narrative as if into tiny slippers'; if they can't, they can only figure uncannily (1998, 6). Fascinated by the fairy tale and mythic exceptionalism of the queen, Tait rewrites – combines, deconstructs – both fairy tale and historical queens in *The Hen and the Bees*, her third chapbook of poems. 'Queen of Fact and Story', as she entitles the first poem in the sequence, undergoes a transformation (Tait 2012, 91-92). First of all, she 'herself had eyes / Full of legends' rather than just being the subject of the gaze (92). In 'Story-telling Queen,' the queen assumes Tait's position of telling stories 'out of her ancestral memory' by the fire (92).

The very idea of queendom is dismantled in 'Belief' in a way that echoes the Old English meaning of *quean*, derived from Old Norse and echoed in contemporary Scandinavian languages: 'Women / Like other women' (Tait 2012, 97). Rather than being a status conferred by marriage to a king, Tait vocalises a chorus of men proclaiming:

'As if there could be queens, we mean natural queens,
Women with possibilities of their own.
Don't make us laugh,' they said,
And laughed, just the same. (ibid.)

Without class and marital status, women are a subject for mockery. Tait's poetry and fiction,

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written from the mid-1950s to 1960, is defiantly outspoken about gender politics, a necessary reminder of the oft-forgotten, or obscured by the Friedan mystique, continuity from suffragism through inter-war feminism to the women workers of WWII. She insistently locates the political in the personal, as in her story 'The Sun and the Moon,' where a female artist attempts to find an identity within an intimate relationship, yet she is also insistently aware of the comedic nature of this struggle. ' "You don't realise quite how much of a feminist I am," she said, snuggling up to him.' (Tait 1959c).

Tait's poetics prefigure the feminist poetics of process by two decades, in which – as feminist filmmaker Yvonne Rainer names her autobiography – 'feelings are facts,' and the traditional affective material of lyric is regarded with a scientific detachment. In her elegy for her sister-in-law, Allison, Tait makes a series of shifts:

I can only lament.
I can only weep and wish she were alive;
And I re-examine,
Was there something to notice that we did not notice?
Could some positive perception have possibly saved her?

Until her last breath she must have been happy:
... Until the day the blood came pouring,
Tore placenta from the wall,
And Death leapt out from his lair in the dark,
Bytuene Mershe and Averil,
And lyht on Alysoun. (Tait 1960, 15-16/Tait 2012, 66-67)

A direct, simple statement of grief is followed, on the turn of a semi-colon, by an analytical statement, whose action – 're-examine' – links philosophical and medical speculation. Tait's questions, in her grief, foreground 'positive perception': although the poem goes on to re-iterate observations of Allison's positivity – 'She was always happy ... / She had such a dancing spirit' (16) – the specificity of the penultimate observation of the cause of death suggests that 'positive' also means 'engaged, active, using perception as a good.'

That it is not scientific positivism is evident in the shift from self-questioning about medical observation to a lyric perception of Allison's 'dancing spirit' and the closing invocation of a canonical British poetics of death that merges the Christian and the elemental pagan. Tait's frankness about sexual and reproductive embodiment, in a poem written in 1955, is well worth noting, but – emphatically *and* – in tandem with the ease with which she moves between traditional elegy (including its religious overtones), confessional lyric with its affective and domestic honesty, and an innovative, hybrid poetics of observation that articulates a new metaphysics. Herself a poet and editor of *The Kirkwallian*, Allison Leonard Tait was a frequent first reader of Margaret's work (Neely 2012, 6). The closing couplet, with its invocation of an older poetry, locates Allison as the reader of the poem, recognising the women's shared expertise – rather than their biology or affective live – as their bond.

In their direct address, refusal (or, frequently, deconstruction) of conceit, and almost meditative examination of both emotions and observations, Tait's poems couldn't be further from Eliot's 'felt thought.' At the end of 'Standing Stones of Stenness,' which holds in tension the holistic spiritual ecosystem of the Neolithic culture that erected the stones and the literate, alienated intellection of modernity, she concludes

They are to blame for mistaking
brooks for books
and we, whom they became, for educating
all that is left of them to our worst conclusions.

Fusions
of thought and emotion are to be sought,
—perhaps found (perhaps not). (Tait 1960, 11/Tait 2012, 62)

Tait is no atavist: she is concerned with (and by) the ways in which human perception and belief determine experience. What's necessary, she suggests, is neither education nor religion, each of which excludes the other, and excludes the seeking mind. 'Fusions / of thought and emotion are to be sought': the passive imperative is at odds with the passion for seeking, but the strangeness of the syntax is qualified and drawn out by the honest ambivalence of the final line. True seeking cannot be commanded in the active tense, but must slip the didactic framework of brooks and books in order to question everything. 'Fusions' are not the goal, for all their dramatic isolation as a one-word line at the opening of the stanza; instead, '(perhaps not)' is the poem's conclusion.

In the following poem, 'Alex' (about her partner Alex Pirie), she continues to slip the commitment to the Enlightenment model of the stable, unified self, embodied in its mentation, as the measure of things, which has remained the dominant voice and framework for mainstream British lyric poetry. The opening lines offer almost a manifesto for Tait's work:

I think nothing of your thought-out thought,
But value you thinking it.
The you-ness of you is other than that. (Tait 1960, 14)

Her poems are 'thought-out thought[s]' tracing themselves, fragments of an internal running commentary engaged in observation of the mechanisms of feeling; here, she suggests that the substance of the thought substantiates neither the poem, nor the poet, nor the reader's experience of it. The value is in the process of 'you thinking it.' It rethinks the triangulation of I, you and the reader that's central to conventional love poetry, effacing both 'I' and 'you', where the second person is both lover and reader. 'The you-ness of you,' she tells the reader, is more than your thought process about the poem; what's valuable is that you think about it, not what you think. That is what crosses the boundary between self and other. Such inside-out thinking, refusing conventions that are structural and systemic, not just substantive, is the heartbeat of Tait's work.

VI. And You're Invisible

The final poem of *Origins and Elements*, 'Ay, Ay, Ay, Dolores' (Tait 1959, 48; Tait 2012, 58) defies its titular invocation of feminine vocal excess, ending:

But there's so much to say that by the time

I fine it down there's only one word left
And then that word has to go too, being inadequate,
And only my eyes are left
For saying it all.

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Punning not, as is pervasive in British post-Romantic poetry where the subject masters the substance, on 'I' and 'eye' but on 'aye' and 'eye', Tait offers a 'positive perception' as her signature. She is intensely self-focused – in describing her internal and external observations – and self-effacing, in placing the process of observation, rather than the observing self, at the centre of the poems. They offer a record of thought in action, unfolding contemplation of the origins and elements of both language and the material world.

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maurits knol

the poetry critic after auschwitz and adorno's *nach*

Adorno's so-called "dictum" (Hofmann 2005 e.a.) about poetry in his 1949 *Kulturkritik und Gesellschaft* has been extremely controversial; it has been far more controversial than the vast majority of his other utterances in his enormous oeuvre. The controversy is mostly limited to two alleged statements about "poetry after Auschwitz", one allegedly saying that it is impossible and the other that it is barbaric to write such poetry.

It is difficult to understand how a philosopher and musicologist who was a profound lover of the arts (he, for instance, wrote many volumes on music) could actually say that the complete art of poetry seized to exist after 1940-45. But what did Adorno actually say, not so much *about* poetry after Auschwitz but *with* poetry after Auschwitz? In short, what does the expression "poetry after Auschwitz" mean?

The problem which gave the impetus to the research which resulted in this essay is actually not merely related to Adorno's interests, but also to his intelligence. One does not even have to read Adorno's text very closely to notice that he does not say that (as I mildly suggested above) there is no writing of poetry anymore after 1945. The simple fact that many poems were written in his time would lead to an utterly and shockingly obvious paradox in the work of a usually coherent and logical thinker. My amazement by this almost unacceptable paradox led me to consider whether there are different explanations of his words possible.

In fact, we should add, Adorno's "poetry after Auschwitz" (as the subject has been famously coined, e.g. by Hofmann 2005 and Revesz 2007) does not exist. He did not write the precise words "Poesie nach Auschwitz" or "Dichtkunst nach Auschwitz" in his *Kulturkritik und Gesellschaft*. The famous passage which has been distorted is the following:

Kulturkritik findet sich der letzten Stufe der Dialektik von Kultur und Barbarei gegenüber: nach Auschwitz ein Gedicht zu schreiben ist barbarisch, und das frißt auch die Erkenntnis an, die ausspricht, warum es unmöglich ward, heute Gedichte zu schreiben (p. 26).

T. W. Adorno, "Kulturkritik und Gesellschaft". In: *Kulturkritik und Gesellschaft*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, ca. 1970. Pg. 30.

The passage consists of two main claims: that writing a poem after Auschwitz is barbaric and that writing poems "nowadays" is impossible. These two claims are related through the third claim which states that the first idea "eats into" the second. To begin with the first claim, what Adorno actually wrote is "nach Auschwitz ein Gedicht [zu schreiben ist barbarisch]". It should be mentioned that the claim is not about *poetry* but about *a poem after Auschwitz* or even *one poem after Auschwitz*. The second claim likewise does not mention *poetry* but *poems* (*Gedichte*) and the second claim does not include Auschwitz. Stein called the metaphor in the third claim a "zweifelloos kryptische Satzaussage" and he does not seem to be alone in his confusion. It is however important to have a clear grasp of it, because otherwise one would conclude confusingly with many authors, such as Peter

Härtling: "Adorno hat gesagt, nach Auschwitz würden keine Gedichte mehr geschrieben werden können" (Stein: 8). This interpretation confuses Adorno's three claims by transferring the predicate of the third by neglect of the second upon the subject of the first claim. Peter Szondi came much closer to an adequate interpretation of the third claim: "Nach Auschwitz ist kein Gedicht mehr möglich, *es sei denn auf Grund von Auschwitz*" (Stein: 8, italics by the author of this essay). I will mostly follow Szondi's clear reading of "anfressen": Adorno states that writing a poem has become impossible, *except* "after Auschwitz". Despite my appreciation of Szondi's *es sei denn auf Grund von* as an explanation of "anfressen", I must oppose his use of "after Auschwitz": Adorno did not specify his "heute" as "nach Auschwitz" and therefore I will not do so either. Adorno's phrase "nach Auschwitz" on the contrary does, I will explain in this essay, not constitute a temporal designation but a thematic genre.

After this introduction, the following will be presented: In the first section of this essay, the musicological use of the word "nach" will be explained. The second section is concerned with how it can be understood within the most closely related parts of the philosophy of Adorno. The third section contains a sketch of some contours of an Adornian critique of the history of poetry. The essay concludes with a short summary and suggestions for further research.

I. A more adequate answer to the question on the interpretation of "poetry after Auschwitz" lies, I think, in the general misunderstanding of the nature of Adorno's writings. Indeed, he has been recognized as a philosopher, as a musicologist, as a philosopher of music, and as a philosophical musicologist. Insofar as he has been specified as a philosopher, he has been further specified as (for instance) a neo-Marxist, post-Hegelian, or German philosopher. Many more qualifications have been proposed and studied. However, despite his being a scholar who was steeped both in the history of philosophy and the history of music, he has barely been received as a musicological philosopher.

The musicological philosopher Theodor Adorno did not found or participate in a school (in the sense of a "musicological philosophy school" such as there is a school of neo-Marxism, etc.), but rather he is a relatively unique individual within the history of philosophy. Thus, it is not without reason that his philosophy has almost never been read in musicological terms: his specific difference has been mostly not acknowledged and few philosophers have an interest in reading philosophy musicologically – even though it is impossible to understand Adorno adequately without considering the musicological part of his intellect.

There are good reasons for reading his notorious *Kulturkritik und Gesellschaft* as the product of a musicological philosopher. Which other philosopher would introduce his topic in the first sentence of this seminal essay by alluding to those who are "gewohnt [...] mit den Ohren zu denken" and commences his elaboration on the word "Kulturkrik" with a remark about the "Klang des Wortes"? And what else would explain the prominence of the "Prinzip von Harmonie" in society in this text of Adorno, as in many other of his writings? These are the words of a philosopher who does not think of musicology merely as a specialist subject, but as a discourse which conceptually informs philosophy as such.

The word upon which we should particularly reflect is the German word "nach", mostly translated as *after* in English. In the common interpretation of Adorno's dictum, this word is merely understood in its temporal sense as the opposite of the German *bevor* and the English *before*, as being-later-than. Although this connotation, as will later be explained, may also be implicit in Adorno's "nach Auschwitz", it is not the primary meaning of "nach" in

that passage. The word “nach” may seem very simple, but the fact that the German *Grimm Wörterbuch* needs 4,604 words to explain its meanings should say enough to demonstrate that what-is and what-seems are contraries in this case, and that we should reconsider the simplistic interpretation of Adorno’s “poetry after Auschwitz”.

A clear example of the word *nach* having a meaning which is completely the opposite of the meaning which is ascribed to this word in Adorno’s dictum, is part of the common German expression *streben nach*. The proper English translation of the *nach* in this expression is [*strive*] *for* or [*try*] *to*. The striving is necessarily directed towards something in the future. To say that *A strebt nach B* or to say that *A ist nach B* are remarkable mutual temporal inversions of the meaning of *nach*: in *A strebt nach B*, A is before B (which is still unrealized and may become real in the future) and therefore B is later than A; but in *A ist nach B*, A is later than B and therefore B is before A. This is simply to say that *nach* is a problematic term even in its temporal sense, not that the temporal inversion applies to Adorno’s dictum.

In music it is quite common to use the word *nach* or *after* without having it preceded by a verb. Thus, for instance, Ferruccio Busoni had *Variationen und Varianten nach Chopin* published in 1925. Obviously, these compositions are later than Chopin: Chopin died in 1849 and Busoni was born in 1866. Although an interpretation of *nach* as later-than in Busoni’s title would thus be adequate, it would remain questionable whether Busoni really intended to say something that goes without saying. Moreover, if he intended to say something that would be obvious from the fact that his entire life is later than Chopin’s life, why did he then choose Chopin and not, for instance, Beethoven or Shakespeare or Plotinus or Christ or Siddharta? An answer to this question requires reading the content of Busoni’s *Variationen und Varianten nach Chopin*.

The content of this book is not alphabetical text but musical score. The musicologist Adorno was able to read musical scores. Busoni’s *Variationen und Varianten nach Chopin* is the eighth book of his *Klavierübung in zehn Büchern* (*Piano Tutorial in Ten Books*) and mainly consists of *Neun Variationen über ein Präludium von Chopin* (*Nine Variations on a Prelude of Chopin*). The first four systems of Busoni’s Variations are given as music examples below and followed by the complete but brief 20th Prelude of Chopin.

Sostenuto.

dolce

Largo.

f

ff

p

pp

riten.

ppp

Music example 1: Busoni, Ferruccio. *Klavierübung in zehn Büchern* [Piano Tutorial in Ten Books], zweite umgestaltete und bereicherte Ausgabe. Buch 8 (Variationen und Varianten nach Chopin). Leipzig: Breitkopf & Härtel, 1925. http://petrucci.mus.auth.gr/imglnks/usimg/3/35/IMSLP34902-PMLP48002-Busoni_KU10_8_pp151-177_Variationen_und_Varianten_zu_Chopin.pdf

Largo.

No 20.

ff

p

ritenuto.

Fine.

Music example 2: Chopin, Frédéric. *Vingt-quatre Préludes pour le Piano*. Leipzig: Breitkopf & Härtel, ca. 1839. [http://petrucci.mus.auth.gr/imglnks/usimg/9/95/IMSLP85374-PMLP02344-Chopin Op 28 Breitkopf 6088 first.pdf](http://petrucci.mus.auth.gr/imglnks/usimg/9/95/IMSLP85374-PMLP02344-Chopin_Op_28_Breitkopf_6088_first.pdf)

Please notice that the edition of the Busoni score has a much broader layout, partly due to Busoni's abundant embellishments in the first system, than the edition of the Chopin score but that they barely differ on duration: music example 1 consists of 17 common measures and music example 2 consists of 13 common measures. Thus, despite the fact that one example shows four systems and the other shows merely two systems, they are almost equal in duration. If we subtract the first four measures of Busoni's score, the *sostenuto* introduction of the musical theme to the whole of the variations and which has its melody repeated in the subsequent measures which commence the *largo*-part, then the two examples are exactly equal in duration: both have 13 common measures in the same tempo (*Largo* with a *ritenuto* in the last 2.5 measures). Also, one should notice that Busoni wrote the upper bar of his *largo*-part in the bass clef while Chopin wrote his in the treble clef, but the key of both parts is C-minor and they both commence with the very same notes. The only difference (potentially inaudible) is that Busoni instructed the pianist to play the first notes *forte* while Chopin prescribed *fortissimo* (note that dynamics instructions in musical scores are relative and not absolute).

The two *largo*-parts are melodically identical and (en)harmonically very similar. The largest deviation is found near the ending, in the measure wherein the *ritenuto* commences: the left hand, which merely plays octaves in the Chopin-piece, play octaves until the last measures in the Busoni-piece too but in the mentioned measure there are some full triads. Moreover, Busoni added some *portato* signs in the last three measures and prescribed that the lowest bass note of the penultimate measure should be sustained into the last measure. These are merely very small additions to Chopin's score. In essence, Busoni mostly imitated Chopin's 20th Prelude with minor additions. By virtue of these minor additions, the Busoni example is truly a *Variation on a Prelude of Chopin*.

The book in which the Busoni example was published contains 9 of such variations. The one discussed is the first and has the fewest alterations; gradually, the source (Chopin's Prelude) becomes more unrecognizable. Nonetheless, they develop from this source theme and together they constitute one single *Variationen und Varianten nach Chopin* on which we may, now that we have gained an understanding of the content of Busoni's music book, repeat the question which gave the impetus for this musicological excursion: If Busoni intended to say something that would be obvious from the fact that his entire life is later than Chopin's life, why did he then choose Chopin and not, for instance, Beethoven or Shakespeare or Plotinus or Christ or Siddharta? The answer, I'd say, is that he did not merely say *nach Chopin* to syllogistically deduce from the fact that Chopin was dead before Busoni himself was born, but to suggest something about the relation between the content of Chopin's oeuvre and the content of his own book: that Busoni's eighth book contains not merely Variations and Varieties which were written temporally after Chopin, but in which Chopin's work also somehow reappears.

Likewise, Busoni composed a *Fantasia nach J.S. Bach* and a *Duetto concertante nach Mozart*. Busoni was not alone in this use of *nach* in the sense of reappearance. For example, Percy Goetschius composed *Melodien-Sträusschen nach Schubert* (not later than 1889) and George Rochberg composed *Nach Bach: Fantasia*, for harpsichord or piano (1966). Nearer to poetry, Schubert famously composed *Lieder nach Gedichten von Johann*

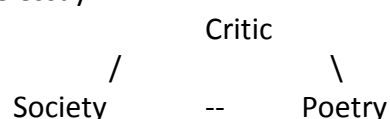
Wolfgang von Goethe (Songs to Poems by J.W. von Goethe). Many more examples could be added to this list. A sense of reappearance and remembering to the German word *nach* has been more than usual in music for over at least two centuries. In classical terminology of aesthetics, this is called *representation*. The representation of Auschwitz is what is found in the many biographies, diaries, and poems, in which survivors, observers and even the guilty have saved their memories, to retain their presence.

II.

Although Adorno's *Kulturkritik und Gesellschaft* concerns much more than merely poetry criticism and society, I will restrict my summarizing reading of this essay to these subjects by substituting "culture" with "poetry". Likewise, I will on the recommendation of Adorno himself in his essay (13-14), substitute the problematic word "Geist" with "poetry" (this is of course not to say that these words are synonyms, but that what applies to the more general word also applies to poetry). Thus, I will read the title as "Poesiekritik und Gesellschaft". After the publication of his essay, especially the pre-concluding dictum was wildly received. This reception may have caused Adorno to later give more meaning to what he initially said. I will not go in this short essay into the interesting reception history of Adorno's position, but will limit my reading to his initial essay and perhaps some occasional references when I think that another text might more comprehensibly rephrase some notion in *Kulturkritik und Gesellschaft* without going too far beyond its explicit statements.

Adorno's *Kulturkritik und Gesellschaft* should be read as the product of a German Cold War historiographical thinker. It implies oppositions which have been increasingly criticized in the latter part of the 20th century, such as between East (Germany) and West (Germany), and communism and capitalism, and compares the forms of poetry criticism which they produce. In general, Adornian thought is oppositional thought. The main opposition in the aforelaying essay is the opposition between culture (poetry) and society, in which the poetry critic has a mediating role. The opposition between poetry and society appears, according to Adorno, historically as a dialectical relation, in which they are originally opposed to each other but gradually merge. This merging, which is facilitated by the critic, has led to the very problematic state of affairs which Adorno addresses in the last part of his essay.

The core thesis of Adorno's essay is that the poetry critic, in its various forms, is in his time ("heute") not critical anymore although the critic continues to present itself as a critic. When reading the essay, it is therefore of utmost importance to distinguish clearly between "critic", "criticism", "critical" and other words which sound familiar and alliterate nicely but can be conceptually very different. Originally, Adorno states, the poetry critics had an economical role in society, which was that of the "Berichtstatter" (12): someone who informs society about poetic production. As such, the poetry critic established and maintained the relation between poetry and society, the poetry critic was a *mediator* between poetry and society, and this has remained one of the fundamental roles of the critic throughout the evolution of the critic. Adorno traces the relation between his three subjects in the essay:



In the original state of affairs, as said, society and poetry were radically opposed, and the critic mediated between them by messaging about poetry to society. Through its opposition, the relation between society and poetry was *critical*. This critical opposition is not immediate, and the relation between society and poetry will according to Adorno never become immediate (15: “Kritik ist ein unabdingbares Element der in sich widerspruchsvollen Kultur”), but *mediated* by the critic. Gradually, it was also expected of the poetry critic to add a judgement because the buyers were aware that the judgement of the poetry critic on what was on offer was at least better than their own. This judgement developed into larger texts. In early aristocratic (13, “theologisch-feudalen”) societies, the critics were mainly educated people in the clergy or in the service of a noble. They had an attitude of elevation which was accepted, because it was associated with the elevated religious and aristocratic institutions which they served.

After the Enlightenment however, historically initiated in Europe by the French Revolution which had its counterpart much later in Germany with the abdication of Kaiser Wilhelm II in 1918, these institutions lost their power and therewith the critic lost funding and protection. The critic, who has, although it was not much recognized, always been the slave of both culture and society (society provides the reproduction and things – such as food, even necessary for a poetry critic), adapted to the new societal circumstances by becoming a *bourgeois* critic who tried to live through many minor transactions with many citizens instead of some major transaction with an elevated institution. However, and this is one of the most important observations in Adorno's essay, despite the fact that the poetry critic lost the affiliation with elevated powers, the critic did not lose the pretension of elevatedness. This pretension led to *tension* between the critic and society, because it clashed with the newly acquired freedom of thought of the bourgeoisie, who were annoyed by the fact that the critic seemed to value the own judgement over theirs. Driven by this tension, the initial opposition between society and poetry as mediated by the critic, who now sought to reconcile with the demands of society, also became the subject of tension.

These tensions would ultimately lead to frustration and anger in Nazi Germany, causing a complete *expulsion* or *destruction* of the critic by society (14, the German text gives “Abschaffung”). The mediation between poetry and society was thus lost and the opposition between poetry and society completely *collapsed*. In the Soviet Union, the critic had a different evolution: after the Russian Revolution in 1917, which resulted into the institution of communism, the Soviet critic was hired by the government and evolved into a censor which executed the government ideology. The situation in the Soviet Union is relevant to Adorno's considerations because it governed East Germany after its Nazi period. After the collapse of Nazism, West Germany evolved a new kind of criticism.

After the Second World War, Germany was divided between the communist East and the capitalist West. Both had their own form of poetry criticism: the East had *transcendent criticism* and the West *immanent criticism*. Adorno found himself in his time confronted with these two types of criticism and a major part of his essay is devoted to criticizing these forms of criticism. They are distinguished by their relation to ideology.

The transcendent critic thinks that one ideology is the true ideology, *in casu*, communism and its aesthetics doctrine, social realism. It had become the activity of this critic, who had developed into a censor, “Kultur insgesamt von aussen, unter dem Oberbegriff der Ideologie in Frage zu stellen” (25). By doing so, only those poems which confirm the truth of the ideology and support it (e.g. the strength of the proletariat) are mediated towards society (published, etc.). The original critical function of culture is thus

lost: the opposition between poetry and society is completely sublated, both are identical in ideology, there is no contradiction. (Notice that it may be still possible to secretly write the most critical poetry ever written. *For society*, however, this poetry and the writing of it are non-existent because it is not published.)

The immanent critic is not a censor, but is also interested in ideology. The poem is analyzed by the immanent critic as something with an ideological content. This ideology may be true or not, according to this critic (this critic does not assume, as the transcendent critic does, that one ideology is true). However, the immanent critic examines the correspondence or the lack thereof with reality (27). Thus, a work with an ideological content which does not reflect the social reality adequately, is disqualified while the supposed ideology of a work which does represent the reality of, for instance, *verdinglichung*, mass consumption and mass production (capitalism), is qualified. It doesn't need much explanation that a thing which is completely disqualified, has no qualities, and therefore does not exist. (Also here one should notice that it was possible for an intelligent reader in those days, such as Adorno himself, to analyze a poem differently for oneself. But *in the perception of society*, which bases its judgement upon the judgement of the critic, the poem without ideological content which adequately represents social reality, did not exist.)

Thus, both the immanent and transcendent critic eliminated the opposition between poetry and society: in the East through censorship, in the West through disqualification. The result is *barbarism*: an uncritical state of affairs, in which poetry does not perform its critical function towards society. Adorno used the verdict of barbarism earlier in his essay, with reference to the destruction of poetry "Kritikaster" by the "wüsten Horde" of the Nazis. After the fall of the Nazi regime, poetry criticism was reinstated in both parts of Germany. Adorno's essay explains that the barbarism however continued under the guise of this reinstated criticism.

One may agree with Adorno or not, but his opinions are implicitly held by many influential philosophers. Recall, for instance, a founding text of poetics, Aristotle's *Poetics*, wherein the poet is explicitly contrasted with the historian as someone who does not represent past necessities but future possibilities. The poetics of mere representation which is inherent in the poetries such as the poetry *nach Auschwitz* rejects this notion by identifying poetry completely with historiography, be it with some occasional rhyme, rhythm or meaningless embellishment. Poetry *nach Auschwitz* has lost its poeticity in the true sense of the word: as a meaningful kind of text which opposes historical reality by proposing unrealized possibilities. In Adorno's terminology, poetries such as poetry *nach Auschwitz* have lost their critical function and hence, are barbaric.

III.

The poetics of *mere representation* is dominant in early post-war poetry criticism. I perhaps cannot emphasize sufficiently that Adorno's utterances about poetry are in fact about poetry as it is interpreted by poetry criticism. The poem in itself has no meaning, according to Adorno; it is the critic who projects meaning upon the work. Two very different works, such as Celan's *Todesfuge* and Pound's late *Cantos*, may thus have a different meaning to us in 2013 than they had in East Germany and West Germany after the Second World War. I will present a transcendent and an immanent critique of both works briefly, in the hope that it will elucidate the problem which Adorno firmly but densely formulated in his *Kulturkritik und Gesellschaft*. Even more important than understanding what the immanent and the

transcendent critic are supposed by Adorno to have found in such works, it is to acknowledge what they did *not* find.

In contemporary critique, notions such as memory, loss and mourning have become firmly established. Contemporary critics would therefore at least notice that the relatively short *Todesfuge* reminds of the violent death of millions while the epic *Pisan Cantos* commences with sadness over the death of one nazi-friendly dictator (Mussolini) and his wife. Other post-Adornian tendencies in literary criticism, such as those which are interested in gender, would notice that the roles of men and women are in both poems quite traditional, the men doing politics while the women are domestically active. These and more approaches were not available to a critic of about 1950, who would apply different notions to these works – the notions which Adorno discussed. One should keep in mind the memorable opening lines of Adorno in *Erziehung nach Auschwitz*, published 17 years after his writing of *Kulturkritik und Gesellschaft*: “Die Forderung, dass Auschwitz nicht noch einmal sei, ist die allererste [...] Ich kann nicht verstehen, dass man mit ihr bis heute so wenig sich abgegeben hat” (674). Also in this late text, Adorno argued that criticism is necessary to overcome barbarism. At this occasion in 1966, and probably even more when he wrote *Kulturkritik und Gesellschaft* earlier in 1949, the critical concepts about Auschwitz were still largely underdeveloped. (This development may be further now, in 2013, but still has a long way to go.)

I haven't had the opportunity yet to extensively research existent critical documents from the period 1945-1949 about the introduced poems, and therefore will limit my exposition to an application of Adorno's ideas to these two poems, which may be useful in future research. If the *Todesfuge* and the *Pisan Cantos* were received by the Soviet critic (and probably, at some time, they were), the first question of this critic would have been: do these poems support the communist ideology, that is, do they realize the maxims of social realism, or not? The Soviet critic would have been ambivalent about the *Todesfuge*. The encamped Jews are a great example of hard working proletarians, digging their own graves without complaining, but what is the function in society of the man in the house? Certainly he does not represent the desired spirit of comradeship. Therefore, the *Todesfuge* is potentially dangerous to the communist ideal and should be censored. The *Pisan Cantos* however remind of the victory of communism: the Tsar-like Mussolini was killed by the proletariat (“the peasant's bent / shoulders” in the first two lines of the *Pisan Cantos*) and therefore, the *Pisan Cantos* can support the communist ideology by celebrating the victory of the proletariat over an oppressive dictator. The fact that Pound mourned the death of the Italian Tsar (*Il Duce*) is not relevant, and would probably not even be recognized through his strict adherence “to the idea of concentration and elimination that [...] deletes the substance entirely” (Stock 1967: 90). Celan's poem would probably be censored, Pound's wouldn't.

The West-German critic would initially follow the same procedure: the ideological content (of form and content), whether communist or capitalist, would be analyzed, but subsequently compared with the social reality. Thus, the West-German critic would find the same communist ideological content in the poems but would also seek the capitalist ideological content. The redundant batch of Jews is efficiently destroyed by the man in the house: he doesn't even need many costly resources to destroy these items, because his capitalist intelligence allowed him to find a method in which the defective and unprofitable batch of Jewish things destroys itself. But how does this ideological content relate to social reality? Batches of things which destroy themselves are, despite their 'praiseworthy' efficiency, virtually non-existent. The Holocaust was a past exception in the increase and

improvement of productivity, and is barely relevant anymore to the immanent critic. The *Pisan Cantos*, like most of the work of Pound, are especially interesting because of their form. Pound's thorough application of the "idea of concentration and elimination" represents the efficient mentality of a capitalist who focuses on his core business and does not allow any losses through transport of spoil or superfluous residual materials. Thus, the *Pisan Cantos* represent the ongoing development of industrialization and commercialization, a true logistic achievement, in (roughly) the past century, and as such reflect the social reality adequately. Celan's poem would have had no real qualities, Pound's would.

Reading these two poems, one by a Holocaust victim and the other by a supporter of a regime which enabled the Holocaust, through the eyes and mind of two kinds of critics around 1950, as Adorno did, leads to the shocking conclusion that in the whole of East and West Germany in that time, the work of the first poet would be censored or disqualified and thus remain unread while the work of the latter poet would be allowed, presented, even praised. This is the problem which Adorno presents in his difficult *Kulturkritik und Gesellschaft*: his contemporaneous critics have lost their critical mind, which would enable them to discuss poetry *nach Auschwitz* properly, thus continuing the state of *Barbarei*.

IV

I think that it has been shown that a coherent reading of Adorno's *Kulturkritik und Gesellschaft* is possible, but many questions remain unanswered after this short and limited essay. For instance, we have given much attention to Adorno's predication of barbarism over a poem after Auschwitz and even more or less to the fact that it "eats into" the impossibility of writing poems "nowadays", but due to our scrutiny within a limited essay size, the claim about the impossibility of (many other kinds of) poems may still be problematic. Moreover, our understanding of Adorno's dictum within his vast oeuvre is still limited to a few paragraphs in one essay, which have not been fully analyzed anyhow. Finally, the application of an Adornian critique of poetry to the history of poetry is far from complete, not only in its discussion of available poetry *nach Auschwitz* which was composed around the time of Adorno's writing his essay, but also in the current lack of research into the available documents of poetry criticism of his time.

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amanda bell

appropriating the language of faith:

calvinism as cultural construct in the poetry of kathleen Jamie

The relationship between religion and poetry is multi-faceted, not least because of the difficulty in defining either term. Religion is broadly understood as an organized collection of belief systems often but not always including belief in a deity or deities, and theories of poetry, broadly grouped into mimetic, pragmatic, expressive and objective¹, do not necessarily answer the question of what constitutes a poem. And yet there is broad agreement among literary critics, theologians and poets themselves that religion and poetry are inextricably entwined. 'Religion and poetry are identical in essence, and differ merely in the way in which they are attached to practical affairs. Poetry is called religion when it intervenes in life, and religion, when it merely supervenes upon life, is seen to be nothing but poetry', according to George Santayana, in his preface to *Interpretations of Poetry and Religion* (v). Religious scholar Paul Carse, interviewed about his book *The Religious Case against Belief*, claims that 'religion in its purest form is a vast work of poetry' (Paulson). The poet's perspective of this relationship is more fully articulated Les Murray's poem 'Poetry and Religion,' a dense comparison of poetry and religion as belief systems, which begins with the assertion that 'Religions are poems'. Murray's poem deals in generalities – the pivotal point is that 'full religion [...] must be inexhaustible and complete /with turns where we ask Now why did the poet do that?' Crucially, 'God is the poetry caught in any religion [...] being in the world as poetry is in the poem.' This statement encapsulates the quicksilver elusiveness of faith and poetry in an inclusive way: Murray is acknowledging the existence of the numinous, be it the leap of faith necessary to believe in God, or the sense that the impact of a poem transcends mere words. He does not make a distinction between devotional poetry and a broader understanding of the genre; he does not break down religion into components of scripture, liturgy, theology. Christian Wyman, editor of *Poetry* magazine who has written extensively about religion and poetry since a catastrophic medical diagnosis precipitated him back to the religious adherence of his Texan upbringing, makes comparable claims for the similarity between poetry and religion, explaining that 'religious feeling went underground in me for a couple of decades, to be released occasionally in ways I never really understood or completely credited — in poems, mostly' (*Christianity Today*). For Wyman, whose poetry overtly explores themes of religious faith and doubt, 'it is a grave mistake for a writer to rely on the language of a religion in which he himself does not believe [...because] it feels like a failure of imagination, a shortcut to transcendence that he either doesn't really buy, or has not earned in his work' (*Harvard Divinity Bulletin*). This may be so in the case of poets aspiring to oracular status, but

¹ Premingen (639) chooses these divisions as a simplified starting point for theories of poetry.

overlooks other facets of religio-poetic liminality. A broader examination of the complex relationship between religion and poetry should include a survey of the centrality of metaphor to both religious and poetic expression and a discussion of the emergent field of theopoetry in theology; as well as an analysis of religious references as cultural constructs, an understanding of which is helpful to achieving full critical engagement with poetry.

At the outset, I would like to consider how a facility to read poetry critically can aid an understanding of the bible, particularly for the lay reader who is struggling with the concept of a divinely inspired text. Taken in the context of literary criticism, the lay reader can conceive that the poet and the human writers of scripture are both faced with the challenge to convey a universal truth through the medium of concrete detail, and are therefore aware of the role of metaphor in expressing the inexpressible. An understanding of the importance, and validity, of metaphor to the poet can provide a new route to interpreting the scriptures. For the sceptic, reluctant to subscribe to the idea of the scriptures being divinely inspired, an appreciation of metaphor, and its validity as an aid to understanding in a poetic context, can provide a point of entry to the scriptures which may otherwise have been blocked by an insistence on scientific proofs. The poet manipulates language as a means of conveying a sense of truthfulness, drawing on experience but not necessarily faithfully reproducing real life events: as American poet and critic Louise Glück says, 'the source of art is experience, the end product truth, and the artist, surveying the actual, constantly intervenes and manages, lies and deletes, all in the service of truth' (34). The truth is understood here as something conveying a sense of veracity, and that therefore rings true to the reader. Although the New Testament says 'Knowing this first, that no prophesy of the scripture is of any private interpretation. For the prophecy came not in old time by the will of man: but holy men of God spake as they were moved by the Holy Ghost' (2 *Peter* 1, 20-21), the liberal wings of most Christian denominations apply a variety of interpretations to the bible, from the literal to the symbolic or metaphoric. As an example, most Protestant churches do not believe in transubstantiation, and therefore regard the sacrament of the Eucharist as a symbol of grace rather than as a literal ingestion of the body and blood of Jesus Christ. Santayana points out that regarding the doctrine of transubstantiation 'a metaphor [...] is the basis of a dogma, because the dogma rises to the same subtle region as the metaphor [...] Religion has here rediscovered its affinity with poetry, and in insisting on the truth of its mystery it unconsciously vindicates the ideality of its truth' (285). For Santayana, 'where poetry rises from its elementary and detached expressions in rhythm, euphemism, characterization, and story-telling, and comes to the consciousness of its highest function, that of portraying the ideals of experience and destiny, then the poet becomes aware that he is essentially a prophet, and either devotes himself, like Homer or Dante, to the loving expression of the religion that exists, or like Lucretius or Wordsworth, to the heralding of one which he believes to be possible' (286).

This claim does not draw a distinction, however, between poetry which is either devotional, like that of Donne, Vaughan and Herbert, or oracular, a tradition extending from Blake to Ginsberg, and which may indeed aspire to enlightenment of the reader, and poetry in the more general sense, understood broadly as an authentic mode of expression designed to evoke an emotional response. Nevertheless, whether the poetry be devotional or oracular or wider in its remit, the triangular relationship between religion, poetry and metaphor does prove fruitful in creating a rich imaginative space. The use of Judaeo-Christian imagery and language as metaphor extends beyond the scriptures and into liturgy, and reference to liturgy is also a powerful emotive tool for the poet, as demonstrated in the

twentieth century by the metaphoric revitalization of the great Christian themes provided by T.S. Eliot. Two of Eliot's poems are considered as particular landmarks of religious poetry: 'Ash Wednesday', a devotional poem about Eliot's conversion to Anglicanism which evokes the Anglican liturgy; and 'Four Quartets', which 'develops freshly paradoxical insights by fusing traditionally Christian images with images drawn from secular aspects of the contemporary world' (Premingen, 690).

Moving away from how an understanding of the uses of metaphor may facilitate a reading of the bible, and the obverse of this where religious themes and liturgical language are revived by being used in poetry, the developing field of theopoetics has particular relevance in understanding the relationship between religion and poetry in that it takes a poetic approach to theology in the postmodern environment. Theopoetics is a term coined by Stanley Hopper in the early 1970s to imagine 'a kind of theological composition at the end of metaphysics and in the face of the death of God' (Holland 'Editorial', 4). Theopoetics can be divided into two branches, that of 'theopoetry' – which poeticizes religious faith and/or theological knowledge, and 'theopoeisis' – which is more of a formal thinking about theology. Hopper, though conscious of the insights offered by both poetry and theology, felt that poetry was the primary discipline 'because it is open to psychological and existential depths and mysteries, while standard theology is fixated on logic and reason' (Gundy, 26). Scott Holland, a contemporary writer on theopoetics in the vein of its initial theorists Hopper and Wilder, insists that in postmodern culture, theology must be understood as a poetics, not a metaphysics. He sees theology joining the disciplines of literary theory, cultural studies, and philosophy in regarding itself as a 'fictive enterprise with emancipatory intentions' (Holland, 'Theology', 2). Practitioners of theopoetics encompass radically different discourses among scholars of different religions (Miller, 6) but even this cursory look should demonstrate that the relationship between poetry and religious belief extends beyond the boundaries of biblical and liturgical texts and into the production of critical writings about them. Outside of the specialized area of theology, and back to how religious formation impacts on the average reader (if such there be) of poetry – questions arise about the implications in the fields of education and of publishing.

When tackling poetry with an overtly religious theme, such as the work of Milton or the English metaphysical poets, a broad scriptural knowledge is crucial, and it is logical that recommended reading for students embarking on undergraduate courses in English literature include the Old and New Testaments as well as the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. A familiarity with biblical references enriches a reading of literature, though this may prove problematic in the context of systems of secular education which shy away from anything approaching 'indoctrination'². Similar issues arise in dealing with literature written within the context of any of the main world religions, but when references pertain to canonical texts they at least have the advantage of being explicable by glossary or consulting an encyclopedia. When it comes down to the minutiae of cultural habits and attitudes associated with religious communities, the subtleties, and indeed ironies, may only be picked up on by readers from within that culture. This raises issues about how universal the accessibility of poetry can be: is it necessary to heavily gloss poetry collections to make them traverse cultural boundaries, or is the appreciation of poetry an innately elite activity in that the better read and/or educated you are, the more you get out of it? Some of the issues arising here may be teased out by examining the poetry of Scottish poet and essayist

² The French system of education, moulded by the principle of *laïcité*, is a case in point.

Kathleen Jamie, whose work has been described as ‘somewhere between Presbyterianism and the Tao’ (Volsik): her early collections, examining issues of identity and gender, are deeply rooted in Scottish Calvinism, her more recent nature writing approaches the Tao in its mindful observation of the natural world. Jamie’s cultural religious identity is inextricable from her national identity and her gender, and her early work satirizes the dour non-conformist background in which she grew up. Each reader takes what s/he finds from a poem, and there is enough going on in a Jamie poem to engage on many different levels. The question is to what extent knowledge of the cultural trappings of Presbyterianism enriches an understanding of her poetry. Jamie relies heavily on biblical sources, particularly in her early collections, but uses them to various effects: the exploration of a religious mindset in ‘Julian of Norwich’, to bolster the emotional impact of a theme in ‘The Tay Moses’, and to comment on the cultural foibles of a community with a particular religious orientation in ‘The Garden of Adam and Dot’ and ‘The Queen of Sheba’.

Interviewed by Rebecca E. Wilson for *Sleeping with Monsters* in the late 1980s, Kathleen Jamie mentions her interest in Julian of Norwich, the 14th century mystic. According to Jamie, she ‘lived for most of her life, forty years, walled up in a cell’ (95). Aspects of Julian’s life that Jamie singles out for mention include her visions, or ‘showings’, and her meditations thereon; the fact that she is credited with having written the first book in English by a woman; her discovery by T.S. Eliot; and her unrelenting questioning of God. Jamie was attracted to Julian as being ‘a bit offbeat, being 14th century, a bit wayward, completely scatty – she was obviously away with the fairies half the time – but at the same time so warm and human. She keeps banging on. I think it takes a woman to keep banging on at God, saying Why evil? Why death?’ Asked by Wilson did her own attitude towards religion affect her work, Jamie replied that ‘using [Julian’s] voice would be my vehicle for talking about any religious feeling I could have, and my feeling for how she understood God and her relationship with God, which is a voyage of exploration for me.’

Although Jamie originally spoke of a series of poems in Julian’s voice, a single poem entitled ‘Julian of Norwich’ appeared in *The Way We Live* (1987), and must have been written contiguous to the interview with Wilson. A much anthologized poem, ‘Julian of Norwich’ is a good starting point for an examination of Jamie’s work in terms of themes, motifs, and philosophical outlook.

In form, ‘Julian of Norwich’ is triply tripartite, consisting of three sections, each of three stanzas, each of three lines. Though in the interview with Wilson Jamie says that she doesn’t use ‘form’ as such, the form of the poem is imbued with Julian’s consciousness of the Holy Trinity. Jamie inhabits the 14th century mystic’s psyche fully: the lexical sets drawn on are those of the 14th century countryside and the Bible, the punctuation and lineation evoke *The Song of Solomon*.

The first line, ‘Everything I do I do for you’, is a complete sentence, a bald statement of the subjugation of the speaker. By not capitalizing ‘you’, it is unclear that God is the addressee, leaving open the boundaries between the sacred and the erotic. This ambiguity is exacerbated by the title – we don’t know yet whether the poem is by or about Julian of Norwich, and anyone incognisant of this historical character may assume her to be male. The blurring of gender roles from the outset plays with the traditionally gendered representation of God as master, devotee as feminized supplicant. The second line, beginning with the single word sentence ‘Brute.’, reinforces the impression of a subordinate female voice addressing a male. The tension between erotic unfulfillment and spiritual longing is maintained throughout the poem. Line two continues ‘You inform the dark’; the

unpunctuated line break allows for two meanings to be conveyed – that the addressee informs both ‘the dark’ and ‘the dark inside of stones’, the latter being the first intimation that we are in the realms of the supernatural, though the erotic tension remains. The stanza speaks of excruciating neglect – ‘Brute’ is a rebuke, indeed the presence of ‘rebuke’ is implied by its phonetic similarity. The sense of betrayal and neglect continues in ‘but never touch me./ You took me on’, and the frustration is reinforced by the pacing, the ‘turn, walk, turn’, at the end of the last stanza and first section. As well as signifying frustration, ‘turn, walk, turn’ measures out for the reader the confined space in which the narrator finds herself. The tercet of the stanzaic form itself suggests the restricted space in which the narrator is ensconced. In two short stanzas Jamie has created an intense feeling of neglect, abandonment and frustration; implied the presence and the absence of an addressee who is everywhere yet nowhere, informing not just the stones but the very inside of stones, and the winds that blow between worlds, without touching her. The rebuke continues, ‘You took me on’, ‘You’, rhymed with ‘Brute’ and similarly placed at the beginning of a line, brings a heart-broken intimacy to the address.

The monastic setting is established with imagery that would have infused the psyche of the 14th century anchorite: ‘the dark inside of stones’ can mean that which is inside a stone, the ultimately inaccessible which can nevertheless be reached by God; it also evokes the inside of a stone-built cell, not just Julian’s, which was quite luxurious by monastic standards³, but of earlier monastic beehive settlements such as those on Scottish and Irish islands, through which the winds blow. Rabbits, to modern sensibilities a symbol of fecundity, during the middle ages had a religious signification. Rabbits had been reintroduced to Britain and Ireland at the time of the Norman invasion, but before evolving into the hardy breeders of modern times were delicate creatures, of high monetary value, and requiring expert husbandry. Cunicularia, often in the form of ‘pillow mounds’, were commonly sited near monasteries and manor houses. The *Queen Mary Psalter*⁴, an exquisitely illustrated psalter dating from 1310-20, features a drawing of veiled women catching rabbits in a raised mound with the use of a ferret and a net. This was likely a familiar sight to Julian, either looking out the window of her anchorite’s cell or from her earlier life. So the image of the rabbit darting in and out of holes operates on several levels: it reinforces the impression of the 14th century worldview, replicates the elusive nature of faith, and plays with the medieval symbolism of the rabbit as the weak human requiring husbandry in the shape of the help of God. Jamie reverses the roles of the human and deity in this analogy, comparing faith to the rabbit. The use of the term ‘the edge of my sense’ also operates on two levels, implying both the quicksilver nature of that which is sought, and being driven to the edge of sanity with frustration⁵.

The second section of the poem shifts the focus from the addressee to the plight of Julian. ‘I am the hermit’ she begins, true both on a literal and a metaphorical level: she is a hermit, but an enclosed one; by representing herself as a wandering hermit she opens the

³ ‘There was a “Rule of Life” associated with Julian’s order drawn up in the 13th century, which stated that the cell should have 3 windows that opened; one into the Church, so she could hear Mass and receive the Blessed Sacrament; one to communicate with her servant, who would have lived close at hand and would have been responsible for the chores; one to give advice to those who sought it.’ St Julian’s Church and Shrine website.

⁴ In the British Library, Royal MS 2BVII

⁵ The wrestle with faith here is evocative of Gerard Manley Hopkins, and is discussed below.

stage of the poem into an array of biblical imagery⁶. The biblical resonances are manifold – both the garden of the *Song of Solomon* and the Garden of Eden are evoked, as is John the Baptist wandering in the desert, and the parable of the lilies of the field (Matthew 6:28). This section of the poem is reminiscent of *The Song of Solomon*⁷ in its cadences, its botanical imagery, and its repetition of the first person.⁸ Not only is the bible evoked, but also Julian's own revelations, which Jamie distils into 'Love is the attitude'.

This central section of the poem soars away from the cold stone cell of the preceding part, approaching a sense of rapture in the crushing of a thousand flowers, but always with the caveat 'were I / attuned to sense them' – it is a straining towards rapture rather than the real thing. 'Crush', which phonically reflects 'Brute' and 'you' from the first section, emphasizes the apocalyptic power of God, but then shifts tone dramatically in the next line, when the [u] of 'brute' becomes the softer [U] sound of 'Hush'. This introduces a new voice, but whether it is that of God or of another facet of Julian is unclear, and is further obscured by the final stanza of the poem being entirely bracketed, and clearly in Julian's voice.

The third section of the poem returns starkly to an image of confinement: 'Canary that I am, caged and hung / from the eaves of the word / to trill your praise.' The choice of the word 'trill' is unsettling, as it seems to trivialize the vocation of the anchorite, and possibly casts doubt on the gravity or validity of the poetic voice, by extension. It is an image of external rather than internal containment, utterly alone and hung from the eaves of the world, and has overtones of punitive hanging as much as of a suspended cage. The cell is a prison, its inhabitant broken. The second stanza of this section is a giving up, of endeavour and of hope. And yet, the vacillating pattern continues. The final, bracketed, stanza resumes the positive note, both the bracket and the repetition of 'And yet, and yet' indicating the endless negotiation intrinsic to sustaining faith. The poem ends with a radiant, double image of maternity. By a shift in perspective the narrator is no longer 'hung / from the eaves of the world', but rather 'suspended / in his joy, huge and helpless as the harvest moon', or as a heavily pregnant woman. It is an entirely fitting ending for Julian's meditation, associated as she is with the concept of the maternity of Jesus. It is also a positive image to end on – a statement that faith will be repaid, in spite of doubt.

This small lyric indicates an immersion in the mindset of medieval life, and a good knowledge of Old and New Testament stories. Jamie studied comparative religion and philosophy of religion after returning from a trip to Jerusalem (Wilson 96). Her interest in religion comes more from a philosophical academic perspective than a spiritual one. The voice of the anchorite to her is a vehicle for 'any religious feeling I could have', and the vacillation of the narrative voice makes it clear that there is an intellectual distance at play. It is a far remove from the excruciating crisis of faith evident in Gerard Manley Hopkins's sonnets, though Jamie uses much of the same imagery as Hopkins. In 'I wake and feel the fell of dark not day', Hopkins's agonised description of spiritual torpor or 'acedia', the poet employs the tropes of darkness and an absent loved one found also in 'Julian of Norwich'.

⁶ This textual wandering has the effect of a wormhole transporting the reader through layers of time as Jamie sees through the eyes of the medieval hermit Julian who sees through the eyes of a wandering hermit of the Old Testament era.

⁷ *The Song of Songs*, or *Song of Solomon*, has been given many interpretations, one of which is that of the relationship between the human and God. It has many similarities with love lyrics from the Ancient Near East. The relationship between sacred and erotic texts in this area has been examined by Martin West.

⁸ *Solomon's Song* 5:1 – "I am come into my garden...", 5:6 – 'I opened to my beloved; but my beloved had withdrawn himself, and was gone: my soul failed when he spake: I sought him, but I could not find him; I called him, but he gave me no answer.'

Describing the acedia syndrome as including ‘feelings of exile and estrangement, darkness, the disappearance of God, despair, the death wish, and attraction to suicide’, the Poetry Foundation notes that Hopkins’s sonnets of desolation ‘are virtually a recapitulation of the medieval treatises on acedia.’ (Hopkins, ‘Biography’) That Jamie is portraying a state of religious anguish that had been the subject of such treatises reinforces the impression of her immersion in medieval iconography to get under the skin of Julian. Biblical references are a resource to which Jamie returns in later collections, both to add gravitas to her themes, and to undercut the Presbyterian community from within which she is writing.⁹ Although it comes chronologically later in her career, I will first turn to ‘The Tay Moses’ as it is closest stylistically to ‘Julian of Norwich’. Like ‘Julian,’ this later lyric encapsulates a vacillation¹⁰. In ‘Julian’, the swaying between presence and absence of faith; here, a simultaneous rejection and acceptance of motherhood.¹¹ ‘The Tay Moses’ will be immediately comprehensible to anyone raised in the Judaeo-Christian tradition, and familiar with the story of baby Moses being hidden in a cradle in bulrushes growing by the river Nile to avoid the Pharaoh’s edict that all Hebrew newborn sons be killed. Jamie has explained that she wrote the poem to explore her fear of not liking the child she was carrying (‘Introduction’).

The uncertainty of the poet is evident from the open question with which the poem begins. The vacillation is emphasized by the action of the river, the turning tides embodying her conflicting emotions. The poem consists of one multi-clause sentence drawn out over four stanzas. There is no question mark, the question itself is a process that creates its own answer. The first line, ‘What can I fashion for you’, immediately evokes Christina Rossetti’s lyrics for the Christmas carol ‘In the Bleak Midwinter’¹², the final stanza of which begins ‘What can I give Him / Poor as I am?’ The resonances of this carol set the tone for the poem, and the substitution of ‘you’ for ‘Him’ establishes an association between the unborn addressee of the poem, the baby Moses, and the infant Jesus.

A freeform, deceptively simple four-stanza lyric, ‘The Tay Moses’ begins simply and quietly, an address to the unborn baby. The sound effects in the first two stanzas, ‘sh’, ‘f’, ‘th’, ‘oo’, are the soft, soothing sibilants of lullaby. The sound effects become harsher from the second half of the third stanza on, when the baby is separated from the poet/mother and in the hands of others. The ratcheting up of alarm in the mother is conveyed by the introduction of harsher consonants, ‘pilot’, ‘!’, ‘tractor-man’, ‘grieve’, ‘competent’, ‘car’s gears’, ‘spitting gravel’ – the succession of harsh sounds mimics the car driven in panic, reaching a crescendo with the capitalized ‘LEAVE HIM!’, after which resolution is reached, a sense of acceptance and of closure, ‘Please,/ it’s okay, he’s mine.’

Apart from the powerful use of sound effects, the poem derives much of its impact from the use of biblical iconography, as Jamie’s references send a ripple through the Old

⁹ Brought up in a ‘liberal atheist’ household (Wilson, 96), she is nevertheless immersed in ‘cultural Calvinism’.

¹⁰ The inner conflict found so often in Jamie’s work could be interpreted as typical of the Caledonian antiszygy, the idea of dueling polarities within one entity coined by G. Gregory Smith in his 1919 book *Scottish Literature: Character and Influence* and further developed by Hugh MacDiarmid in ‘The Caledonian Antiszygy and the Gaelic Idea’. This inner conflict has come to be considered as typical of the Scottish psyche.

¹¹ The theme of inner conflict surrounding motherhood is most overtly dealt with in ‘Wee Wifey’.

¹² Written in 1872 as a Christmas poem for the American magazine *Scribner’s Monthly*. The last verse reads: ‘What can I give Him, Poor as I am? / If I were a shepherd / I would bring a lamb, / If I were a wise man / I would do my part, / Yet what I can give him, / Give my heart.’ It was set to music to Gustav Holst for the 1906 edition of *The English Hymnal*. (Christiansen)

and New Testaments, telescoping the stories of Moses (Exodus 2:3)¹³ and the nativity story (Luke 2). The poem is accessible and comprehensible to someone from a non-Christian tradition, but is given an extra level of emotional impact by knowledge of the bible: the poet channels the fear of Moses' mother for her child into fear of her own unborn child, then transmutes that fear back into the fear of losing the child. The first stanza, while conjuring the Moses basket found by the Egyptian princess, also references a gift of gold for a newborn, introducing the idea of the three wise men paying homage to the infant Jesus. This image conveys a sense of awe at the newborn, and a fear and inadequacy born from that. This is elaborated on in the second stanza, where 'wisdom', which could be that of the salmon¹⁴ but also of the 'wise men', has withered in the act of procreation: the phrase 'wisdom and guts withered in spawn' conveys the emotional, physical and intellectual surrender of the mother post-partum. The cross-species universality of this experience is emphasized by the juxtaposition of salmon spawning and 'that/slither of body as you were born'. This poem demonstrates a synthesis of biblical and natural imagery typical of Jamie's work, the balance of which switches further towards nature as her career progresses, an exemplar of how vocabularies succeed one another in a post-Christian world.

The journey downriver mirrors the emotional rollercoaster of the expectant mother. The course of the poem, and the course of the river, leads us from the Hebrew mother abandoning her baby and the virgin Mary giving birth in a stable to the iconic mother at the foot of the cross, as the poet reclaims her baby, crying 'LEAVE HIM! Please, / it's okay, he's mine.' She has become Everywoman, terrified for the safety of her child. The poignancy of this ending is greatly enhanced by scriptural literacy, although it could not be described as a religious poem.

'The Tay Moses' makes very straightforward use of biblical iconography, to great emotional effect. The poem placed immediately after it, 'A Miracle', demonstrates a different use of religion as a resource in Jamie's poetry – the irony created by sending up the Presbyterian environment in which Jamie was reared by portraying it in a distinctly unCalvinist light. The poem describes the unlikely spectacle of a statue of John Knox¹⁵ being carried around Edinburgh on a certain Sunday, bedecked in tinsel and accompanied by a band playing 'Comin' Through the Rye'¹⁶. The irony comes from the ambiguity of the title – to what does the miracle refer? Is it that Knox's statue wept tears of milk, that it was turned into an object of decidedly unPresbyterian hysteria, or indeed that the girl who claimed to have witnessed the 'miracle' in the first place made good in Hollywood, and came home to buy the Queen's residence in Edinburgh and run for president? No biblical knowledge is required to appreciate this poem, but an understanding of the Presbyterian cultural milieu is crucial to getting the humour. In other poems again, the impact derives from a juxtaposition of biblical references with denominationally-specific mores. 'The Garden of Adam and Dot' (Jizzen, 8) mixes these registers to comic effect. The eponymous Dot is God's human female alter ego. More like the ferocious Hindu goddess Kali than a figure from the Christian tradition, she is described as 'terrible', the information that she 'casts out beasts' references both St Patrick banishing snakes and God expelling Adam and Eve from the garden. The

¹³ It could also reference the foundation myth of Rome with the abandonment of Romulus and Remus in the Tiber.

¹⁴ The story of the Salmon of Knowledge in Celtic mythology.

¹⁵ 1514-72. Leader of the Scottish Reformation.

¹⁶ Having the crowd sing this Burns lyric while holding Knox loft, Jamie is overlaying literary and religious cultural clichés.

portentous language of the first two lines shifts tone sharply in the third line with the description of Adam. Beside the ferocity of Dot, Adam is diminished and emasculated, his insignificance emphasized by the little clicking sounds associated with him – the snapping shut of the wicker gate and the briefcase lock. The juxtaposition between the bible and the Protestant milieu continues with a comparison of the biblical Adam hiding his nakedness from God after eating from the Tree of Knowledge, and the mortal Scottish Adam hiding his own shame with a 'daft pinny'. The question of what is he ashamed of poses itself. Combined with the shift into the vernacular marked by 'awa tae the Masons', the prissiness of snapping shut the wicker gate, and the effeminacy suggested by the 'daft pinny', it reads as a scathing critique of small-town Scottish sensibilities and mores. This theme is more fully expounded in the earlier poem 'The Queen of Sheba' in the collection of the same name, which creates a complex layering of cultural constructions in drawing on biblical and religious references. As in 'The Garden of Adam and Dot', Jamie here juxtaposes the authoritative cadences and rounded vowels of the bible with the clipped vernacular vocabulary of Lowlands Scots: 'She's heard, yea / even unto heathenish Arabia' contrasts sharply with 'Whit, tae this dump?' The contrasting sound effects emphasize the differences between cultures, and particularly in relation to their appreciation of the sensuous and their attitudes to women. This is neatly encapsulated in the description of bathing habits in the third stanza: in Scotland, women's experience of communal bathing is described as 'the chlorine stink / of the swimming pool where skinny girls / accuse each other of verrucas', whereas in Arabia 'In her bathhouses women bear / warm pot-bellied terracotta pitchers / on their laughing hips.'

In this poem Jamie both uses an Old Testament story and satirizes the attitude of her own religious community towards it, by juxtaposing the biblical figure of the eponymous queen with the Scottish congregation used to invoking her name to those who 'get above themselves'. The comparisons satirize the austere Presbyterian environment, but on a deeper level accessible to those familiar with *I Kings*, challenge the prejudices of a community priding itself on austerity and humility. Invoked 'once too often in [...] Presbyterian living rooms', the Queen of Sheba arrives by camel, responding to the 'vixen's bark of poverty', languorously approaching in a haze of steamy musk: everything about her contrasts starkly with Scotland – her demeanour, her odour, her utter gorgeousness overwhelming the Scottish authority figures characterized as 'Masons and the elders and the police'. Held up for generations as an example of those who have notions of grandeur, her exoticism is overwhelming, uncontainable by 'the cool black skin of the Bible' – her allure transcends temporal and geographical boundaries. Superficially, this poem playfully contrasts the exoticism of the east with the austerity of this bleak outpost of the west, the joyousness of the feminine with the rigidity of the male, but there is a deeper level accessible to those with a more in-depth biblical knowledge – a group which would certainly include the nonconformist community satirized, as practitioners of a tradition steeped in the authority of the scriptures. The Queen of Sheba was a regent and an ambassador – she came to seek out King Solomon having heard of his great wisdom, bearing gifts of spices, precious stones, gold and beautiful wood. She came to test him with questions, and having done so, 'she said to the king, It was a true report that I heard in mine own land of thy acts and of thy wisdom. Howbeit I believed not the words, until I came, and mine eyes had seen it: and behold, the half was not told me: thy wisdom and prosperity exceedeth the fame which I heard' (*I Kings*, 6-7). The contrast with Jamie's Queen of Sheba could not be sharper: she shouts for 'our wisest man to test her mettle' but wise men there are none – her

reception is an anonymous growl of ‘whae do you think y’ur?’ This is a savage undercutting of the Presbyterian community, portraying it as begrudging, prosaic, lacking in beauty, exoticism, eroticism and, most pointedly, wisdom. And the savagery is only fully appreciable to those within the tradition satirized. The poem is not a straightforward juxtaposition of east and west, feminine and masculine energies, but a manifesto proclaiming that the exotic has much to offer by way of wisdom rather than being a threat to a measured way of life, a challenge to Calvinism’s repudiation of the poetic graces, perhaps even a poet’s plea for a renewed appreciation of the poetry of the *King James Bible*. It is an interesting example of using biblical language to undercut the biblically literate within a poem of broad appeal, a subtle gesture analogous to the Masonic handshake – perceptible only to those in the know. Jamie’s work could be seen as an exemplar for the importance of scriptural literacy, and also demonstrates the subtleties attainable by a play on religious cultural signifiers.

In entering the mindset of a medieval hermit in ‘Julian of Norwich’, reinforcing the emotional impact of ‘The Tay Moses’, and commenting on the foibles of a nonconformist community in ‘The Queen of Sheba’, Jamie’s exploitation of biblical and religious sources makes for richly textured poetry. In a post-Christian world, where at school level Bible Studies has been replaced by Comparative Religions, it remains to be seen what will act as a comparable *lingua franca*. In terms of Jamie’s poetry, a hint can be found as early as 1999 in the synthesis of biblical and natural imagery found in ‘The Tay Moses’: as Jamie’s subject matter moves outwards from issues of nationality and gender to broader environmental concerns, her vocabulary and terms of reference move away from the resources provided by the Judaeo-Christian tradition and towards the more cross-culturally recognisable vocabulary of environmentalism. While Jamie may have replaced religion with environmentalism as a cultural referent, the challenge of inculcating scriptural literacy to facilitate an in-depth appreciation of literature remains.

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james heaney

“the value of agony”:

poetry and violence in the work of rafael alberti, 1930-39

I.

Rafael Alberti (1902-1999) was one of the most important Spanish poets of the twentieth-century. He was also among the first of his compatriots to produce ‘committed’ literature [*literatura comprometida*] during the turbulent decade of the 1930s. This development in his writing was inspired by the student-protests against the ailing Primo de Rivera dictatorship in 1929, and the emergence of the Second Spanish Republic the following year. His political poetry reached its height of achievement during the Spanish Civil War of 1936-9; the poet’s 1938 collection, *Capital of Glory* [*Capital de la gloria*] standing as one of the finest examples of committed literature in modern Europe.¹⁷

The theme of ‘poetry in process’ is relevant to an understanding of Alberti’s writing in the 1930s in two related respects. The first has to do with the way in which, as a republican (and later communist) revolutionary, he treated poetry as ‘an instrument for transforming the world’.¹⁸ The second has to do with the changes that this tumultuous decade wrought in the poet himself. Aside from a number of the poems in the aforementioned collection, *Capital of Glory*, only a small portion of the author’s writing in this period could be described as first-rate literature, and there is no question but that many of his poems are partisan and ‘ideological’. However, the interesting point is that this is not *all* that they are. The tone of his work varies between political optimism and pessimism, confidence and despair. At times the writing is declamatory, at other times deeply introspective. It can extol violence, but it can also express deep disgust at it. His poetry, in short, amounts to a ‘literature of crisis’, one which I will contend reveals a *process of thought* rather than a static (or at times even very stable) outlook.

II.

Prior to 1930, Alberti, by his own admission, knew ‘little or nothing about politics’. His attitude changed very quickly, however, in the highly charged atmosphere that gripped the streets of Madrid during the student-riots against the de Rivera dictatorship in 1929.

¹⁷ Johannes Lechner remarks that *Capital of Glory* ‘contains some of the best poems written during this tragic phase of Spanish letters; an impressive book, that represents an example of what committed poetry can become in the hands of a great poet: true art.’ [‘contiene algunos de los mejores poemas que se escribieron en esta trágica etapa de las letras españolas; libro impresionante, que constituye un ejemplo de lo que puede ser la poesía comprometida en manos de un gran poeta: arte auténtico.’] Lechner, *El compromiso en la poesía española del siglo XX parte primera* (Univ. Pers Leiden, Leiden, 1968), p. 163. The translations of Alberti’s poetry and Spanish criticism in this essay are my own unless otherwise stated.

¹⁸ [‘For Alberti] La literatura no era más que ‘un instrumento para transformar el mundo’. Lechner, p. 96.

Suddenly my ears heard words that had never reached them before, or at least had not meant anything to me before: Republic, Fascism, liberty [...] As if by magic, a climate of violence had been created, and I was fascinated by it all. The shouts and protests, which in some dim way had existed within me, eating away at my own defences, finally found an escape hatch and raced frantically into streets filled with fervent students.¹⁹

Although he felt common cause with the student-protesters, Alberti sensed that – as a poet – he had very little to offer their cause.²⁰ In 1929 there was no tradition of committed poetry in Spain from which he could draw inspiration.²¹ A similar situation existed in relation to novel-writing in Spain in this period. And apart from a few noteworthy exceptions such as Ramón del Valle-Inclán, Benito Pérez Galdos, and work by the director, Cipriano de Rivas Cherif, Spanish theatre was still churning out ‘pre-Ibsenite’ domestic farces and melodramas.

It was the genre of film rather than the more established art-forms such as poetry, drama or the novel that inspired Alberti’s first attempts at politically-engaged writing. Works such as Fritz Lang’s *Metropolis* (1927), Eisenstein’s *The Battleship Potemkin* (1925), and, in particular, Luis Buñuel’s *Un Chien andalou* (1928) (made in collaboration with Salvador Dalí), had a dramatic impact on the poet’s understanding of the relationship between art and politics. Alberti was present at the first screening of Buñuel’s film in Spain, at the Cine Club in Madrid on the 8th December 1929. In his autobiography, *The Lost Grove* [*La arboleada perdida*] he recalls the powerful effect it had on the audience that night. Madrid was already in ‘a feverish state and on the eve of great political events’ when the film appeared, he notes. ‘In the middle of this activity and on this battlefield which was not literary but real, Luis Buñuel appeared like some kind of meteor.’ The premiere

caused a sensation, although many were disturbed by it; everyone in the theatre was horrified by the image of a moon being sliced in two by a cloud, followed immediately by that other terrifying scene of an eye slit by a razor. When the audience, in a state of near shock, then asked Buñuel to offer some words of explanation, I remember how he stood up for a moment and said from his box seat: ‘It’s merely a desperate and impassioned invitation to crime’.²²

The influence of Buñuel’s film on the poet’s work was immediate. Alberti’s first explicitly political poem, ‘With My Boots On I Must Die (Civic Elegy) [1st January 1930]’,²³ was composed barely twenty-three days after he saw *Un Chien andalou*, and as Judieth Nantell has noted, it ‘is, in many ways, a verbal extension of Buñuel and Dalí’s vision of the same period.’²⁴ The poet’s new-found interest in ‘crime’ is apparent from the opening lines:

It will be at that moment when blind horses
scrape their knees against the pointed spears of indignant chairs,

¹⁹ Alberti, *The Lost Grove* [*La arboleada perdida* (1959)], trans. Gabriel Berns (Berkley: California U.P., 1976), p. 270-1.

²⁰ ‘Nobody then even considered that poetry might have any other purpose than to be intimately enjoyed by each individual’, he recalls in his autobiography *The Lost Grove*. ‘No one thought that it could have any other effect on people.’ Ibid. p. 272.

²¹ As Johannes Lechner has observed ‘not withstanding a few isolated cases, Spanish poets only began to address their country’s social problems in their work around the mid-1930s.’ [‘No obstante algunos casos aislados [...] la toma de conciencia de los poetas frente a los problemas de la sociedad en que vivían y su consiguiente responsabilización en los terrenos artístico y cívico, se sitúan en la poco más de media década que va de los años 1930 a 1936 aproximadamente.’] Lechner, p. 120.

²² Alberti, *The Lost Grove*, p. 272.

²³ ‘Con los zapatos puestos tengo que morir (Elegía Cívica) [1^o de enero de 1930]’.

²⁴ Judieth Nantell, *Rafael Alberti’s Poetry of the Thirties – The Poet’s Public Voice* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1986), p. 20.

POETRY AS PROCESS

against the flagstones from the streets recently absorbed in the madness.
I will return to shit one last time on all your dead
at that same instant in which the coats of amour come crashing down
in the house of the king,
in which the most illustrious men search between their legs
without finding there the solution to the desperate urgings of the blood.²⁵

The references here to barricades and street-violence, to a collapsing monarchy and impotent aristocracy illustrate the importance of contemporary political events in Spain to a reading of the 'Civic Elegy'. In the course of this lengthy work (the poem is over one hundred lines long), Alberti accuses three separate individuals of responsibility for the violence: firstly, an 'Antonio', then an 'Arturo' and finally an 'Aurelio'. These names find no obvious parallel in contemporary Spanish affairs, but it is clear, nevertheless, that they are representative of the ruling elite, and that the poet aligns himself politically with the people who have suffered under their regime: 'You are the one responsible for the iodine raising to heaven the cry/ of the mouths without teeth,' he accuses Antonio, 'of the mouths opened by the instantaneous hate of a revolver or/ a sable.'²⁶ Alberti then takes it upon himself to speak out for these voiceless mouths:

I only counted on two gums with which to bless you,
but now 27 have erupted in my body to vomit in your
throat and make your death-throes more difficult.²⁷

In contrast to the introspective poetic voice of his earlier poetry collections *Concerning the Angels* [*Sobre los ángeles*] (1929), and *Sermons and Dwelling Places* [*Sermones y moradas*] (1930) in the 'Civic Elegy' the poet turns outwards, towards the people and city of Madrid. In the process he seems to discover a multitude of voices within himself, and come to perceive his role as a kind of verbal conduit for a range of angry and marginalized Madrileños.

The sudden and completely unexpected (at least to Alberti) political awakening of the Spanish people, as well as the artistic revolution embodied by Buñuel's film, convinced the poet that he was witnessing the beginning of a process of profound change in Spanish society, and it inspired the almost euphoric tone that the 'Civic Elegy' adopts towards the prospect of destruction and political violence. In an article for the newspaper *El Sol* on the 18th August 1931, Alberti expressed his belief that 'the poets of today' should be 'cruel, violent, demoniac, frightening.'²⁸ The 'Civic Elegy' undoubtedly fulfils these requirements: anger and violence are the predominant themes in this often quite chilling work. But these same qualities also detract from the poem's effectiveness as committed literature. The

²⁵ Será en ese momento cuando los caballos sin ojos se desgarran/ las tibias contra los hierros en punta de una valla de sillas/ indignadas junto a los adoquines de cualquier calle recién ab-/ sorta en la locura./ Vuelvo a cagarme por última vez en todos vuestros muertos/ en este mismo instante en que las armaduras se desploman en/ la casa del rey,/ en que los hombres más ilustres se miran a las ingles sin encon-/ trar en ellas la solución a las desesperadas órdenes de la sangre. Rafael Alberti, *Poesías completas* (Buenos Aires: Editorial Losada, 1961), p. 333. (This stanza is a translation by Gabriel Berns, *The Lost Grove*, p. 277, with some alterations.)

²⁶ Tú eres el responsable de que el yodo haga llegar al cielo el grito/ de las bocas sin dientes,/ de las bocas abiertas por el odio instantáneo de un revólver o/ un sable. *Poesías completas*. p. 333

²⁷ Yo sólo contaba con dos encías para bendecirte,/ pero ahora en mi cuerpo han estallado 27 para vomitar en tu/ garganta y hacerte más difíciles los estertores. *Ibid*, p. 333.

²⁸ In Nantell, p. 19.

violence in this poem does not appear to have any constructive objectives. The reader is simply 'assaulted' with an unremitting series of grotesque and 'difficult' images that lack any sense of purpose or narrative continuity; a feature which itself underlines the influence of Buñuel's film on this work.

Secret anger in the beak of the rook that unearths
the world-less eyes of corpses.
That hand rebels against the tender forehead
of she who made him to understand
the pleasure that a child feels on being circumcised
by his cook with a shard of broken glass.
Come closer
and you'll know the recondite joy
that the baton feels as it breaks against the bone
that serves as a lid for your defunct ideas.
Anger even in the most pathetic threads
of a handkerchief torn apart by the rats.²⁹

Even those sections of the poem that do seem to gesture towards a new dawn in Spanish society are characterized by a sobering emphasis on the violence of the struggle rather than its objectives: 'the dawn of the raised hands', Alberti assures us, will be 'the dawn of nauseas and of the spoilt milk,/ of the consumption of the progressive paralysis of the world and the/ arteriosclerosis of the sky.'³⁰ It is as though the poet knows that all he can be sure of is that the transition to a 'new' Spain is going to be an extremely violent one. Like the date included in its title, therefore – '1st January 1930' – there is a Janus-headed quality to this poem: On the one hand, it is the last of Alberti's introspective, surrealistic poems of the 1920s, and on the other, it is his first politically-engaged work of the 1930s. The 'Civic Elegy' is, in effect, the work of a poet who is himself under-going a process of change.³¹

III.

By the time the 'Civic Elegy' was published Alberti was already thinking of himself as a 'street poet', and taking an active role in the movement to oust the existing government and replace it with a republican regime. In January 1930 he was among the demonstrators who marched on the Royal Palace in Madrid to protest against the Primo de Rivera dictatorship. When that regime fell, the republican-led movement set about overthrowing the Alphonse monarchy. Significantly (given the apolitical character of much Spanish literature at the time) writers were at the heart of this initiative. 'For the first time during this period,' Alberti

²⁹ 'Ira secreta en el pico del grajo que desentierra las pupilas sin/ mundo de los cadáveres./ Aquella mano se rebela contra la frente tiernísima de la que le/ hizo comprender el agrado que siente un niño al ser circuncidado por su cocinera con un vidrio roto./ Acércate y sabrás la alegría recóndita que siente el palo que se/ parte contra el hueso que sirve de tapa a tus ideas difuntas./ Ira hasta en los hilos más miserables de un pañuelo descuartizado/ por las ratas.' *Poesías completas*. p. 333-4.

³⁰ 'Oíd el alba de las manos arriba,/ el alba de las náuseas y los lechos desbaratados,/ de la consunción de la parálisis progresiva del mundo y la arterioesclerosis del cielo.' *Poesías completas*. p. 334.

³¹ Alberti's comments in *The Lost Grove* underline this point. The poem, he remarks, was 'written in anger and from within the bubbling cauldron that was Spain in that moment in its history. Exaggerated, obscure, sensing but not truly knowing what I wanted, with a taste of bile and gnashing of teeth, with an undefined sense of desperation that was pushing me to bite the ground itself, this poem [...] indicated that I had become an integral part of a new universe which I had entered blindly without thinking where it all might lead'. Alberti, *The Lost Grove*, p. 277.

recalls in his autobiography, 'writers joined with each other because of political affinities rather than professional ones [...] Azaña, Ortega, Valle-Inclán, Pérez de Ayala, Marañón, Machado, Baeza, Bergamín, Espina, Díaz, Fernández, (to mention only a few) were now working furiously and openly 'in the service of the Republic.'"³²

Alfonso XIII abdicated his throne and the Second Spanish Republic was declared after a landslide victory for pro-republican parties in April elections of 1931. In September of that year, as part of the emphasis that the new regime placed on educational and cultural affairs, Alberti and his wife (the writer and activist, María Teresa León), received funding from the government to study developments in European theatre. The couple spent the next year and a half travelling in France, Germany, Holland, the Scandinavian countries, and the U.S.S.R. These trips abroad had a catalytic effect on Alberti's political thinking. It was in Germany that the writer first came to consider himself a communist, and to refine his understanding of the relationship between art and politics. From Germany, the couple travelled on to the U.S.S.R., which Alberti later described as being 'like a journey from the depth of night into the centre of the light.'³³ His stay in this country had an even more profound effect on the poet's development than his experiences in Germany. 'I returned from the Soviet Union [...] a different person', he remarks *The Lost Grove*.³⁴

Alberti's political conversion had a profound impact on his writing. The poetry he writes between 1933 and 1936 has an optimism and sense of purpose so obviously lacking in the purely destructive energies of the 'Civic Elegy'. His work now expresses deep dissatisfaction with the liberal political agenda of the Second Spanish Republic, and shows the author trying to incite a workers' revolution which would lead to the overthrow of the regime he had supported when it came to power in 1931.

The call for revolution is apparent in the title-poem from *A Spectre Haunts Europe* [*Un fantasma recorre Europa*], published in 1933. The opening stanzas of this work view the advancing 'spectre' from the point of view of a wealthy landowner whose dreams are haunted by the vision of his crops going up in the flames created by a communist revolution: 'and his dreams are filled with bonfires,' the speaker remarks,

with burning herds,
which instead of wheat wave flames,
instead of grain, sparks,³⁵

'Where are you, where are you?' the landowner cries out to an unnamed protector (the Civil Guard perhaps, or God) 'the peasants are trampling on our blood.'³⁶

The part that Catholicism played in the subjugation of the peasantry is one of the central themes in Alberti's poetry in these years. Two related ideas frequently arise in these poems: firstly, that both socially and politically the Catholic Church in Spain had aligned itself with the country's elite against the peasantry; and secondly, that it used its control of the

³² Ibid., pp. 287-8.

³³ 'En ese momento viajo por primera vez a la Unión Soviética, que fue para mí entonces como un viaje del fondo de la noche al centro de la luz.' Alberti, *Crónicas* (1932-1938). In Rafael Alberti, *El poeta en la calle*, p. 453.

³⁴ Quoted in Robert Havard, *The Crucified Mind: Rafael Alberti and the Surrealist Ethos in Spain* (Tamesis, London, 2001). p. 214.

³⁵ 'y sueña por la noche con hogueras,/ con ganados ardiendo,/ que en vez de trigo tiene llamas,/ en vez de granos, chispas,' Alberti, *El poeta en la calle*, p.348.

³⁶ '¿Dónde estás,/ dónde estás?/ los campesinos pasan pisando nuestra sangre.' Ibid, p. 348.

educational-system as a means of continuing the oppression of the poorer classes. The former theme is apparent in 'The Church is Walking a Tightrope', a poem which takes its title from a drawing by Goya in which a cleric is precariously balanced on a tightrope above a crowd of people.³⁷ In Alberti's work the Church forms part of a ruling trinity of conservative forces in Spanish life that also includes the banks and the military. Perched on his tightrope the cleric offers God's protection to these institutions: 'My prayers/ will add more fire to your cannons', he first assures a military-official. Then he invites a wealthy 'brother' banker onto the rope:

Come up, you, banker,
[...]
come up here to me, give me your hand,
for should the rope snap
for should the rope snap
we'll all land in the crap.³⁸

The simple and direct political message contained in this poem is characteristic of much of Alberti's poetry in the years 1932-36 – the period between the founding of the Second Spanish Republic and the outbreak of the civil war. As Lechner remarks, in keeping with contemporary Marxist literary-practice, 'everything is subordinated to the objective of making the rural and industrial proletariat conscious of their social position [...] and of provoking political unrest.'³⁹

A more impressive poem, 'The Fight for the Earth', from *Watchwords* [*Consignas*] (1933), is concerned with the subject of religious belief as a form of false consciousness.⁴⁰ 'We were directed towards God', the speaker, a Spanish peasant, complains in the opening line of this poem,

we cried out our appeals to him
because we supposed him higher than the rooftops and pigeon lofts,
further away than the back of the last star.⁴¹

The priests only related this God to earthly matters for the peasants in order to assure them that everything in the world was ordered exactly as He had ordained it.

To the point of paralysis they had repeated to us that he was the one
creator of everything,
of the lice that feed and grow in the hair of the poor
as well as the congestion that unsettles the siesta
of the rich.⁴²

³⁷ 'La iglesia marcha sobre la cuerda floja' in *Octubre* No. 2 (July-August 1933), p. 33 -4. Reprinted in Nantell, pp. 170-71.

³⁸ '-Ven tú, banquero, [...] Banquero, hermano,/ sube hasta mí, dame la mano,/ que si la cuerda/ que si la cuerda/ se rompe iremos a la mierda.' Nantell, pp. 170-1.

³⁹ 'La literatura no era más que 'un instrumento para transformar el mundo' [...] El primer lugar lo ocupan los fines didácticos, pragmáticos: todo está supeditado al objetivo de hacer consciente de su situación social al proletariado rural e industrial [...] y de provocar la agitación política. [...] Poesía combativa, panfletaria, muchas veces, denunciatoria casi siempre. Los cultismos sintácticos o lexicológicos no asoman en ninguno de los poemas, la mayoría de los cuales están escritos en verso libre'. Lechner, 96.

⁴⁰ 'La lucha por la tierra'. *Poesías completas*, p. 351-2.

⁴¹ 'Nos dirigíamos a Dios,/ le suplicábamos a voces/ porque le suponíamos más arriba de los tejados y los palo-/ mares,/ más allá de la espalda de la última estrella.' Ibid, p. 351.

As a consequence of such teachings the peasants came to view God as just another of their oppressors. 'And like any other proprietor or exploiter of men,' the speaker remarks, 'it was also demanded that we called him Lord.'⁴³ In the second half of the poem, the peasant directly apostrophises this exploiter-God, telling him that his reign is over.

But now, Lord, a sickle has cut off your head
and with a single strike a hammer has demolished your throne forever.
It's a red star that inflames the rotting debris of
your heaven.⁴⁴

Christianity, therefore, is replaced by a revolutionary Marxist doctrine as the peasantry reject the notion that the social injustices suffered by the lice-ridden poor must be accepted as a part of God's plan.

IV.

The Spanish Civil War of 1936-9 produced a huge volume of committed writing. Alun Kenwood observes that the conflict 'inspired more literature than any other event in Spain's history'. The war crystallized the issue of commitment in literature. Every artistic form became, on each side, a weapon in the struggle and contributed powerfully to the politicization of European literature.⁴⁵ Only some of the writers who supported the republican regime during the war were themselves republicans, but the consensus among the large numbers of Spanish anarchists, communists, and socialists who did support the Republic was that it 'provided the political framework through which their revolution would be accomplished.' As Kenwood remarks, for these individuals and organisations, 'the Spanish Republic becomes a symbol of the future socialist society in the process of construction.'⁴⁶ By and large, therefore, their literature treats the civil war as a continuation of the social revolution inaugurated by the Second Republic in 1931.⁴⁷

Like many communists, Alberti lent his support to the Republic during the civil war. He was actively involved in the defence of Madrid in the 1936-7 period, serving in the

⁴² 'Nos habían repetido hasta paralizarnos que él era el único/ creador de todo,/ tanto del piojo que se alimenta y cría en la cabeza del pobre/ como del estómago pesado que hace congestionar la siesta de/ los ricos.' Ibid. p. 352.

⁴³ 'como cualquier propietario o explotador de hombres,/ exigía además que le llamásemos Señor./ Esto nos enseñaron desde niño los curas,/ el arzobispo en su visita pastoral/ y los dueños del campo que labramos hasta que nos derriba.' Ibid. 352.

⁴⁴ 'Pero ahora, Señor, una hoz te ha segado la cabeza/ y un martillo de un golpe ha derribado tu trono para siempre./ Es una estrella roja la que incendia los escombros podridos de/ tu cielo.' Ibid.

⁴⁵ Alun Kenwood, *The Spanish Civil War: A Cultural and Historical Reader* (Oxford: Berg, 1993), p. 27.

⁴⁶ Kenwood, p.31. 'The view argued by the Communist Party, the right-wing of the Socialist Party and the bourgeois Republican politicians', Paul Preston notes, 'was that the war must be won first in order to give the revolution any possibility of triumphing later'. Paul Preston, *The Coming of the Spanish Civil War* (London: Routledge, 1994), p. 171.

⁴⁷ Lechner comments that 'the poetry written in the Republican camp is essentially the expression of a society living, with the utmost dedication and commitment, its social revolution and spiritual emancipation; a poetry in which fighting the forces captained by General Franco was only the most immediate and urgent theme.' ['Hay que tener en cuenta, además, que la poesía que se escribió en el campo republicano es esencialmente la expresión de una sociedad que estaba viviendo, con la máxima dedicación y entrega, su revolución social y emancipación espiritual y en la que combatir las fuerzas capitaneadas por el general Franco no era más que la faceta más inmediata y urgente.'] Lechner, p. 152.

Aviation section of the army. As secretary of the government-sponsored *Alliance of Anti-Fascist Intellectuals* during the conflict, and editor of the journal *The Blue Overalls* [*El mono azul*] he was also one of the central figures in the Republic's attempts to use art and literature to mobilize support for the regime among the indigenous population and the international intelligentsia. Aside from these activities, he continued to write poetry and drama during the war, and helped to devise a form of Spanish *agitprop* theatre, which he called 'Theatre of Urgency' [Teatro de urgencia].

Alberti's Civil War poems were collected together under the title *Capital of Glory* [*Capital de la gloria*] (1936-1938). If some of his earlier attempts at committed writing amount to little more than rhyming propaganda, this volume redresses the aesthetic balance and contains some very impressive work indeed. The collection is particularly interesting in terms of the struggle it reveals within the poet himself between his commitment to revolutionary change (and violence) on the one hand, and on the other, his horror at the suffering that was being caused by the conflict. Revolutionary violence was a recurring theme in the poetry Alberti composed in the first half of the decade. It was not, however, until the outbreak of the civil war in July 1936 that he gained any personal experience of warfare. It quickly became apparent to him that it was not at all like he imagined it would be.

'Madrid-Autumn', the opening poem in this collection, is one of Alberti's most impressive works. It was written during the intense bombing of the capital city by Franco's forces in late 1936. The opening stanza of the poem reveals how the sobering realities of violence, and the prospect of military defeat, caused Alberti to question his role as an enthusiastic poet of the revolution.

City of the darkest and most deliberate atrocities,
whose nightly suffering makes fear bury itself
wide-eyed in livid cellars,/ I should wish, furiously, yet impassively,
to tear out my voice by its roots, but I cannot,
that I might tread upon you so silently/ the spilt blood
would bite my grief and my footstep without protest.⁴⁸

A great deal of critical analysis has focused on Alberti's desire here 'to tear out my voice by its roots'. This line is often interpreted as expressing a sense of frustration or disillusionment on the part of the poet due, perhaps, to a belief that to write poetry in circumstances such as these is unjustifiable, and implies that the poet is removed from the suffering he is witnessing. Pieter Wesseling, for example, maintains that 'Madrid as a cause demands that the poet merge completely with it and efface whatever capacities he may have to celebrate its grandeur. His inability to do so ('pero no puedo' [but I can't]) means that his ability to praise supposes a kind of distancing, an ability to see the horrific details of war in a meaningful perspective.'⁴⁹ Robert Havard suggests that the poet's desire to 'to tear out my voice' can be traced to the anti-individualism inherent in Marxist ideology: 'as a communist,' Havard writes, Alberti 'knows that mass suffering is not to be appropriated by an individual

⁴⁸ 'Madrid-Otoño': 'Ciudad de los más turbios siniestros provocados/ de la angustia nocturna que ordena hundirse al miedo en los sótanos lívidos con ojos desvelados,/ yo quisiera furiosa, pero impasiblemente/ arrancarme de cuajo la voz, pero no puedo,/ para pisarte toda tan silenciosamente, Que la sangre tirada/ mordiera, sin protesta, mi llanto y mi pisada.' *Poesías completas*, p. 401 (The translation of this stanza is by Havard, p.223).

⁴⁹ Pieter Wesseling, *Revolution and Tradition: The Poetry of Rafael Alberti* (Valencia: Albatros, 1981), p. 64.

[...] His vain hope is to merge with the city's blood-spattered streets. Only an impersonal treatment will allow the collective body to listen unoffended, 'sin protesta' [without protest].⁵⁰ This important line can also be read as revealing a conflict within the poet between his commitment to the revolution on the one hand, and his anger at the awful suffering it was causing, on the other. It appears that at – an instinctive level – Alberti wants to use poetry to express his rage at the 'atrocities' and 'nightly suffering' occurring in Madrid at this time; however, the Marxist in him knows that violence is an intrinsic component of revolution and, as such, the 'spilt blood' must be accepted as a part of the struggle to emancipate the Spanish working classes. This is why he feels it should not be 'protest[ed]' against. Alberti overcomes this dilemma. By the end of the poem is able to re-affirm his intention to use poetry to further the cause of the revolution: 'City' he exclaims in the final line, 'I want to help you to give birth to your day.'⁵¹ The eight stanzas of poetry that precede this confident assertion provide an insight into the *process of thought* that enabled him to overcome his doubts regarding his role as a poet of the revolution.

'Madrid-Autumn' is a loosely structured poem that intersperses alexandrine quatrains with unrhymed lines of irregular length. This arrangement complements the overall intention of the work, which is to produce the impression that the poem was created through a spontaneous process of thought as Alberti walked through the war-torn suburbs of the capital, meditating on the meaning of the landscape that surrounded him. Much of what he describes has a kind of ordinary-yet-surreal quality; most memorably, perhaps, a house blown open on one side that reveals a 'a supper scene and the beds all made,/ a mute drama of empty clothes,/ with no one present.'⁵² As we move further into the work the broken-down commodities that the poet encounters on his walk through the city ('rickety sofas', trampled upon 'family portraits', 'empty suits', 'paintings', and 'discarded books'⁵³) are interpreted as parts of a greater whole – physical aspects of the apostrophised city of Madrid itself: as 'drops of blood in your terrible dawn.'⁵⁴

In the sixth stanza, Alberti appeals to the *polis*:

City, city here and now,
in your bowels of catastrophe and glory
protect/ the handsome seed of your future life.
Beneath the creaking dynamite of your skies
is heard the birth of the new child of victory.
Screaming and pushing the earth inaugurates it.⁵⁵

In this manner the destruction that is being visited on the city is conceived of as a process of transformation; a process Alberti confidently asserts will issue in a 'future life [...] the birth of the new child of victory.'

⁵⁰ Havard, p. 223.

⁵¹ 'Ciudad, quiero ayudarte a dar a luz tu día.' *Poesías completas*, p. 403

⁵² 'la escena/ del mantel y los lechos todavía ordenados,/ el drama silencioso de los trajes vacíos,/ sin nadie,' *Poesías completas*, p. 401-2. (Translation by Havard, p. 224).

⁵³ 'Estos libros tirados/ que la yerba arrasada recibe y no comprende,/ estos descoloridos sofás desvencijados [...] estos inesperados/ retratos familiares'. *Poesías completas*, p. 402.

⁵⁴ 'este cuadro, este libro, este furor que ahora/ me arranca lo que tienes para mí de elegía/ son pedazos de sangre de tu terrible aurora.' *Poesías completas*, p. 402. (Translation by Havard, p. 226.)

⁵⁵ 'Ciudad, ciudad presente,/ guardas en tus entrañas de catástrofe y gloria/ el germen más hermoso de tu vida futura./ Bajo la dinamita de tus cielos, crujiente,/ se oye el nacer del nuevo hijo de la victoria./ Gritando y a empujones la tierra lo inaugura.' Ibid.

It is noteworthy that during his walk through the battle-scarred city Alberti's 'eye' is drawn primarily towards objects that – from a Marxist perspective – are typically bourgeois artefacts and commodities: suits, family portraits, rickety sofas etc. It is this focus that enables the poet able to create a scenario whereby he can welcome the destruction being wrought on the city as, actually, a form of creation. In stanza six Alberti insists that Madrid is 'More visible than ever before'. As its bourgeois characteristics are annihilated, the proletarian 'heart' of the city becomes increasingly exposed: 'but they will never seal your heart', the speaker insists, 'even though mountains of rubble stop its pulse.'⁵⁶

It is in this way that Alberti manages to resolve the dilemma he raises in the poem's opening stanza: how to voice his horror of war and still remain true to the revolution. He discovers that he can give full expression to the suffering caused by the revolution without raising doubts about his commitment to the Communist cause because that suffering is being viewed in the context of birth rather than death. Madrid is at one and the same time dying and being re-born into a more authentic mode of existence.

'Though pain is generally to be avoided as an evil,' Terry Eagleton writes in 'The Value of Agony', Chapter Two of his *Sweet Violence – the Idea of the Tragic*:

there are kinds of affliction in which loss and gain go curiously together. It is around this aporetic point, at which dispossession begins to blur into power, blindness into insight and victimage into victory, that a good deal of tragedy turns. So does much revolutionary politics.⁵⁷

'Madrid-Autumn' gives stark expression to this poet's conviction that loss and gain, victimage and victory could go 'curiously together' in Spain during the civil war of 1936-9. The notion that death, suffering and destruction are simultaneously evil, yet necessary, and even positive experiences, occurs in many of the poems in *Capital of Glory*. In 'To General Kleber' Alberti again represents the physical terrain of Madrid as a sentient being and laments the terrible effects of the war on its 'body', as well as its inhabitants:

that which was a man, is now cold bone;
that which was a field, a desolate wound,
and a vertiginous tomb the river.⁵⁸

These deathly images are not treated pessimistically by the poet. Rather, once again, the awful effects of the conflict are viewed the context of 'revolutionary' change: 'the earth', quite literally, 'wants to turn another way'; and as in 'Madrid-Autumn', Alberti represents this transformation in terms of a process of birth:

It is the moment in which everything changes,
in which horrified and stunned
the earth wants to turn another way.

It pains us, this pushing, the superhuman
pressure that our bones do not refuse
in order to hasten in the morning.⁵⁹

⁵⁶ 'Más que nunca mirada [...] pero tu corazón no lo taparán nunca muerto,/ aunque montes de escombros le paren sus latidos.' Ibid.

⁵⁷ Terry Eagleton, *Sweet Violence – the Idea of the Tragic* (Blackwell: Oxford, 2003), p. 36.

⁵⁸ 'Al general Kleber': 'lo que era un hombre, ser hueco frío;/ lo que era un campo, una desierta herida,/ y una vertiginosa tumba el río.' *Poesías completas*, p. 407.

The theme of death being transcended by means of a fecund earth also arises in the poems 'The Peasants' and 'Anniversary'. The former work celebrates the commitment of 'men from the countryside' who came to Madrid 'to kill death, in order to win life.'⁶⁰ Alberti likens these men to 'immense seeds/ to be sown in the deep furrows of the trenches.'⁶¹ In 'Anniversary (To the Soldiers of the Red Army)' he maintains that he can feel the dead soldiers of the Red Army 'sprout forth from the broken terrain of the earth/ with the same simple purpose as the wheat.'⁶²

By 1938, Alberti's ability to represent suffering and death as part of an optimistic revolutionary narrative began to falter. In 'April 1938' and 'Autumn and the Ebro' the theme of seasonal change is no longer being used to reinforce the idea that Republican setbacks will eventually result in victory and a transfigured way of life. In the former work, the sight of the earth's regenerative power is greeted with undisguised incredulity: 'You again?' the poet exclaims to the apostrophized figure of Spring in the poem's opening lines,

but this coming
strikes me as quite impossible,
rising and renewing
during such terrible upheaval⁶³

Whereas in his earlier works Alberti could conjure up the most outrageous images of the earth giving birth to human life, by the Spring of 1938 he greets the sight of a few flowers breaking through soil with disbelief.

You again, placing flowers
above the improvised tomb,
above the sod of the trench

and that appearance of colours
in this bloodied land?
You again, Spring?⁶⁴

In 'Autumn and the Ebro'⁶⁵ the political conflict is represented as being opposed to the 'narrative' of seasonal change. The sufferings it brings are no longer viewed as necessary

⁵⁹ 'Es el momento en que se cambia todo,/ en que conmocionada y conmovida/ quiere girar la tierra de otro modo./Nos duele su empujar, la sobrehumana/ presión que nuestros huesos no rehuyen/ para precipitarle la mañana'. Ibid.

⁶⁰ 'Los campesinos': 'los hombres del campo/ [...] de sol a sol trabajan en la nueva costumbre/ de matar a la muerte, para ganar la vida.' Ibid. p. 410.

⁶¹ 'Se ven marchando duros, color de la corteza/ [...] Huelen los capotones a corderos mojados/ [...] uncido a los estiércoles y fangales pegados/ en las cansinas botas más rígidas que patas/ [...] van los hombres del campo como inmensas simientes/ a sembrarse en los hondos surcos de las trincheras.' Ibid.

⁶² 'Anniversario (A los soldados del Ejército Rojo)': 'soldados [...] que ahora siento en mi patria/ brotar de los terrones partidos de la tierra/ con la misma razón sencilla de los trigos.' Ibid. p. 416.

⁶³ 'Abril, 1938': '¿Otra vez tú, si esta venida/ más que imposible me parece,/ puesto que sube y reverdece/ en tan tremenda sacudida?' Ibid. p. 417.

⁶⁴ '¿Otra vez tú poniendo flores/ sobre la tumba improvisada,/ sobre el terrón de la trinchera/ y esa apariencia de colores/ en esta patria ensangrentada?/ ¿Otra vez tú, la Primavera?' Ibid. p. 417-8.

⁶⁵ 'El otoño y el Ebro'. The assault across the river Ebro in July 1938 was the Republic's last major offensive of the war and involved some 80,000 troops. As in so many of their previous campaigns the Popular Army made initial advances but could not hold on to their territorial gains. Preston notes that Franco could have contained

elements in a painful process of transformation. Instead, the war is literally 'insensible' to all forms of life.

Autumn, once. The war carries on, cold,
insensible to the periodic descent of the leaves.
Like the man on the Ebro beneath the artillery,
the desolate trunks alongside the red waters.⁶⁶

No longer being welcomed as a revolution, therefore, the conflict is recognized for what it is: just another 'war' which holds out no promise of a transfigured existence to compensate for all the death and suffering it is causing. Earlier poems frequently ended by anticipating a glorious new 'dawn' or 'Era' in Spanish life. When Alberti tries to look forward in time at the end of this work, however, the most optimistic image he can offer is one of hibernation rather than re-birth.

Autumn, again. Later, winter. So be it.
Let the tree's clothes fall, and let the sun not remind us.
Yet like their trunks, the man in battle,
withered, yellow, cold, but underneath, green.⁶⁷

Like the bare trees that line the river Ebro, the poet's words are no longer capable of providing emotional protection, and offer only the slimmest suggestion of hope for the future.

The idea that poetry, and indeed language as a whole, have no useful role to play in the war is the central theme of one of Alberti's most impressive poems, 'Nocturne', which he composed in the final stages of the conflict. 'When one suffers so much without sleep', the poet remarks in the opening stanza of this work,

and blood only carries the sound of rage,
and one trembles to the core with a wakening hate
and the marrow burns for revenge,
then words are no use: they're just words.

Bullets. Bullets.⁶⁸

This blunt refrain, 'Bullets. Bullets', closes each of the poem's three stanzas, reinforcing our sense that the war is drowning out all other sounds, and so words are futile.

Manifestos, articles, commentaries, speeches,

the Republican advance and moved against a near helpless Barcelona. Instead, he called up 40,000 fresh troops armed with new German equipment and turned Gandesa into 'the graveyard of the Republican army'. By mid-November, at horrendous cost in casualties, the Francoists had pushed the Republicans out of the territory captured in July. The Republic's 'last despairing effort had seen the Nationalists gain a decisive victory.' Preston, *The Coming of the Spanish Civil War*, pp. 207-9.

⁶⁶ 'El otoño, una vez. Sigue la guerra, fría,/ insensible al periódico descenso de las hojas./ Como el hombre del Ebro bajo la artillería,/ los despoblados troncos junto a las aguas rojas.' *Poesías completas*, p. 421.

⁶⁷ El otoño, otra vez. Luego, el invierno. Sea./ Caiga el traje del árbol, el sol no nos recuerde./ Pero como los troncos, el hombre en la pelea,/ seco, amarillo, frío, mas por debajo, verde.' *Ibid.* p. 421.

⁶⁸ 'Nocturno': 'Cuando tanto se sufre sin sueño y por la sangre/ se escucha que transita solamente la rabia,/ que en los tuétanos tiembla despabilado el odio/ y en las medulas arde continua la venganza,/ las palabras entonces no sirven: son palabras./ Balas. Balas.' *Ibid.* p. 420.

POETRY AS PROCESS

lost smoke, imprinted clouds,
what a waste of paper the wind has to sweep away,
what sad news the water has to erase!

Bullets. Bullets.⁶⁹

In the opening stanza of 'Madrid-Autumn' we saw Alberti express his desire to remain silent in the face of the carnage caused by the war: to 'tear out [his] voice by its roots' in order to 'tread upon' the city 'so silently/ the split blood would bite my grief and my footstep without protest.' In the final stanza of 'Nocturne' he expresses a contrary urge:

Now I suffer the poverty, the meanness, the grief,
the wretchedness and death of one who from
the depths of his language would have
cried out that which he cannot, and is silent.

Bullets. Bullets.

Tonight, I feel words are mortally wounded.⁷⁰

It is not at all clear what it is that Alberti feels he should have 'cried out' in this work. The most obvious interpretation is that he believes he should have voiced his horror at the destruction caused by the war more vigorously than he did. However, if he now believes that the war made words redundant, why would it have made any difference what he said at an earlier stage in the conflict? And why is the verb 'cannot' expressed in the present- rather than the past-tense here: is there something that Alberti believes he *still* cannot express? Does he still feel bound to write as an enthusiastic 'poet of the revolution' perhaps? But then 'Nocturne' as a whole conveys deeply pessimistic, anti-war sentiments, so this reading makes little sense either. On the one hand the poet thinks words are futile, 'mortally wounded', on the other, he feels as though he has not said enough. This paradox is perhaps best understood as, simply, an honest and very moving expression of the personal dilemmas that the poet was still experiencing as the civil war neared its conclusion. As in this poem's companion-piece, 'Madrid-Autumn', written in 1936, we see that Alberti produced his finest work when, in a single poem he somehow managed to give expression to the range of conflicting thoughts and emotions that were assailing him as a poet of the war.

It would be difficult to imagine a more ideologically-committed writer than Rafael Alberti. Yet, as noted at the start of this essay, one of the most interesting features of his poetry of the 1930s is that it does not just advocate an ideological position (although it certainly does that), it also reveals the poet's views in a process of change. Modern literary theorists are often deeply sceptical about the idea that writing can reveal 'the truth' of human experience, but it is highly significant, I believe, that the poetry produced by a writer such as Alberti is able to convey his doubts, confusion, and sense of failure, as well as his ideological convictions. This aspect of his work reminds that committed writing need not only give expression to a partisan political outlook, at its best, it can also be 'responsive' to

⁶⁹ 'Manifiestos, artículos, comentarios, discursos,/ humaredas perdidas, neblinas estampadas,/ ¡qué dolor de papeles que ha de barrer el viento,/ qué tristeza de tinta que ha de borrar el agua!/ Balas. Balas.' Ibid.

⁷⁰ 'Ahora sufro lo pobre, lo mezquino, lo triste,/ lo desgraciado y muerto que tiene una garganta/ cuando desde el abismo de su idioma quisiera/ gritar lo que no puede por imposible, y calla./ Balas. Balas./ Siento esta noche heridas de muerte las palabras.' Ibid.

contemporary events, and truthful in the sense that it draws attention to the limitations of its author's own ideological beliefs in the face of the often horrendous realities of war.

maurice devitt

girly man – poetry as reality TV

For most poets the publication of a new collection is a rare and significant event, defining a further point on the arc of their writing life, which runs at a controlled, and largely parallel, distance from the highs and lows of their everyday life. Not Charles Bernstein. Not *Girly Man*.

Bernstein has a vision where poetry and life are asymptotic – poetry is not a series of discrete events stapled on to the life of the poet; poetry is a continuous shadow of that life, a shadow that is just a few beats behind. For Bernstein everything connects as he seems to live in an infinite cross-hatch of poetry and daily life – today it could be an after-school conversation with his son, Felix, a dinner party at Marjorie Perloff's or a call from Mei-mei Berssenbrugge, tomorrow it could be a poem.

While this approach has the advantage of a single unifying aesthetic, it opens up a greater risk around quality control as Bernstein's poetry seeks to track the mundane and humdrum as well as the surprising and inspiring. He seems to see this as a risk worth taking and side-steps any potential issue by adopting an approach to poetry which is both inductive and phenomenological – his fundamental position is that the perceived effectiveness of a poem is not determined by the quality of the inputs and inspiration, but by how the reader reacts to the final work – “poetry's power to evoke emotion is unrelated to any utilitarian idea of the meaning or ideas a poem conveys; rather the emotion is aroused by the sound of the words” (Bernstein, *Apoetics* 58).

So for Bernstein poetry is the portal through which he observes and responds to the world, although recognising the limitations of language, time and truth. While language¹ is the essence of how we express ourselves, it often falls short when seeking to describe a musical or visual arts experience – the art critic plays an important role but can never fully communicate what it was like to *be there*. Language is only one dimension of our sensory experience and while advances in Neuro-Linguistic Programming have shown how words can actively create meaning and emotion, language on its own can't fully describe our world. For this reason *Girly Man* is littered with links to other sensory experiences, particularly music and visual art, as Bernstein seeks to “develop more fully the latticework of those involved in aesthetically related activity” (Andrews and Bernstein ix).

Girly Man, published in 2006, is Bernstein's fifteenth full collection of poetry, in a prolific writing career which started with his first collection, *Asylums* in 1975. Always considered an innovative and radical thinker about poetry, he has also written extensively about the theory of poetics and is probably best known for his seminal role, with Bruce Andrews, in the foreground of the Language poetry movement – in 1978 Andrews and Bernstein founded L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E magazine which they edited for 13 issues between

¹ Bernstein tends to use the word “language” to encapsulate all forms of creative expression and differentiates poetry as “the art of (verbal) language” (Bernstein, *Attack of the Difficult Poems* 227). However, in this critique I use “language” to denote simply spoken or written expression.

1978 and 1981 and which became a lightning-rod for all that was new and radical about poetry during that time.

The term *Girly Man* was originally spawned by the comedians, Dana Carvey and Kevin Nealon, for a series of satirical sketches about two Austrian bodybuilders, Hans and Franz, on *Saturday Night Live* in the late 1980s. However, its provenance is more normally associated with Arnold Schwarzenegger, who borrowed the term, and used it extensively, perhaps most notably at the 2004 Republican National Convention, as a pejorative term for people who didn't support that party's singular vision for America (Schwarzenegger 3).

The cover art for the collection is a painting by Susan Bee, Bernstein's wife, entitled *Fleurs Du Mal (Flowers of Evil)*, a rather arty title for what looks like a promotional poster for a 1950s B-movie possibly titled *The Scientist and the Show-girl*. Bernstein continued this B-movie connection in the title of his recent book of essays and inventions, *Attack of the Difficult Poems*, possibly reflecting his ongoing interest in popular culture and his constant desire to avoid the perceived elitism of poetry. The other connection here is that *Fleurs du Mal* was the title of the most significant collection by the French poet, Charles Baudelaire, a poet who Bernstein originally admired as "a crucial poet in terms of what we call the modern history of the representation of the everyday" (Bernstein, "Attack of the Difficult Poems" 176), although later believing that Baudelaire had fallen short because he never fully integrated with the ordinary, as he continued to observe it "from his own point of detached privilege" (177).

Flicking through the collection the first impression is that it is unusually long. However, reading Bernstein's own extensive "Notes and Acknowledgements" at the back of the book it quickly becomes clear that *Girly Man* is essentially a collection of collections – the book is in seven sections each of which has been published previously, either as a pamphlet or as a series of individual poems. Prior to the recent publication of his first book of selected poems, *All the Whiskey in Heaven*, Bernstein had believed that each of his books was "a constellation of chosen poems that give the book a specific gravity" (Sanders 6) and for this reason he "couldn't imagine excerpting parts of those books; it would be as if you asked a novelist to do a selected paragraphs." (Sanders 6). This probably explains why Bernstein decided to collate such an extensive and stylistically-varied collection, a collection that now feels like the genome of this important period in American life. It might also explain his choice of title, as he seeks to herd the various strands of reflection under a term that can succinctly capture the *zeitgeist*, albeit ironically. Respecting these completist tendencies, I have also taken the view that a balanced review of the work requires a critique which forensically plots Bernstein's latticework of meanings and connections.

As we start to examine the book in more detail, we see that *Girly Man* is essentially the programme for a far more extensive and dynamic world, one which cannot be fully represented by the flat words on the page. Charles Bernstein is convinced of a world where technology, through the medium of hypertext, has created a multi-dimensional opportunity for creative expression and believes that it is important his poetry will help to provide the key. While *Girly Man* can be read in isolation as simply another expansive and erudite poetry collection, it achieves true exponential value as it reaches beyond the words on the page through both the dedicated micro-site on the website of the Electronic Poetry Centre and the specific links to other media happenings, whether in the shape of the visual art of Richard Suttle and Mimi Gross, or the music of Ben Yarmolinsky and (the other) Charles Bernstein. In the "Notes and Acknowledgements" at the end of the collection Bernstein

encourages the reader to visit the website, thereby hoping to create a dynamically evolving environment for the collection.

The first section of *Girly Man* is entitled *Lets Just Say* and is comprised of four poems written in the spring and summer of 2001, and published as a pamphlet in 2003. The title sounds tentative and conciliatory, and the poems are presented in a quite matter-of-fact tone. However, like a lot of Bernstein's work they are riven with irony. *In Particular* is actually not particular at all and through the music of repetition, internal rhyme ("A Montenegrin taking Excedrin"² (63)) and variously ingenious or inane word-play ("A Czech man in a check suit"(77) or "A Syrian swami on Lake Origami"(59)) Bernstein has created a hymn to diversity. While the poem was written long before the full collection was conceived it is a very effective opening poem, both in the widescreen tableau it creates and the anticipation of the swarming, Breughel-like scenes which will be played out in the second section of the book, set in the wake of 9/11. There is also a sense of melancholy, or maybe even nullity, as the poem circles in on itself, starting and ending at the same point, the flat, discursive tone seeming to reflect the futility and interchangeability of everyday tasks.

The tone of "Thank You for Saying Thank You" is stridently satirical, visiting a topic that has been a favourite of Bernstein's since the days of the L-A-N-G-U-A-G-E movement – the challenge of the "difficult poem". By addressing the reader directly he draws us into the debate and forces us to take a position. Using very controlled parsing of plain speech and a short line, the poem reads like a very open, assertive defence of the "accessible poem"(2). However, while it is a "totally / accessible poem"(1-2) most of Bernstein's other claims in the poem are deliciously untrue: it is not "all about / communication"(24-25) nor does it say "just what / it says"(90-91). It is like Bernstein is miming the poem into a mirror, with the growing belief that the opposite of every assertion is true. The reader is left with the disconsolate view that if this is accessible poetry I don't want it or, as Bernstein cautioned in his essay, "The Difficult Poem", "Readers of difficult poems also need to beware of the tendency to idealize the accessible poem. Keep in mind that a poem may be easy because it is not saying anything."(Bernstein, *Attack of the Difficult Poems* 5).

In the title poem of the section Bernstein returns to repetition and off-kilter epigrams to de-stabilise our thinking. The anaphora of "Let's Just Say..." creates a very insistent, incantatory rhythm while the double-spacing means every proposition stands alone and hangs for seconds before we read the next. The choice of the tentative, vernacular "Let's Just Say..." gives greater power to the propositions that follow, each of which playfully trips our expectations of language and logic: "Lets just say that every time you fall you never hit the ground"(1), "Lets just say that sometimes a rose is just a read flower"(8), as Bernstein seeks to work at "angles to the strong tidal pull of an expected sequence of a sentence"(*Contents Dream* 38). The litany also touches on deeper issues of language as it, questions representative norms, "Let's just say that green is always a reflection of the idea of green"(11), challenges the accepted meaning of common expressions, "Let's just say that pretty ugly is an aspiring oxymoron"(28) and flags the double-edge of language, "Let's just say that mankind suffers its language"(25), a theme that re-emerges throughout the work.

The final untitled poem in the section has echoes of the earlier poems in its pounding repetition of "& every...", its short line and its circular narrative. It opens like a fairy-tale as it declares that "every lake has a house"(1) and evokes memories of childhood

² All poems quoted are from *Girly Man*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006.

songs e.g. the traditional Irish tune “The Rattlin’ Bog,” and puzzles - convert “lake” to “slope” and back in 21 steps! . Although some of the transformations are clever (“& every thought has a trap / & every trap has a door”(16-17)) the poem feels quite monochromatic, lacking the linguistic colour and depth of the earlier poems.

The second section of the collection, *Some of these Daze*, is a series of five prose-poems largely written in the days following 9/11. They are composed in what Bernstein describes as a “serial aesthetic”(Bernstein, *Granary Books* 1) where “one perception immediately follows the next, without an attempt to create an overall hierarchy or controlling narrative.”(1). *Some of these Daze* opens with “It’s 8:23 in New York,” a peripatetic description of walking through New York in a *daze*, in the hours after 9/11. It is a memo of denial and disbelief as New Yorkers look for reassurance in the everyday activities of “bicycling and rollerblading”(53-54) or, Andrew, the local hairdresser stays open because “people would want to have him there, standing in front of his shop.”(49). It feels like the early stages of grief, a theme consistent throughout the poems and borne out by the specific reference to (Elisabeth) Kubler-Ross³ in “Aftershock”. This first poem is loosely stanzaic, a form carried through to the other poems. In “Today is the next day of the rest of your life,” explicit separators are studded throughout the poem, giving the feel of an ensemble piece comprised of overlapping vignettes.

The dimensionality of the poems feels naturally progressive. “It’s 8:23 in New York” consists largely of stunned observation, the limited emotional comment seeking to understand rather than analyse, as in “This could not have happened. This hasn’t happened. / This is happening.”(59-60). The episodic nature of “Today is the next day of the rest of your life” is inter-cut with political comment - a friend of Bernstein’s writes “It’s a bit ominous,... the way the politicians are speaking about talking with one voice”(32-33). While this is the first time we see explicit reference to what is probably the strongest theme in the collection, Bernstein’s fear of a dogmatic, binary world, his full-on invective is temporarily stayed by the enormity of the human tragedy. As a result the initial response is guarded, as he tries “to get by talking with no voice”(34). However in the inchoate search for understanding, his analytical mind is quickly at play as he laments the short-comings of language, “the image is greater than the reality / the image can’t approach the reality / the reality has no image”(45-47) and closes the poem with the haunting statement that “our eyes are burning”(48) an image that reverberates and anticipates questions about response and retribution.

“Aftershock” opens with a post-catastrophic catharsis: “Thursday night it started to pour. The piercing thunder claps echoed over Manhattan.”(1-2). After this cleansing, the tension builds, peaking with the “visceral need to lash out...to destroy in turn for what has been destroyed”(19-20). The style remains stanzaic and episodic, but the content has shifted from passive observation to latent reaction, and Bernstein’s school-book declension of the verb “to bomb”(51-56) introduces subsequently the ambivalence of identity and blame, a moral shift which culminates in the closing-line “We is they.”(59), which provides a seamless link into “Report from Liberty Street”.

Written between September 18 and October 1, “Report from Liberty Street” starts with the picture of physical devastation and switches quickly to the people’s reaction, as “We look on, perhaps not yet ready for despair, against our stronger instincts, which well up, boundless and bare.”(14-15). While stylistically the same as the earlier poems in the

³ The psychiatrist Elisabeth Kubler-Ross introduced a model entitled, “The Five Stages of Grief” (now “The Kubler-Ross Model”), in her 1969 book *On Death and Dying*. The model now has universal acceptance.

section, the tone is transformed by the echoing refrain, "They thought they were going to heaven." (3), repeated throughout the piece as though seeking to counterpoint the unbridled hatred expressed towards the perpetrators of this "dastardly" (81) act. Again we have Bernstein's aversion to the binary, his belief that nothing is singularly right or singularly wrong; he seeks to understand before judging. This aspiration can be frustrated by the polarising power of language, however: by a t-shirt slogan reads "What Part of Hatred Don't You Understand?" (63-64), and the media's moralistic vocabulary runs from the "cowardly" to the "dastardly" (81). In the poem he dramatically switches between the innocence of the individual victims as "No one deserves to die this way" (93) and the less certain national innocence, as he tentatively posits that "We got what we deserved," (89) and "We / have our own domestic product" (107-108). He closes the poem with a line from "Ozymandias," a bleak reminder of the inevitability of imperial decline, prompted here not only by the act itself but by the xenophobic sophistry of the political response.

The epistolary poem *"A Letter from New York"* closes the section beautifully. While the earlier poems were almost like letters to himself, in this letter to his friend Arkadii in St Petersburg, Bernstein, aided by time and physical separation, seeks to provide perspective but realises it is impossible. It is too soon and "there is no place to which to return" (57). Like November 22, September 11 will now be etched into the consciousness of America and everything will be framed as being before, or after, 9/11. Bernstein captures this perfectly with his final image of the day in August "we drifted aimlessly down the Neva." (66) a starkly pastoral image considering all that has gone before, but an image that really shimmers – what was once never-ending now seems unreachable.

"World on Fire" was written by Bernstein in July and August 2002, and published as a chapbook in 2004. The title suggests a continuity and resonance with *"Some of These Daze,"* although it is formally and thematically very different. The poem titles are cleverly deceptive as, mostly derived from the song-writing of Jimmy Webb, Johnny Mercer and others like them, they create an expectation of popular lyricism that is conventionally thought of as unproblematic. In general they are quite traditionally structured, starting with the seemingly pastoral "Didn't We," which is set out in couplets, then progressing through the tercets of "One for the Road" and the two sonnets which centre the collection, "In a Restless World Like This Is" and "Ghost of a Chance". Bernstein's traditional titles and forms represent a bedrock of normality; on this platform Bernstein builds an endlessly shifting world of fear and uncertainty. Having moved from the grand canvas of 9/11, where the enormity of the event obviated any need for seering imagery or sparkling wit, Bernstein has returned to the micro-world of relationships, of middle-class angst, of consumerism. It is a world of constant change where we take nothing for granted and the Sisyphean nature of everyday life means "We're getting there, just / Fall a little further behind by day" ("One More for the Road" 13-14) or, in the turn of "In a Restless World Like This Is," "all the further you'll / Have to go on before the way back has / Become totally indivisible." (12-14).

With echoes back to "Let's Just Say," Bernstein uses the suggestive power of language to reflect this uncertainty, as he lulls us with stock phrases then veers into the unexpected, "Follow the / rules then go straight to the linen closet / for folding." ("The Folks who Live on the Hill" 12-14), or "Refurbishment / is just around the hospital coroner." ("Choo Choo Ch'Boogie" 16-17) He ironically asserts the moral authority of poetry with instructions and aphorisms that should make sense but don't, as he suggests we "Overcome fears of cloning / by using patent leather shoes." ("Choo Choo Ch'Boogie" 26-27). He also displays an unerring, yet sardonic, ear for the sounds of popular culture, as *Looney*

Tunes become “ludic runes” (“Sunset at Quaquaversal Point” 13) and *Busta Rhymes* becomes “busted rhymes”(1).

Bernstein believes that all poetry is a balance between absorption and impermeability or as he says in his poem/essay “The Artifice of Absorption,” “The intersection / of absorption & impermeability is precisely /flesh, / as Merleau-Ponty uses this term / to designate the intersection of the visible / & the invisible.”(Bernstein, *Apoetics* 86) and he is constantly changing the mix between the two. In *World on Fire* he seems to favour impermeability as each poem seeks to offer glimpses of meaning only to divert us when we seem in touching distance. Bernstein’s approach is to switch primacy from the signified to the signifier, by creating unexpected combinations of language that in turn evoke new reactions in the mind of the reader, based largely on texture, rhythm and sound. While this aesthetic is a constant undercurrent to Bernstein’s work, he seems to use it with more deliberate intensity here, in *World on Fire*, and also later in “Likeness.”

In the *Warrant* section the oblique stylistic cohesion of *World on Fire* is supplanted by a mish-mash of different styles, each of the poems having a quite explicit external inspiration which serves to prompt the reader to look beyond the collection, thus creating a seemingly arbitrary collage of experience. The section opens with the eponymously-titled poem where Bernstein frustrates any potential absorption by addressing the reader directly. The poem is shaped from the found text of a legal contract between poet and publisher. The long sentences, multiple lists and short line create a breathlessness and submissiveness in tone, as though nervously reciting for a superior. The pacing is pulled up at two key points, by the practical commitments of the fifth stanza drawn out in a more prose-like line and by the grudging resignation of the closing agreement, “To exercise this option/I agree to make payment in full in the next thirty (30)/days.”(99-102).

The anti-absorptive technique of directly addressing or questioning the reader is repeated in both “Questionnaire” and “Language, Truth, and Logic” and has the effect of removing any artifice around the mimetic nature of the poems, thereby prompting the reader to respond directly. “Questionnaire” again feels like a found poem based on a standard personality questionnaire. Its presence in a poetry collection, where the answers are not important, prompts us to study the nature of the questions in more detail. The most striking aspect is their representation of a world of absolute truth, an idea that is anathema to Bernstein. Normally he would use irony to debunk this myth; here the polarity of the statements themselves has the same effect.

“Language, Truth, and Logic” is a title which could summarise Bernstein’s poetic drivers yet it originally emanates from the philosopher A.J. Ayer’s book of the same name from 1930. The book provides a starting-point for the poem with the intricate philosophical discussion, presented in a conversational matter-of-fact tone, seamlessly segueing through the principles of David Ross’s *The Right and the Good* and J. L. Austin’s *A Plea for Excuses* (71). The poem deals humorously with complex arguments of philosophy, the simple language and form running a jagged line of dialogue between Samuel Beckett and the Marx Brothers.

The short poem “Why I don’t Meditate” flippantly swats the burgeoning ubiquity of meditation and mindfulness, with the grand opening assertion that “Mental health is probably overrated”(1) raising our hackles and then trailing off into a specious argument in favour of a “little anxiety”(1) and “chairs with heavy cushions”(4).

The New York poet and editor Kevin Killian encouraged Bernstein to write a short lyric for the original theme tune to *Nightmare on Elm Street* and while the resulting 6-line

poem is vaguely mysterious it loses out to the jarring menace of the original music. The poem is certainly less than the sum of its parts, but placed in the collection it piques the reader's interest in two directions: the presence of two Charles Bernsteins – heaven for the language poet: two people, one name – and the door into the exceptional cinematic experience that is *Nightmare on Elm Street*.

Cultural references are rife in the composition of "He's So Heavy, He's My Sokal." The title partially inverts the well-known phrase, "He Ain't Heavy, He's My Brother," perhaps most famous as the title of a popular song by Bobby Scott and Bob Russell that was a major hit for The Hollies in 1969. In addition the poem itself is a very close copy of the song written by Milton Schafer, and popularised by Danny Kaye, "Please Don't Tickle Me." The *Sokal* that pervades the poem is a reference to the physicist, Alan Sokal, who published a hoax article in *Social Text* 46/47, which seemed to debunk what Sokal termed "currently fashionable postmodernist/poststructuralist/social-constructivist discourse theory"(184). Bernstein's inversion of the title and his use of *Sokal* as a mildly aggressive verb are initially surprising. However the contradiction is somewhat clarified in Bernstein's essay "Fraud's Phantoms"(Bernstein, *Attack of the Difficult Poems* 206) where he initially seems to support Sokal's approach but then castigates him for taking his own hoax too seriously: "Sokal's glosses of the hoax give no comic relief and indeed are filled with high moral tone in the defense of empirical truth"(212). Once again the poem offers little in isolation but does prompt the reader to investigate and connect with the key debate of cultural veracity.

In the *Warrant* section Bernstein includes two translated poems "Cum ipse..." and "from *Canti Antichi*" attributed to the Italian poet, Antonio Calvocressi. To the reader they immediately take on the customary gravitas of translation but closer inspection reveals that Bernstein is playing with us and our natural assumptions. Bernstein's notes indicate that "Cum ipse... has been reconstructed from documents recently discovered near Rome"(62) yet the transition between original and translation indicates a rather fluid boundary between Latin and English: "Ammo"(4), although echoing the well-recognised "Amo"(3) in the previous line, seems to have no origin in Latin and translates rather conveniently to "Ammunition"(4), similarly the previously-unknown "masturboris"(5) becomes "handles himself"(5) and the Latin "quamquam"(11), normally translated as "although", playfully becomes the English plural "qualms"(11). No surprise that Bernstein views accuracy as "the bogeyman of translation"(Bernstein, *Attack of the Difficult Poems* 199).

"from *Canti Antichi*, translated as " from Ancient Songs," looks like the true translation of an Italian love-song, although there is no evidence that the poet or original poem ever existed. The translation seems quite traditional in structure, with the consistent opening line in each 5-line stanza, "O! Heart of mine"(1) and the intermittent end-line rhyme. However, the final poem descends into satire as Bernstein over-dramatises with his intense punctuation and the ever-more sundering violence captured in the sequence of "cleaved"(2), "broken"(5), "fractures"(7), "ripped"(9), "hemorrhage"(10), "bludgeon"(13) and "exploding"(15).

While clever and playful in exposition these two poems ask serious questions about language and truth as applied to translation, questions which mirror Bernstein's fundamental view of poetry. For Bernstein, every piece of writing is essentially an exercise in translation - whether it is the traditional translation of language to language or the more usual translation of thought/idea to word - and in every case the source and outcome must be able to stand apart. This is central to Bernstein's phenomenological view where readers

react to the sound and shape of the final work and don't judge it based on assumptions about the inputs or creative process.

The ekphrastic, "Slap Me Five, Cleo, Mark's History," inspired by the painting *Cleopatra* by Bernard Duvivier, shows Bernstein at his expansive and allusive best. Shaped as a 239-line monologue from a gallery guide (descended from Mark Antony) and delivered in a pacy, dead-pan style it is littered with contemporary cultural references, including re-run stations *Nick at Night* and *TV Land*, some homespun psychoanalysis of Cleopatra's condition, the Betty Ford clinic, Y-zero-K, bald men wearing baseball caps and it even purloins the words of "These Foolish Things" to create the fictitious vocal standard, "Roman Nights of an Egyptian Queen." The delivery and sparkling one-liners would stand comparison with the comedy of Woody Allen or The Marx Brothers, "I guess that's poetic license / (how do you apply for one of those?)"(152-153) or "You didn't invite me here to talk / about myself, well you didn't invite me here / at all."(31-33).

For the reader the poem is a real roller-coaster as its content ranges peripatetically from the cloying introduction of a game-show host, through the fate of Marie Antoinette and Louis XVI, the cuisine at *Montrachet*, the romanticisation of suicide, the 1963 film version of *Cleopatra*, right through to the essence of Roman history, where Julius Caesar crosses the Rubicon. There are echoes of Bernstein in the guide himself, as he seeks to make the painting more accessible and achieves this through invention, creating fictitious, latter-day back-stories for the key characters in the painting. The poem exhibits the power of poetry to fluidly connect words and ideas, and to create credible associations between disparate realms of experience. Of course the monologue could have been shaped as prose but, written to be spoken or read aloud, the lineation and white space of poetry serve to accentuate the dramatic power and rhythm.

Large elements of *In Parts* were written as companion pieces to the artwork of Richard Suttle, a close friend of Bernstein's: "*Reading Red* initially published as a collaborative book... with the poems superimposed on images of his painting"(184) while *In Parts* was "written.....for the catalog of *In Parts*, 1998-2001"(184). Publishing the poetry without the related images is consistent with two familiar traits in Bernstein's writing, firstly, his belief that the most important aspect of poetry is the end-product and how we react to it – a reaction independent of the source – and secondly, that writing can act as a door opening into a much wider world of creative expression. While the *mise-en-page* of the five poems in *In Parts* is quite individual (although *Pomegranates* and *12²* look similarly haiku-ish) there is a consistency of tone and execution. As we move from poem-to-poem it is like moving from room-to-room in an art gallery – echoes here of Bernstein's view of the poetry collection as a "group show"(*My Way: Speeches and Poems* 57). The poems are segmented into discrete statements, assertions and aphorisms (reflecting the title *In Parts*), each of which stands alone for consideration and reaction, while continuing the conversation with other sections and other poems.

These are poems of texture, colour and shape but as always with Bernstein the plates are shifting. Sometimes he seems to refer directly to the source of his inspiration, "Where the fold should be / There is no fold"("Reading Red," segment 10 1-2) or "the red does not / touch the blue"("In Parts," segment 10 1-2), sometimes he plays with the texture of the language itself "masonry steps / CONCRETE"(*In Parts*, segment 3 6-7) or "the syntax inside the nouns touch"(*In Parts*, segment 12 6), often returning to the overlap between life and language, "my elbow against your / composure / burns like wax"(*12²*, segment 9 1-3) or "art is not an copy of nature but an extension"("In Parts," segment 6 1). Although the titles

seem arbitrary there is a synergy between them: the wordplay of “Reading Red” also sets up “red” as a common motif, “Pomegranates” continues the “red” link while conjuring up the image of seeds for each of the poem’s segments, “In Parts” serves both to describe the overall section and to foreground another common theme of Bernstein’s, the tension between touching and separation, “12²” is self-referential in terms of the number of segments and the (approximate) number of syllables in each segment and *Photo Opportunity*, with its circular structure, creates the image of flicking through a series of photographs and then passing back through them to find a particular one.

After the amorphous coherence of *In Parts*, *Likeness* feels like a compilation album with nods to all of Bernstein’s familiar styles. There’s the translation (of the translation) poem, “Pocket in the Hole,” two ekphrastic poems, “Jacob’s Ladder” and “Further Color Notes,” the incantatory list poem “Likeness,” the re-vamped song lyric, “Shenandoah,” the clever monologue, “Secrets of a Clear Hand” and even the love poem, “Don’t Get me Wrong” with the aching plea, “Don’t say goodbye no more”(25). While there are some high points, the verbal larking and jaunty rhythms of “Secrets of a Clear Hand,” the simplicity and hope of the reverberating “Comforting Thoughts” and “Should We Let Patients Write Down Their Own Dreams?,” and even the mantra-like cleansing of “Likeness” resonating back to “In Particular,” too many of the poems fall down when compared to their most direct antecedents. “Rain is Local” looks like a doodle from any one of Bernstein’s list poems, the rather robotic “Jacob’s Ladder” could have been retrieved from the cutting-room floor after “Reading Red,” and “Further Color Notes” is flat and hermetic.

There are too many poems in this section where Bernstein seems to run content against form: “Interim Standoff” starts beautifully with “If discipline is required / you’re more than competent / less than able.”(1-3) only to run aground in a mire of punctuation and hard edges, while in reading “Pocket in the Hole” the word selection feels distinctly aleatoric and, despite its heavy use of alliteration, the rhythm is like walking through treacle. This of course could simply be another exercise in discombobulation by Bernstein. Presented with what look like neat, ordered lyric poems we expect them to flow smoothly, only to find ourselves picking our way carefully through them as word combinations jar with our expectations of rhythm and meaning. It is as though Bernstein is following his long-held and consistent practice of making “language opaque so that writing becomes more and more conscious of itself as world generating, object generating”(*Content’s Dream* 71). Here he seeks to do this within the straitjacket of tightly structured poems and for me, this reflects, a weakness in Bernstein’s approach. Dense, opaque language works best when the poem has space to breathe and the reader doesn’t have the sensation of clambering over rocks. In this section I feel the grunginess is further exacerbated by a dilution in the quality of rhythm and content. The downside to framing poetry as a lens through which to track and interpret daily life is that large parts of our lives are uninteresting and, no matter how clever or iconoclastic the word structures, in the absence of an essential music, the mirroring poetry will, in turn, be equally uninteresting.

So, after a poetic odyssey of 146 pages, we finally get to meet *Girly Man* and in this, the seventh, and final, section Bernstein seeks to pull together the best of what has gone before. Even with a similar variety of style and content, there is an absolute cohesion; the same word-play and humour but here they are the servants of a clinical intent. Every poem pays its way, beginning with the magnificent “War Stories.” A list poem, driven by the thumpingly anaphoric, “War is...” it presents as a series of seemingly definitive truths about war which on closer examination reflect: ambivalence, “War is unjust even when it is

just.”(55); inversion of accepted truth, “War is a horse that bridles its rider.”(66); paradox, “War is a five-mile hike in a one-mile cemetery.”(14); situational certainty, “War is the right of a people who are oppressed.”(45) and ambiguity, “War is tyranny’s greatest foe. / War is tyranny’s greatest friend.”(63-64). While the pounding rhythm and the surprising thought combinations are largely what keep the poem vibrant and fresh, Bernstein also uses some familiar techniques: mirroring, “War is raw”(60); juxtaposing common phrases, “War is never having to say you’re sorry”(2) and transposing tired clichés, “War is the end justifying the meanness”(72) or “War is the opiate of the politicians”(30). The poem is exceedingly clever and thought-provoking and we initially read it with the comfort of personal distance; that is, until the closing lines where Bernstein funnels the ambiguity of war into the certainty of personal accountability, “War is the answer. / War is here. / War is this. / War is now. / War is us.”(91-95)

This is followed by the idyllically-titled “There’s Beauty in the Sound of the Rushing Brook as It Forks & Bends in the Moonlight.” However, it is not as it seems. An ironic take on the immigrant’s search for the American Dream, it counterpoints very directly with Schwarzenegger’s speech at the Republican National Convention in 2004, where he asserted that for an immigrant “there is no place, no country, more compassionate, more generous, more accepting and more welcoming than the United States of America”, (Schwarzenegger 1) the implication being that it is the fault of the immigrant if they don’t realise this and profit from it.

Questions of national identity also surface in “Death Fugue(Echo)” which was originally written by the German poet, Stefan George, but brought to Bernstein’s attention by Marjorie Perloff in her memoir *The Vienna Paradox*. It reflects Perloff’s personal experience growing up in the Jewish community of Vienna just before the Second World War, her family never really being accepted as truly Austrian. The Austrian echoes with Schwarzenegger, and Hans and Franz, are interesting but coincidental.

Faced with important issues like terrorism, nationalism and international conflict what role does the individual play, and how are they to respond? Bernstein seems to suggest two potential paths, the first to use the power of creative expression, an approach reflected in much of this collection, the second to take personal responsibility for what is in their own control, and what they can influence.

The path of creative expression is reflected in both, “A Poem is not a Weapon,” a blank but powerfully subversive take on the latent power of poetry and language to trigger change - referenced throughout the collection - and also in “The Beauty of Useless Things: A Kantian Tale,” a short allegory, based on an after-school conversation with Felix, Bernstein’s son, which again re-iterates Bernstein’s aesthetic – it’s not important how art is planned or created, it is more important how the reader/consumer reacts, as in “The face is the meaning.....the beholding is the face”(9-10).

Bernstein has included two poems in this section which are set out as personal explorations. In “Sign Under Test” he is tentative and unsure as he wrestles “again, taste to taste, with his own self-inoculations.”(2-3). The form and style are familiar but interspersed with the clever, pithy aphorisms and the philosophical observations there are more personal assertions and uncertainties: the resignation of “My cares turned to wares.”(58); the hesitation of “A girl I once met told me her name rhymed with orange. /Did I just imagine that?”(53-54); the insecurity of “If you lead you’d have to know where you are going whereas I only know where I am not going”(95-96) and the plaintive pleading of the closing “Save the last chance for me.”(139). It is as though he is re-examining long-held beliefs and

principles and, as he looks to re-shape them, feels the need to verify each as a “Sign Under Test”.

By the time “Self-Help” comes around Bernstein’s tentativeness has disappeared, at least superficially. Presented in similar form to “Sign Under Test”, but this time with possible solutions, it reads like a series of bumper stickers: “Marriage on rocks. – Nothing like Coke”(5); “Miss the train? – Great chance to explore the station!”(20); “Nothing doing. – Take a break!”(22). Topics range from the advantages of baldness and the problems of misprogramming VCRs, through to “AIDS ravaging Africa.”(50) and the torture of “Abu Ghraib prisoners”(54) but the important factor is that all are imbued with a sense of confidence and the belief that, in the face of problems, the one who takes positive action survives, while the “Other drowns.”(60). This newly-found confidence and can-do attitude starts to seed possible feelings of hope.

The penultimate poem in the collection, *The Bricklayer’s Arms*, seems quaintly named conjuring up as it does images of English pubs and anchor tattoos. However, it is, in fact, quite a profound poem both in form and content. The choice of the bricklayer as a type of Atlas figure – echoes here of the emergency services being the heroes of 9/11 – the synecdoche of “Bricklayer’s Arms” as the symbol of omnipotent strength, the anaphora of “The Bricklayer’s Arms...” driving the rhythm of the poem and creating the feel of a street-song, and the intensive use of alliteration and lists of descriptors to fine-tune the music. For once there is no evidence of the twisted narrative, the diverting word-play. It is a journey poem set on a definite path: the bricklayer’s arms fight through all the vicissitudes of life, and although they may be ultimately “stamped by the artifice of token / and projection. The bricklayer’s arms / cradle the soul of the lost world”(103-105). It is a serious and thought-provoking message, laced with yearning and hope. By stating this so directly in his penultimate poem, Bernstein seems to be clearing the stage for his *coup de grace*, where irony becomes truth.

In choosing the phrase that has become explicitly ironic, *Girly Man*, as a title for the collection, as well as his final section and final poem, Bernstein is seeking to unite the collection under a flag of open debate, compromise and hope. Initially readers’ curiosity will have been piqued by the unusual title and their resultant research would have surfaced a prescribed tone. This tone is reinforced by the strong resonance between the first two sections of the collection, a resonance which leaches into the third section, then becomes more intermittent and oblique in the next three sections, only to return with a bang in the final section as “Girly Man” creates a book-ending cohesion.

The poem “Girly Man” bluntly copper-fastens this resonance as it plays us out. While the chorus is pure vaudeville, the message is direct and unflinching as “The truth is hidden in a veil of tears / The scabs of the mourners grow thick with fear”(1-2). The title is now worn as a badge of honour to describe people who are not ruled by binary truth, people who:

are not afraid
Of uncertainty or reason or interdependence
We think before we fight, then think some more
Proclaim our faith in listening, in art, in compromise(23-26)

It takes a while to get to the discovery of this civic and aesthetic courage, but the journey has been worth it. *Girly Man’s* arc is a process of acculturation, essaying a poetics of the liveable and achieving an impious peace.

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annette skade

hatmaker:

craft, language, music and performance in basil bunting's *briggflatts*.

Basil Bunting's emphasis on craft and music in *Briggflatts* may be partly attributed to his involvement with a group of poets in the 1930's, including Louis Zukofsky, Alfred Dehn and William Carlos Williams, who worked together to produce *An Objectivist Anthology*. At the time Zukofsky, who edited the anthology, was circumspect as to the exact nature of Objectivist poetics:

From the very start, the format Zukofsky chose in 1931 prompted indignant responses from readers wanting the editor to place the poetry by Charles Reznikoff, Carl Rakosi, Basil Bunting, George Orpen, Kenneth Rexroth, Robert McAlmon, William Carlos Williams, himself and others within the context of a tradition. How is Objectivism related to past poetry. Is it a new ramification (such as Dadaism, Jemenfoutism, Surrealism, for instance) [...] ?" one reader was to ask in the April 1931 edition of *Poetry* (53). Zukofsky's exasperation was apparent in his response: "Poetry is 'past' or 'news' only to historians of literature and to certain lay readers; to poets (craftsmen in the art of poetry) and to competent critics, poetry" (55). in the April 1931 edition of *Poetry* (53)....And to the question: "Is Objectivist poetry a programmed movement (such as the Imagists instituted) [...]?" (53), his reply was equally terse: "To those interested in programmed movements 'Objectivist' poetry will be a programmed movement" (55). (Fiona McMahon 2009)

It is evident that there was a desire to avoid being defined by any particular movement and that the idea of Objectivist poetics was meant to be a loose one. Michael Davidson in his book *Ghostlier Demarcations* indicates the breadth that any definition of Objectivist poetics would have to encompass:

Objectivist poetics stress exactitude and sincerity, visual immediacy over introspection and irony. The eye is the model for poetic meditation.As for language, poetry should achieve a ratio between speech and music, a formula that would accommodate both Williams' plain style and Zukofsky's or Bunting's elaborate metrical experiments and often baroque diction."(1997, 23)

In his autobiography, Williams tells us. "We together inaugurated first the Objectivist theory of the poem and then the Objectivist press. 3 or 4 books were published including my own collected poems. Then it folded". (1967, 264)

Susan Kumamoto Stanley asserts that Bunting aligned Objectivist tenets with Pound's 1912 Imagist tenets. These were as follows:

1. Direct treatment of the "thing" whether subjective or objective.
2. To use absolutely no word that does not contribute to the presentation.
3. As regarding rhythm, to compose in the sequence of the musical phrase, not in the sequence of the metronome. (1994, 11)

Objectivist poetics were interpreted differently within the group. Essentially Zukofsky felt

that Eliot too was on an Objectivist quest: the “desire for what is objectively perfect, inextricably the direction of historic and contemporary particulars: Finally though Eliot went a step further and this is what bothered both Bunting and Zukofsky for Eliot transformed the historic and contemporary particulars into a transhistorical myth. (Kumamoto Stanley 1994 53-54) In 1932 Basil Bunting wrote an open letter, published in *// Mare*, to his friend and fellow objectivist Louis Zukofsky¹. In it he takes issue with Zukofsky’s approach to critical analysis.

I have always supposed you to have a greater care for facts than almost any critic now living, a greater partiality for the particular, for the “very words”. But these paragraphs about poetry look to me like flights with darkness, away from ascertained and reascertainable facts to speculative mysticism, to a region I think void of anything permanently valuable.(Kumamoto Stanley,1996, 14)

For Bunting, the poem is a tangible object, an object that is not imbued with abstractions. If the poem is an object, then the poet can be likened to a craftsman working on that object. Bunting continues:

If I am a hatmaker I seek instruction in a series of limited practical operations ending in the production of a good hat with the least possible waste of effort and expense. I NEVER want a philosophy of hats, a metaphysical idea of Hat in the abstract nor in any case a great deal of talk about hats. This is what I would understand by Objectivism, if the word were mine.²

This letter reveals that as a young man Bunting held views concerning poetry entirely consistent with those expressed in his lectures in the nineteen seventies.³

It seems to me that the language of criticism, the language of grammar and prosody, in this country and perhaps in all countries , is full of words imposed from Latin, Greek and other learned languages, such as men normally use when they want to make vague statements sound precise, or when they want to make remote generalities seem relevant. (1999, 1)

Craft

In his lecture on the *Codex Lindisfarnensis* Bunting likened the process of writing a poem to the skills employed by Eadfrith in illuminating the Lindisfarne Gospels . He refers to the complexity of the work and the laborious care taken to achieve it and concludes, “This is the way you’ve got to write poetry, you know: every word has got to be thought of with all that care.” (1999, p10)

Basil Bunting emerges as a man whose interest throughout his life is in poetic craft: the poem as an object to be worked, the poet as one who can be likened to Eadfrith as a skilled practitioner of his craft but also, and perhaps half- disingenuously, to a hatmaker. He dismisses less practical theories of poetry as “flights with darkness” and perhaps the

² Zukofsky appears to have been like-minded: Ira B. Nadel in notes on his essay “ A Precision of Appeal” Louis Zukofsky and the *Index of American Design* states:

In 1946 Zukofsky reiterated his analogy between poetry and handicrafts when he cited a weaver and an architect as examples of craftspeople whose actions achieve ‘constructions apart from themselves,[and] move in effect towards poetry’ (“Poetry” *Prepositions* 8). In a 1969 interview with L.S. Dembo , Zukofsky returned to carpentry: ‘[P]eople are free to construct whatever table they want, but if it’s going to be art you had better have some standard. I at least want a table that I can write on and put to what use a table usually has’ (Interview 268) (Scroggins,2012)

³ See *The Codex* Basil Bunting on Poetry 1-18.

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reference to “vague statements” in words imposed from learned languages is a swipe at Neo Platonists. In his notes on *Briggflatts* he makes this explicit:

Hierarchy and order, the virtues of the neo-platonist quasi- religion, were prime virtues also to Yeats, Pound and Eliot. They are not virtues to me, only expedients that chafe almost as vilely as the crimes they try to restrain.(2009, 41)

It is evident that the past impacts on the present for Bunting and : “Then is Now “(2009, 32), and that he considers poetic craft in the present in Northumberland to be on a continuum linking to those past craftsmen, and to artists and craftsmen to come. In *the Codex* he talks of the creation of a Northumbrian Art for the twentieth and twenty first century and suggests that artists of the region do not mimic “what has come to us from Rome or Europe or from the South of England “ but that they should try to “discern what is our own”. (1999, 16-18) Bunting looks to the past to inform the future, but it is a Northumbrian past and a Northumbrian future that fires his imagination.⁴ The emphasis on poetry as craft in *Briggflatts* reflects this view and there are numerous references to craft throughout the poem. The trope of the mason underpins Parts I and II of the poem and returns in Part V . Bunting lingers throughout the second verse of Part I on the image of the mason who performs the mundane but exact tasks required for his craft: hammering, laying his rule. He listens to a lark. He is shaping a name. Bunting sees the poem is an object to be worked as a mason works stone. Unlike the mason’s work, however, it is unclear whether a poet’s work will last through time, and perhaps the line about spelling a name “naming none/ a man abolished” is a reference to Bunting’s struggle to be published throughout his life. The poet “dare not decline/to walk among the bogus” (2009, 17). The poet’s disdain of himself and “the bogus” contrasts with an appreciation of craft and craftsmen, such as of the ship’s pilot in verse 2 “he blends, balances, drawing leagues under the keel” (18). There are references to “Lindisfarne’s plaited lines” and to metalwork:

Win from rock
flame and ore
Crucibles pour
sanded ingots.

Heat and hammer
draw out a bar.
Wheel and water
Grind an edge. (2009, 20)

The poet is now a “reproached/ uneasy mason” unable to make anything but “flawed fragment.” Part III begins with an extremely long verse spanning three pages (2009, 23-25). Bunting depicts a world in conflict, where society has broken down. The nearest we get to craft in this section is a depiction of “turd-bakers”. The reaper and miller cannot ply their trade as “grubs adhere even to stubble” (2009, 25). Part III gives a vision of war , death, and famine where society has disintegrated and no craft can take place. The last two lines signal a desire to return home.

⁴ Zukofsky also had a great interest in historical craft as well as the craft of poetry and was an important contributor to *The Index of American Design*. See Ira. B. Nadel’s “ ‘A Precision of Appeal’ ”(Scroggins 1999, 112-126)

So he rose and led home silently through clean woodland
where every bough repeated the slowworm's song (2009, 26)

Home to the poet is not only his region, but is that place where the poet can engage fully with his poetic craft. It is regained with difficulty though, and in Part IV we have an accomplished interlacing of images of home and Northumbrian history, and images very foreign to Northumbria. Columba, Cuthbert and Aneurin mix with dying leopards and ibex guts. These foreign images are for the most part decaying and harsh, making reference to war and carnality, but also perhaps signalling a growing disenchantment with Persia:

Aidan and Cuthbert put on daylight,
wires of sharp western metal entangled in its soft
web, many shuttles as midges darting; (2009, 27)

In Parts IV and V the angular strokes of the mason's hammer, prevalent in the references to poetic craftsmanship of Part I, are replaced by a more intricate and sinuous imagery. The reference to medieval monks leads us to think of Anglo-Saxon interlacing, which Bunting discusses in detail in his series of lectures in the nineteen eighties, not just in illuminated manuscripts but also in stone and metal. The trope of metal work, signalled in Part II, (2009 20) is picked up and extensively worked in Part IV and picked up again in Part V. The working is complex but never moves into the philosophical or emotional: feeling is conveyed by well-chosen words that signify *things* in the poet's experience. It is akin to the intricate patterns of Anglo-Saxon craftsmen working in metal, stone or vellum.⁵

There is a spool of thread running through Part IV which manifests itself as "guts", "wires", "cabled thighs", "midges darting", "spiderlines" (2009, 27) , a "girdle", "spider floss", "cobweb hair" , and even "a boy's jet"(28): the thread which is hard and functional in the first long verse of Part IV(2009, 27) becomes softer as the poet encounters his lover in verse 3 (2009, 28). This thread may be akin to a repeated strain in music, or the sinuous, painted lines of an illuminated manuscript. This thread is "entangled", and the spider and cobweb images reinforce the intricate nature of the poetry and the complexities of life for anyone who dares to weave.

The interlace trope continues in Part V, "pigment", gruff sole cormorant (as depicted in the Lindisfarne gospel) "threads", "lace". There is also reference to weaving, which was signalled in Part IV by the repetition of "shuttles" (2009, 27) " sinews ripple the weave"(2009, 30). Here also the mason returns. Whereas Part IV reveals the complexities encountered by the poet in his early middle age, through the interlacing of images and the references to Anglo-Saxon interlace, the return of the mason may signal a return to some simplicity: to a certain resignation, made more explicit in the Coda:

Who,
swinging his axe
to fell kings, guesses
where we go? (2009, 33)

⁵ For further exploration of the Anglo- Saxon interlace and the interlacing of the verbal and visual in *Briggflatts* see Basil Bunting, *Lindisfarne and the Anglo-Saxon interlace*, by Clare A. Lees

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His choice of words from the Germanic root in *Briggflatts* is a deliberate one and differs from his neighbours in 1960s Northumbria, as consciously chosen, (They had not been educated at boarding school nor spent years abroad in the company of poets), but there is strong evidence in *Briggflatts* of an emphasis on and comfort in dialect. There is also a sense in which Bunting's regionality is a political stance: an assertion of northernness:

Poets like Basil Bunting and David Jones should not be simply placed in an adjacent canonical space. Instead, the complex refiguring embedded- however unwittingly- in Kavanagh's notion of "parochialism" can be applied to them as to other works and figures. The "region" becomes not only the zone for an alternative politics, but also an imaginative space that can be made to enact temporalities and rhythms that differ from metropolitan rhythms. Regionality becomes a stance for poetry as well as a site for poems. Its investment in the linguistic registers and vocabularies of Northern England, its sharply carved stanzas and lines, and its harmonic densities make *Briggflatts* into a kind of sedimented epic, wherein the poet mimics a geological formation to an extent unseen in other twentieth century poetry. (Eric Falci, 2009, 204)

In *In Parenthesis* and *The Anathemata*, David Jones, like Bunting, uses historical events from his region or country, (in Jones' case Wales) to inform the present. Jones too had an interest in the craft of the past, particularly in the development of lettering: "He (Jones) maintains that the whole quality of a civilisation, or a culture, can be shown in a very short inscription, or derived even from a single letter. "(Bunting 1999, 8). *Briggflatts* has strong historicopoetic elements, fusing the life of Bunting with events from the past:

..of a man's life, interrupted in the middle and balanced around Alexander's trip to the limits of the world and it's futility....Those fail who try to force their destiny, like Eric; but those who are resolute to submit, like my version of Pasiphae, may bring something new to birth, be it only a monster.(Bunting, 2009, p40)

Bunting lays great emphasis on the history of the art and craft of his region: "Autumn is a reflection, to set Aneurin's grim elegy against the legend of Cuthbert who saw God in everything."(1999, p xv)⁶

Words

The conscious use of Germanic root words may show a preference for spare, radiant language but may also be accounted for by the dialect which surrounded Bunting as he grew up. This may lead us to dismiss Bunting's use of dialect as a pose. However, in an interview published in the *London Magazine* in January 1971, the Northern English poet Ted Hughes makes explicit that which I believe is implicit in Bunting's poetry: "I grew up in West Yorkshire. They have a very distinctive dialect there. Whatever other speech you grow into, presumably your dialect stays alive in a sort of inner freedom, a separate little self. Without it I doubt that I would ever have written verse." (Ted Hughes in interview) Hughes' "inner freedom, a separate little self" could be deemed a poetic space, created by the language and experiences which shape an individual. It may act as a seedbed for writing and define a person's relationship with their home region. In Part I Verse I of *Briggflatts* there are around fifty words. All but six are rooted in the Germanic word hoard. Germanic words are bold script, Italic words are italicised,("Brag" is first found in Spencer):

⁶ Clare A. Lees refers to Bunting's engagement with earlier Northern poetic and visual traditions as "a commonplace of modern scholarship" (2010, p111)

Brag, **sweet tenor bull**
descant on Rawthey's madrigal
each pebble its part
for the fells late spring.
Dance tiptoe, bull
black against may
ridiculous and lovely
chase hurdling shadows
morning into noon
May on the bull's hide
and through the dale
furrows fill with may
paving the slowworms way. (2009, 13)

It is unlikely that Bunting arrived at this selection of Germanic root words without deliberation and his motivation may partly be explained by reference to the following reminiscence by Ezra Pound, who Bunting cites, along with Zukofsky, as a major influence: ⁷

Dichten = condensare

I begin with poetry because it is the most concentrated form of verbal expression. Basil Bunting fumbling about with a German- Italian dictionary found that this idea of poetry as concentration is almost as old as the German language. 'Dichten' is the German verb corresponding to the noun 'dichtung' meaning poetry and the lexicographer had rendered it by the Italian verb meaning 'to condense' (1987, 36)

In spare and powerful Germanic root words, Bunting finds this condensing of images and ideas, generating simple language that is dense with meaning; evidently, Pound may have influenced Bunting here. In 1934 the American laid down ways in which words are given energy or "charged":

Nevertheless you charge words with meaning in three ways, phanopoeia, melopoeia, logopoeia. You use a word to throw a visual image on to the reader's imagination, or you charge it by sound, or you use groups of words to do this

Thirdly, you take the greater risk of using the word in some special relation to 'usage', that is, to the kind of context in which the reader expects, or is accustomed, to find it. (1987, 37)

Reading through the poem we see words carefully selected with all three ways in mind. It is instructive, to explore the words in *Briggflatts* that jar against the Germanic register. In the first verse of Part I, if we sift out those of Germanic root, we find words related to music: tenor; descant; madrigal. These may signal Bunting's belief that a poem is like a piece of music⁸ and their context also conflicts with normal "usage" which charges the words with more significance (Pound's logopoeia). The opening lines "Brag sweet tenor bull/ descant on Rawthey's madrigal" (2009, 13) are lines of lasting power, which take hold of the mind rather like a compelling piece of music might. The words are charged in all the three ways recommended by Pound but "Rawthey" is also given significance amongst the Italic words of the second line. This immediately informs us that this is a poem of place. When spoken by Bunting it also informs us that this is a poem of dialect; the uvular "r" being particular to the North East. May is an important word here, and Bunting gives us a note: "May, the flower,

⁷ "...but two living men also taught me much: Ezra Pound and in his sterner stonier way Louis Zukofsky." (2009, 44)

⁸ See Chapter 3

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as haw is the fruit, of the thorn" (2009, 37). It signals a thread which runs through Part I: May, Hawes, spring. This thread reinforces meaning. "Dance" and "chase" are from Old French. None of these words sound odd in terms of register. Dance itself is important in Bunting's poetics, as a precursor to poetry, and is an appropriate allusion in this first verse.⁹ There are two words remaining from the Latin root: "paving" and "ridiculous". "Paving" is in itself important, reminding the reader that we are setting out on a path with the slowworm. Being a simple two syllable word serving as part of a common phrase "paving the way" it does not jar. However, the word that really stands out both in syllabication (four syllables) and in its change in register is "ridiculous". When one hears Bunting read *Briggflatts*, we hear this word spoken with affection as one would expect in a line "ridiculous and lovely". It can also be noted that in a stanza containing only five adjectives, two are contained in one line. This signals its importance: the bull is ridiculous and lovely, so is this part of the poem, so is youth: an older man(Bunting subtitles this poem "a biography") looking back on his youthful love. As a Latin scholar, Bunting would also be aware of the origin of the word "ridere" the latin for "to laugh". The bull is "ridiculous" but, man is the only animal that is risible: this poem explores the essentially human.

It may be that Bunting chooses Germanic root words from the North East of England because they "sound right", just as Italic words sound right in a Southern European landscape.¹⁰

It sounds right, spoken on the ridge
between marine olives and hillside
blue figs, under the breeze fresh
with pollen of Apennine sage. (2009, 19)

Part II commences with a striking change in register and a contempt for self and those around him:

Poet appointed dare not decline
to walk among the bogus, nothing to authenticate
the mission imposed (2009, 17)

The (polysyllabic) contempt and estrangement, begun in verse 1 with "authenticate", is picked up in verses 2 and 3 with "calculate" and "elucidate". Some level of content returns with Bunting at sea and the Germanic root words again gather strength: "Thole-pins shred where the ore leans".(2009, 18) The fusion of Italic and Germanic root words in the short lines commencing "Win from rock", work well as a deliberate device to indicate that things are still out of kilter. While almost achieving the tone and register of Part I, they are actually a deliberate distortion of it:

No worn tool
whittles stone;
but a reproached
uneasy mason

⁹ Referring to dance Bunting says "Poetry must arise very similarly.....It is very closely related to music from its birth and both are tied ultimately to the body and its movements" (1999, p3)

¹⁰ Bunting speaking of Wyatt " You (will) have noticed how simple the language is. There are none of those Elizabethan mouth-filling polysyllables that mean so little." (1999 p46)

shaping evasive
ornament
litters his yard
with flawed fragments. (2009, 20)

These lines also demonstrate Bunting's skill in empowering words from an Italic language root. "litters" has particular force, containing the idea of rubbish, the screwed up papers that may indicate failed poems, and the literary world. Parts IV and V show a Bunting returned to his homeland and a gradual return to the simple. The coda provides us with some of the simplest, sparest lines, with a simple *ababa* rhyming scheme, signifying a resignation that touches the "we" of the collectively human.

A strong song tows
us, long earsick.
Blind, we follow
rain slant, spray flick
to fields we do not know.
(2009, 33)

As Bunting explores his coming of age in Part I of *Briggflatts*, he also self-consciously explores the language which shaped him, and asserts his commonality with the people of his region. He asserts a common world view with those from his area and even when far from home in Parts II and III; this commonality is always his reference point. Bunting's uses words as a device to indicate where he and his poem belong: Part I, as shown above, is almost exclusively written in Germanic root words, appropriate to the dialect of his area. However, the further the poet travels from home and the more estranged he becomes, the more Italic words are used. Bunting's use of dialect is a self-conscious appeal to a common Northumbrian world view, as Eric Falci elaborates:

Briggflatts, published in 1965 after a long silence, is an intensely rooted poem, and uses the histories, mythologies, and geographies of Northumberland to evoke an "archipelago of galaxies" that encompasses a millennium and ranges from the farthest edges of the Celtic fringes and Scandinavia through Southern Europe to Asia (Bunting 2001, 70). (2009, 208)

Bunting had an agenda in his use of dialect. It is instructive to refer to Mark Scroggins on Zukofsky here:

The real problems of knowledge, as Zukofsky explores them in his poetry, lie in the social, interpersonal bases of our shared worldview, in the extent to which our communications one with another are made in the medium of a language that we have inherited and which shapes us. (1997, 9)

The words used by Bunting point to a desire to do many things: to use words "charged" in the three ways that Pound identifies; to celebrate the North,¹¹ and in particular Northumbria; to provide language that is spare and musical and to place the poem on that continuum of northern creativity which, according to Bunting, stretches back to the Lindisfarne Gospels.

Bunting has a skilled and considered use of language. Like the mason, who "lays his rule/at a letter's edge/ finger tips checking", (2009, 13) Bunting, like any good poet,

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carefully checks each word. The tone and radiance of the Germanic root word hoard of Northumbria is Bunting's rule. When the poetry runs straight along this line, then, it portrays a poet true to himself and to his region. When the language deviates from this Bunting is skilfully using italic words in a new way, usually with a change in usage which allows us to look at the word afresh, or to denote a shift in region, signalling that things are out of kilter, and the poet and poem are far from home.

Performance

"...lines of sounds drawn in the air which stir deep emotions which have not even a name in prose. This needs no explaining to an audience which gets its poetry by ear." (Basil Bunting. 2009 p42)

On 22nd December 1965 Bunting read *Briggflatts* in public for the first time in a venue that was once the home of a craft guild:

Up a cobbled back lane in Newcastle, where the ventilators of Stowell Street expel the cooking smells of the Orient, squats the Morden Tower. It forms part of the 13th Century City Walls and in the early 17th Century was the meeting place of the Company of Glaziers, Plumbers, Pewterers and Painters. (David Whetstone, 2004)

Photographs taken at the time show a small simple room with most of the audience seated on the floor. This was far from a regional backwater however. Allen Ginsberg read at Modern Tower in 1965 and wrote an enthusiastic and amusing (if somewhat flowery) account of his night there:

A crowded evening, candles, incense, music, beautiful-bodied company, stone walls, Pickard with the haircut of a valiant magician's attendant in charge of the Tower's rare library, Bunting the master himself smiling in the fete-oso I gave the most complete reading of my own written work that I ever vocalised in one evening. Knowing the minds and ears were fine, (or among the younger folk, if inexperienced, tenderly open), I began at my beginning as a poet and read past midnight all the scribbling I had done for a decade.(Ginsberg, 1968)

The first reading of *Briggflatts* took place within months of the Ginsberg reading and one can imagine the atmosphere to be very similar. Bunting's reference to an audience "which gets its poetry by ear" can only be aspirational. Most if not all of Bunting's audience at Morden Tower would be more used to getting its poetry by reading, but as Ginsberg says "the minds and ears were fine" and the minds of the "younger folk" were open. It is apt that the ancient home of a craft guild should echo with images of craft in the carefully crafted words of Bunting. A fine example of "Then is Now." (2009, 32), and is wholly appropriate for a poet who sees his work on a continuum with a Northumbrian past.

Was Bunting a performance poet? He would be in absolute agreement with performance poets as to the value of the spoken word and the emphasis on sound. In a paper on Performance Poetry in 2011, David Lordan states

In simple chronological terms performance poetry has an absolute predominance over page poetry. The defining feature of performance poetry is its orality and for 99.99 % of human history is a history of oral culture. That is the only poetry was performance poetry. It is so-called page poetry which is the stranger in the house of poetry.¹²

Thus far we can imagine David Lordan's views on poetry as performance to be similar to

¹² David Lordan, unpublished, *Performance Poetry* ' Mater Dei Institute seminar 2012 ,

those of Bunting. When considering possible views on poetry as performance in the sixties it is instructive to consider the following statement by Ginsberg regarding his poem, *Kaddish*:

I have read this huge poem aloud only three times. The first reading of the complete text was for *The Catholic Worker* after they opened a new salvation centre near the bowery in 1960. I didn't read the whole poem aloud (except once to Kerouac in my kitchen) in public again till the occasion of the recording at Brandeis University Nov 24th 1964.

I've done it only once since then a year later in Morden Tower, Newcastle, England for a small group of longhaired kids in the presence of the greatest living British poet Basil Bunting. I was afraid that reading it over and over, except where there was a spiritual reason, would put the scene into the realm of performance, an act, rather than a spontaneous poetic Event, happening, in time." (Ginsberg, 1966)

Ginsberg quickly exchanges the word performance, which also has connotations of musical performance, for "act" which smacks of the circus. For poets such as Ginsberg, at least, reading poetry aloud had nothing to do with performance, which had negative connotations. It may be that Ginsberg is so disdainful because of the sensitive subject matter of *Kaddish*. Bunting, while not quite so particular, still responded negatively to the idea of acting a poem, but was also disdainful of certain poetic affectations. After disparaging some poets who "lack voice" or "lose the swing of the metre" (2009, 43), he scorns those who have mannerisms "such as the constant repetition of a particular cadence, producing an effect rather like the detestable noise parsons make in church." He also has words of caution for actors who "cannot bear to leave their beautiful voices in the dark, they must use the whole range on poems that need only a short scale. He concludes "....actors and poets alike, if they but speak the lines, will give you more of a poem than you can get by reading it in silence." It must also be noted that Bunting himself had a stylised delivery of his verse, which was quite different than his ordinary speech but was nevertheless more natural than some of his contemporaries.

When Bunting speaks of "lines of sounds drawn in the air which stir deep emotions which have not even a name in prose." we get the impression of an actively listening, but otherwise passive, audience. In the same paper quoted above, Dave Lordan describes a more active audience for performance poetry: "At times poetry performance- precisely because its orality, accessibility, thematic adaptability and potential for audience interactivity becomes completely integrated into the *modus vivendi* of an emergent community."

Bunting grappled with ideas of sound and meaning, at times appearing to assert that poetry has no meaning if not spoken aloud: "Poetry lies dead on the page, until some voice brings it to life, just as music, on the stave is no more than instructions to the player." (2009, 42). For Bunting the poetic event is primarily an auditory experience. He later struggles to clarify this: "I've never said that poetry consists only of sound. I said again and again that the essential thing is sound." (2009, 44)

The interactivity with audience which Lordan attributes to contemporary performance poetry might have been novel to Bunting, but photographs from Morden Tower of Bunting with Ginsberg shows his obvious enjoyment of Ginsberg's mammoth performance there in 1965. Ginsberg's anecdote of that night tells of Bunting's advice: "Certainly happy circumstances for a poet, and happier to hear Buntings concern 'Too many words, condense still more' which altered my own poetic practice slightly towards greater economy of presentation."

Music

Bunting has read *Briggflatts* with Scarlatti's Sonata in B minor L33 as musical accompaniment and has stated that the poem is influenced by the Lindisfarne gospels and Scarlatti's L33. Both these works create an intricate effect, one visually in the illumination used, and one musically: Scarlatti's L33 is a beautiful example of baroque counterpoint, its minor key sets a plaintive tone and the interweaving sinuous instruments can be heard independently. This works well because of the strength and beauty of the *cantus firmus* (main melody). There is a strong harmonic cadence to signal a firm ending to the piece.

To read *Briggflatts* with Scarlatti's sonata in the mind is to gain further understanding of the poem. The tone of *Briggflatts* is sombre from the outset, as is any music in the minor key. The life of the poet, the strong sense of place and the search for home is the *cantus firmus*, the main melody which is constant through the poem. This is a simple, human, evocative feeling with which the poem is charged. Similarly L 33's *cantus firmus* is evocative and easy to access, a melody that one can find oneself humming and which never disappears throughout the sonata. The final bars of Scarlatti's piece provide a strong harmonic cadence, a feeling of resignation and rest and of finality. The Coda in *Briggflatts* has a similar mood. In 1989 Bunting described this mood as "man is contemptibly nothing and may live content in humility" (2009, 40) yet the Bunting of 1965 picks up the small suggestion of something more, in the final bars of L33 as he ends this resignation on a question "... Who / swinging his axe/to fell kings, guesses/where we go? (2009, 33)

In baroque counterpoint the main melody is joined by other voices and instruments which interweave with it, sometimes in unison, sometimes following the main melody, sometimes contrasting with it, almost always, in Scarlatti's day, in consonance with the notes of the main melody.

Bunting expanded on the musicality of his poem in a radio interview with Hugh Kenner in nineteen eighty:

....[was] the notion of a sonata, where two themes which at first appear quite separate, and all the better if they are strongly contrasted.....gradually alter and weave together until at the end of your movement you've forgotten they are two themes. And that struck me when I was very young as a form that poetry should and could exploit. (1999, 207)

The complimentary themes in *Briggflatts* of craft and poetic craft, provide a consonance with the main melody or theme of life, place and search for home which plot Bunting's personal history. The historical theme of people, objects and events in Northumbrian (and western) history, something we might not expect to see in "An Autobiography" (the subtitle of the poem), provides a certain dissonance and adds hugely to the texture of the poem. The tone of Part II conveys the poet's estrangement from his surroundings and the historical images are similarly dissonant.

The figure of Eric Bloodaxe, a Viking King of Northumbria, may assert a strong Northumbrian identity but also signals violence and betrayal. The decay picks up on the trope of rot in Part I and violence signals images of war in Part III, as well as Bunting's personal betrayal by Lord Astor (the "Hastor" of Part III) who put an end to Bunting's career as a foreign correspondent. Bunting weaves seemingly disparate themes together, but, as in counterpoint, allows us to hear all the voices moving together. By the coda we have become used to the historical images and the return to the image of the king and the axe, couched in simple language, does not seem out of place but seems to add to the feeling of resignation. I believe that, in the Coda, Bunting does achieve the weaving together of themes so that the reader/ listener forgets they are separate. The Coda is simple but dense, fusing historical

images with those of the sea and human emotion, perhaps the emotion which has “not even a name in prose” as Bunting asserts in the quote which begins this chapter. Here again and finally, Bunting reminds us of the importance of the ear, and of the music of the poem. Part III, which Bunting’s diagram indicates is pivotal, provides a most dissonant music, underscoring the poet’s estrangement. This dissonance grows to a discordant pitch as Bunting fills the verses with clashing images.

The *cantus firmus* of place, life and home is strong here, and again in the sombre tone of B minor, other voices almost work in unison with it, but can still be heard: “slither” reminds us of the “slowworm” whose path we follow in Part I, and the “charred hearths” return to the trope of decay. The sea voice continues but raises dissonant notes “.....grey marshes/ where some souse in brine/long rotted corpses” the salt freshness of the sea becomes a brine for corpses and the sombre tone of the poem now becomes a powerful discord as the poet piles up images of cannibalism and the horror of war. We get the sense that these too are life experiences of the poet and that the *cantus firmus* has become loud and raucous here. For Bunting such discordance was another weapon in the poetic arsenal.

Bunting’s pivotal position in the development of Place Poetry in the twentieth century is widely acknowledged, “In Bunting’s wake came a series of important works in the 1970s and 1980s that reconceptualised poetry’s involvement with the landscapes and locations of “coiled, entrenched England” (Hill 2000:112). There is no doubt that Basil Bunting helped to further the now widely accepted view of poetry as craft, as well as the use of simple, charged language as part of that craft. We may refer back to his early “collaboration” with Zukofsky, Williams and others, “...I have chosen to stress what might be called an Objectivist continuum running through modernism. The phrase refers both to a literary movement launched in the early 1930 and to a general tendency to toward objectification in much modernist and postmodern poetry” (Davidson, 1997, 23) Davidson’s “movement” may be too firm a word but it is undoubtedly true that the *Objectivist Anthology* and the later works of Bunting and his fellow poets in that collaboration, did much to further “a general trend towards objectification.” (Davidson, 1997, 23)

In Bunting’s emphasis on sound, language and music, and his insistence on poetry being spoken aloud, he also has something to say to present day spoken word and performance poets and to the more experimental poetry of the twenty first century:

Poetry is seeking not to make meaning, but beauty; or, if you insist on misusing words, its “meaning” is of another kind, and lies in the relation to one another of lines and patterns of sound, perhaps harmonious, perhaps contrasting and clashing, which the hearer feels rather than understands...” (2009, 4)

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review

alex runchman

Young Poets: An Australian Anthology, ed. by John Leonard (St Kilda, VIC: John Leonard Press, 2011)

In his 'Preface' to this anthology of young Australian poets, John Leonard stresses that each of the poets represented has 'grown up with the effects of instant global communication', insisting, however, that they are equally attuned to 'art's other pole, of being still'. The first of these characteristics is most overt in Petra White's 'Southbank', her contribution to the burgeoning genre of the office poem. In its fifth section, for example, White satirizes corporate-speak in a memo issued to thank employees for their messages of condolence on the death of a managing director: 'on a global basis I thank you personally', writes an anonymous lackey. 'A nine-minute webcast / of the funeral will stream to your inboxes on Thursday.' Note how precisely time is quantified here. Along with the preceding section's observation that 'Office workers lose approximately / two hours daily / reading news websites, ebaying, / chewing up emails', the memo evinces an anxiety about how time in contemporary society tends to be measured, portioned, and used up. The instantaneousness of contemporary correspondence doesn't defend against time being limited or time being wasted.

Within the context of this anthology, 'Southbank' represents something of an exception in its direct targeting of contemporaneity. In general, these poets – White included – are more invested in notions of 'deep time' and permanence, as well as in securing a usable tradition derived from the classics and the Western Canon, than they are in charting the ephemera of the here and now. When Elizabeth Campbell ends a meditation on Dante's *Inferno* with the lines

There are places outside hell that are not heaven –
he room full of brave light,

the phone, the laptop: texting, facebooking,
speak of me to the living.

she is attempting an Eliotic transportation of the past into the present and of the present back into the past. But 'texting' and 'facebooking' refuse to be assimilated. It is left to the reader to decide whether to take them as present continuous verbs (denoting ongoing activity) or as gerunds (acting as nouns – functions or states of being). This purgatorial ambiguity only adds to the disjunction created by setting them in relation to the Florentine poet's timeless epic. If "'Dante" is // his greatest work', Campbell appears to be asking, is the present day writer no more than a transient text or facebook message? Against this, her series of troubadour songs, grouped under the title 'A Mon Seul Desir' and based upon the 15th-century tapestries known as the 'Dame à la Licorne', seem deliberate in their turning away from the paraphernalia of the contemporary moment.

In 'The Idea of Mountain', Sarah Holland-Batt similarly wards off the instant, articulating a longing for permanence, endurance. We want, she says:

To be less alive
to each particular sadness. Monolithic.
Unmoved as the old man who wakes
and knows no pleasure or disgrace
can harm his tired heart any more
because he has lived, in practical terms, for ever.

Such temporal negotiations are even more prominent in Bonny Cassidy's documentary eco-poem, *Final Theory*, the first part of which is reproduced here. 'A broad geology of the last sixty million years is mined', Cassidy explains; 'the poem plays with what knowledge we have of prehistory, and projects some kind of future.' The poem's central symbol is the camera, and there are technological references to film, pixels, and a crackling radio. But one of the effects of the vast temporal scale is the diminishment of the individual and the immediate moment, encapsulating what Leonard identifies as 'the strange fusion of ambitious intent and self-effacement that serious artistry requires.' Cassidy's often long, sometimes prosaic lines – which distinguish her from the more formally constrained poetics of some of her contemporaries – reflect the expansive and seemingly arbitrary geological movements with which she is concerned. In what reads almost as a manifesto, she admits:

Form may once have had some salvaging power,
But these days we let form whirl out of hand
Like a camera in a Frisbee;
And see that order and delay cannot be made from space and time,
how could they?
All my words are gunning for extinction, all they can tell us is:
live more.

Words move, as Eliot said, only in time; but Cassidy doubts them ever reaching stillness, even by form or pattern. Frisbee cameras are a niche tech-school innovation, the ultimate in modernity; but it is the images they produce of motion apparently frozen ('a scream') that interest Cassidy more, photographic stills that she well knows, within the spectrum of 'deep time', will also disintegrate – '(which will go, which will also go)' (43).

Related concerns play out, in quite different ways, in the works of the other poets. Simon West, for example, playfully dismantles the ontology of naming, seeing first names as 'Pithy social passwords chosen by those / who like to imagine a word could hold / to their past', but who also dream 'of futures not their own'. The poem concludes with a willed effacement of self even as individuality is asserted: 'But unless subsumed into a greater "we" / or "they" by loving bonds / it's your first person singular that always responds.' A similar tension between self and world takes over 'After a Self-portrait' – one of this anthology's many ekphrastic poems. Although he suggests that the self is the centre around which the world revolves, West makes that self intangible: 'Two eyes are an uneasy centre. / The world spirals around their green quicks.' When an 'I' then enters the poem, there remains a sense that this could be anyone's self-portrait, while the poem's gaze sees the face as 'just earth' and finally falls on the still wells on a plain in the background: in other words, the poem has not only become distracted from the 'self' but has also turned the portrait into a landscape. West's tone is too modest to advocate transcendence;

nonetheless, the poem inclines, paradoxically, to see the self seep into world around it in order to achieve its distinction.

A portrait-to-landscape trajectory also occurs in Graeme Miles' enigmatic poem, 'Photis'. Alluding to the *Metamorphoses* of Apuleius (better known as *The Golden Ass*), this five-part poem considers the metamorphic possibilities of art: the title character starts off by painting portraits of sitters (her lovers) in animal poses, thinking that 'these pictures change them, make them what they always were / but more.' One of her models poses as a hawk but becomes an ass: he then forms a band and joins the ashram trail in India. But a child has been conceived, whose 'soft skin is full of animals': implicitly, this is what changes the mother too. 'Your mother is painting landscapes,' the speaker (an aunt) tells the child, 'the flight of rain / seen from above, things she never wanted / to paint before. The images / become human'. Moving beyond the simply trite conclusion that motherhood changes a woman, the poem ends with Photis painting 'the night as a newsreel of frightening things', another version, perhaps, of Cassidy's Frisbee camera images. Miles, drawing on mythological exemplars, is more interested in family histories than geological epochs: 'Verandah', for example, has a son meet his parents as newlyweds who 'don't recognise me / or understand why I'm speaking to them, / since I'm not yet born.' But he is no less open to thinking about time on a universal scale, speculating in 'Two Guesses at Immortality' that eternity is either like being 'home once and for all / at the moment when it's all new again. / And it's absolutely still', or, instead, akin to 'one day repeat[ing] itself / with its long night to be slept through / while the world returns to how it was. / A long loop'. Possibilities remain open.

L. K. Holt's 'Unfinished Confession', written within a tradition that includes Virginia Woolf's *Orlando* and Jeffrey Eugenides' *Middlesex*, presents this anthology's most emphatic metamorphosis: a sex change. Much of the poem's lexis is contemporary and slangy, but its starting point is the theory of the Roman physician Galen that the vagina is 'a direct inversion' of the penis. 'I mention the ancient fucker', Holt's queen has us know,

because millennia later
My cock will be turned inside out and shoved up inside
To make the shadow of a cunt on Plato's cave wall.
And Galen will have got it right after all.

What this leaves unclear is whether, in this case, the male or the female sex organ is to be considered more real, shadow not corresponding to the thing that cast it. There is similar uncertainty over the case of Alexina-cum-Abel Barbin, a nineteenth-century French male pseudohermaphrodite (whose journals were published in the 1970s by Michel Foucault), born with 'a mortified penis and shallow promise / of vagina, respectively'. Holt's titular confession is one of murder, the sense of having killed off a part of one's own identity; but it is not a confession 'for redemption. / Only for the narrator's profane exemption from Time.' It is unfinished (the poem falling two lines short of formal completion) partly because the operation cannot effect a total transformation. Becoming a woman, the narrator fears being 'an orphan of memory', ending up

exiled from my only
plausible history: my boyhood, my rentboy-hood, my body
complex, ornate and two sexed, my unwritten denouement

The way in which selfhood is defined by one's past – suggested and questioned by all of the poets collected – becomes especially urgent here: despite the orchidectomy and vaginoplasty, despite having explicitly chosen one gender over the other, the speaker is still caught between two identities, a state more extreme than, but still analogous to, the experience of the continual temporal limbo of the present that we find elsewhere in this anthology.

If a sensitivity to the contingency of the present moment in relation to both universal and personal history unites these seven poets, something similar applies to their understanding of place. A few of the poems make reference to specifically Australian locales – Footscray, Rotto, St Kilda – and a few address what we might think of as Australian subject matter: White's 'Kangaroos', Holland-Batt's 'A Scrap of Lace' (which becomes about the deportation of convicts from Britain), and Holt's visceral unrhymed sonnet on Douglas Mawson (the Antarctic explorer) returning to base camp and throwing away the frostbitten soles of his feet. Nonetheless, nationality is subsidiary to internationality. All of these poets have lived or studied for a period in the USA, Asia, or Europe, and their international models extend beyond the classical. While the Australian poet, environmentalist, and campaigner for Aboriginal rights, Judith Wright, is a presence in Cassidy's work, Holland-Batt and Holt owe more to the American Robert Lowell, as evidenced in Holland-Batt's allusive and imitative (though also lightly parodic) 'Letter to Robert Lowell' and in Holt's *History*-like fourteen-liners. The title *An Australian Anthology* sits a little uneasily. Nationality isn't adequate to defining the tradition within which these poets work. But perhaps that, in the end, is the key mark of their contemporaneity: that they are writing a brand of 'world literature' rather than a poetry circumscribed by national expectations.

ian gray

**Sappho
after Fats Waller**

DOWN, low-down Long Way St

reet way trat that

man that Fats Waller man

& what do you know

a lady-o looked her love at him

then she

then she rose, lily, bonzai

then she

treed and

God!

said Fats

that kitten this cat

NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

Amanda Bell is a doctoral student in UCD working on an ecocritical study of contemporary Scottish and Irish women poets. Her poetry has appeared in print and online journals

Maurice Devitt is a graduate of the Poetry Studies MA at Mater Dei, where he focused on the poetry of James Wright, he was recently short-listed for The Cork Literary Review Manuscript Competition, the Over the Edge New Writer Award and The Doire Press International Chapbook Competition. A Pushcart Prize nominee, he has had poems published in Ireland, England, Scotland, the US, Australia and Mexico and is a founder member of the Hibernian Writers' Group.

Ian Gray was born in NY, NY. He is currently a graduate student at the Irish Centre for Poetry Studies.

James Heaney teaches English and Irish Studies at Carlow College, Co. Carlow. He has a particular interest in Irish-Hispanic literary connections, and is currently working on a comparative study of the literature produced in Ireland and Spain during early twentieth century revolutions in those countries.

Maurits Knol is currently researching the work of Theodor Adorno at The Irish Centre for Poetry Studies. He is from the Netherlands.

Sophie Mayer is the author of *The Cinema of Sally Potter*, and of two full-length poetry collections, her *Various Scalpels* and *The Private Parts of Girls*. "Cinema Mon Amour," her essay for *The Oxford Handbook of Contemporary British and Irish Poetry*, discusses Margaret Tait alongside Derek Jarman, Denise Riley and Redell Olsen.

Maria Proitsaki was born in Greece and received her BA from Aristotle University of Thessaloniki. She is currently a Ph.D. candidate at the University of Gothenburg, Sweden, completing a thesis which examines the works of Nikki Giovanni and Rita Dove. She has taught English mostly at Höskolan Väst and at Halmstad University and has published papers on Giovanni's and Dove's poetry as well as creative writing in Sweden and abroad.

Alex Runchman teaches at Trinity College Dublin and the Mater Dei Institute of Education. His monograph, *Delmore Schwartz: A Critical Reassessment*, is due to be published by Palgrave Macmillan in May 2014.

Annette Skade is an award-winning poet. Her first collection *Thimblorig* was published following her receipt of the Cork Review Literary Manuscript prize in 2012. www.annetteskade.com



Gerd Stern peeks through his "Contact is the Only Love" machine

A Poetry Machine At the S. F. Museum

"Contact Is The Only Love," a three-dimensional poem in 16 flashing rhythmic patterns of light and sound by poet-sculptor Gerd Stern, will be featured in an exhibition of his new work at the San Francisco Museum of Art, November 4 through December 1.

Stern, who had his first exhibition of experimental poem machines at New York's Allan Stone Gallery last December, says that he turned from classic poetry forms to visual and contemporary media because "in our generation the word has

sound . . . I am using the media of my own time to achieve the classic contact."

The seven-foot diameter, octagon-shaped "Contact Is The Only Love," incorporates neon, fluorescent and incandescent lighting, sign flashers, eight loudspeakers, amplifiers and a loop tape recorder. Several other sculpture constructions by Stern, including a piece "Help Put The Christ Back Into Crossing," will also be displayed at the Museum.

In conjunction with his exhibition the artist has scheduled two per-

Museum, Tuesday, November 12, beginning at 8 p. m.

These performances, conceived and produced by Stern in association with painter Ivan Majdrakoff, sociologist Howard Becker and the San Francisco Tape Music Center, incorporate television, telephone, tape, projected images and participation by 64 public figures in person.

It was developed from "The Verbal American Landscape," a proposal prepared for the Guggenheim Foundation. Tickets, priced at \$2, \$1.50 for Museum members, and \$1 for students with studentbody