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‘Ear Loads’: Neologisms and Sound Poetry in Maggie O’Sullivan’s *Palace Of Reptiles*

EAR LOADS

- I SING –

THEY CAME TO ME –

OCCIPUTAL DISTENTIONS

LINGERED, CHISMERIC, CHISMIC,
SCAR
CUMES,
CON-
CONDY-
CREO-
KAKA-
CATE-
CUA-
COOT-
E-
COB-
OD-
CL-
CR-
SWISH OF

( - WRENS CROSS MY PATH - )

TREMORING BUSTLE & MUTE
Maggie O’Sullivan, *from* ‘Doubtless’

To read ‘Doubtless’ and the book where it appears, *Palace of Reptiles*, is to be filled with ‘ear loads’ of clongy, phonempathic language songs, creating whisdomensional rituals cut with the unknown. Maggie O’Sullivan’s spondeeling non-lexical vocables have such wonderful sonic associations that one wants to break out into one’s own creashining, arkhaptic neologisms (and trying to do so I realise how subtle and wide-ranging hers are compared to my efforts). Charles Bernstein’s preface to a collection of her earlier books, *Body of Work*, applauds ‘dialogic extravagance in the articulated, dithrombotic, honeycomb pluriperversity.’ He calls her style ‘clinamacaronic’ (playing on *clinamen*, *macaronic*, and the German *kleine*), an especially apt neologism; the sequence repeatedly swerves away from expected syntactic or syllogistic climaxes, and employs so many strange words or recognisable words made
foreign by unexpected prefixes and suffixes, that it might well be borrowing its
camacotics from an unknown language just emerging into perception, like the
Borgesian language of Tlön. The passage above reflexively describes its use of
liminal phonemic inventions as the fruit of ‘occipital distentions’, which one can take
to mean intentional distortions of the rules of language by the back brain. What form
of sound poetry is this? It accommodates familiar lexical items, short bursts of regular
syntax, and intimates both lexical and syntactic placement for many of the non-lexical
sounds. It is both phonemic and non-phonemic, both purely sensuous sound and
semantically active lexis. How therefore might readers (and listeners—O’Sullivan is a
consummate performer of her work) respond to those ‘ear loads’ of ‘chismeric’
sounds of Tlönic language?

‘What is the function of sound poetry today’? asks Stephen Voyce in an
interview with Christian Bök, and then qualifies the question by adding that he is
interested in how things have changed since ‘the groundbreaking work of the 1970s
by poets such as the Four Horsemen, Henry Chopin, or Bob Cobbing’. This is a
question that might equally be put to Maggie O’Sullivan, who was mentored in
Cobbing’s poetry workshops, and whose poetry and performance, though very
different to Bök’s, similarly dances along the borders of sound, sense and
disorientation. Bök’s response to the leading question’s inadvertent functionalism and
its invitation to dogmatic generalisation is to shift ground to the poetics of sound
poetry. Earlier generations of sound poets, he says, ‘justified their work by saying that
such poetry allows the practitioner to revert to a more primitive, if not more infantile,
variety of humanism.’ Bök proposes instead that we think in terms of the
achievements of civilisation and adopt a cyborg poetics: ‘I think that most of the
theories about sound poems are too “phono-philic” or too “quasi-mystic” for my own
tastes as an intellectual, and I think that modern poetry may have to adopt other
updated, musical theories to express the hectic tempos of our electrified environment.’

Salience of the acoustic in Maggie O’Sullivan’s poetry, especially her use of non-
lexical word-like assemblages of recognisable phonemes, readily elicits
characterisation as a primarily sound-based poetry that courts animist, bodily,
zoomorphic spirits to express themselves in raw, passionate sounds that can be
reductively explained as primitivist (as can the work of an artist on whom O’Sullivan
researched for the BBC, and who could also be mistakenly taken for no more than a
primitivist, Joseph Beuys). As an alternative to grounding the phonic in a pre-rational
culture, Bök follows what he calls a ‘techno’ standpoint towards the practice of sound
poetry. Techno probably wouldn’t help us understand O’Sullivan’s practice, but I
think Bök’s emphasis on the value of a rationalist poetics for sound poetry is well
worth pursuing when considering her poetry’s use of sound. One way of doing this is
to consider the history and concept of neologisms as a backdrop for her use of words
that are on the margins of language or even entirely outwith semantic range.

As the passage above shows, the neologisms have a special context that
requires acknowledgement even before considering the individual words themselves.
These poems take time, time to happen, sound out, reveal thought, and they respond
best to immersive reading and attentive listening. Nothing remains the same long
eough to enable a truth claim to assert strong rights over the reader. Each line, each
word, and sometimes each phoneme, mark shifts of being, changes of perspective,
transformations of feeling, altered understanding, hits of new perception. She can be a
good modernist and doesn’t explain this process as a stream of mental event, or
provide a capacious subject whose identity might be the locus for all these verbalising
moments. More radically still, her poems don’t unfold in evenly spaced verbal
moments. Typographical and visual use of the space of the page, as well as painterly marks in some books, stretch and slow elapsed time, and the changing intensities of expression create wide differences in the scale of the poem’s instants. The poetry can feel very small or terrifying large, imminently integrable or a rubble dump where horrors lurk (I can think of no other poetry that has learned as much from the contemporary genre of horror fiction and film). Even the words ‘slip, slide and sometimes perish’ in a manner alarmingly literal, so that words seem familiar, old, new and damaged, keeping the element of surprise on their side. It’s within this altered sense of time and spacing that the neologisms occur, so many that the poetry might be called Adamic, although the power of naming often seems less a gift and more a desperate ruse in the face of unknowable and unsayable forces, entities and events.

News, new products, new celebrities, new words. Writing during the excitement about liberty after the French Revolution, Louis-Sébastien Mercier said: ‘Neologers are everywhere, in the market halls just as in the Roman Forum, in the stock exchange, just as in the Senate. They are everywhere where liberty makes genius fruitful, where the imagination operates without constraint upon the models of nature, where thought can enlighten authority and defy tyranny.’ Neologisms are still everywhere. In parapraxes: my mother on the telephone is telling me that she has heard from the sister of a New Zealand cousin who has just visited, and refers to the ‘hister,’ conflating ‘heard from’ and ‘sister’. My son used to call yoga ‘loga’, hearing the words ‘low’ and ‘lower’ in the word. Misprints and mis-translations frequently create neologisms. On holiday in Italy I notice that a menu explains that a Calzone pizza is ‘struffed’ with ham. Scholars and scientists often invent words. The ecologist Charles Kendeigh coins the term ‘biociation’ as a condensed form of ‘biological association’ and ‘consociality’ to describe a climax community. An entire academic industry grew up around the neologism différance, which Jacques Derrida coined in order to demonstrate just how much philosophers and theorists ignored the rhetorical implications of ambiguity. Différance is an example of a neologism that somehow clings to its outsider status even while it becomes so widely recognised that it must be older than many ordinary but recent words. Politics takes up and drops words all the time. Back in 2003 we found out, or were led to believe that we were finding out, whether the government sexed-up, or should this be ‘sexed-up’, (just how new is this phrase?) its dossier outlining the dangers of Iraq’s weapons of mass destruction. A friend of mine is explaining how a seeming opportunity came to nothing: ‘then it fuzzled out again.’ I think I know (or seem to—this is not a moment in the conversation to ask for a definition) what she means: it was fucked up, it fizzled out.

‘Sexed up’ and ‘fuzzled’ are neither just everyday echoes of Finnegans Wake speak, nor sharp displays of semantic compression, nor just a new productivity of speech capable of replacing two or more words with one. Much of their force lies in the mixture of creativity on show and the slight fuzziness of meaning. Linguistic creativity is also a sign of power or agency, of being able to exercise some control in situations (men, everyday life) which often render us somewhat helpless. Even the childish mispronunciation of ‘yoga’ provides evidence of emerging intellectual powers, at least for doting parents. Residual imprecision is important too, because it allows, as Derrida knew, room for imagination and new ideas to develop. Listeners are left to fill in their own interpretation as a contribution to the shared working out of what a discursive situation might mean to them, and this, like a mutual conversational game, is intersubjectively satisfying. Vagueness bonds people. It is not that the ordinary clarity of words is a solidity like that of objects against which we can only
kick. Words are usually old currency, smell of tired habits of mind and action, already carry too much historical clutter with them. And what is worse they often lie inert and almost useless there ‘on the table top in front of you.’ As Pablo Neruda wrote, it can seem that we are faced with ‘un golpe de objetos que llaman sin ser respondidos’ (‘a swarm of objects that call without being answered’). The doctors of language have applied almost every conceivable poetic medicine imaginable during the past hundred years to answer that call and get words back on their feet. Improved referentiality, elided referentiality; hyper-syntagmatics, sensory deprivation of single words; saturation with voice, deep impersonality; artificial languages, submission to the sliding signifier; and so on. This is not a list that is terminable.

Maggie O’Sullivan’s poem ‘Narcotic Properties,’ from Palace of Reptiles (excellently produced by Nate Dorward’s press The Gig) might be a new allegory of this history, as it instructs someone (a reader, a practitioner of magic) to ‘PLACE A SMALL PALE-CREAM BOWL (TO SIGNIFY / abundance) / on the table-top in front of you’ (16) and then to wash a series of ‘LEAD ANIMALS’ which presumably signify the ordinary idea of linguistic reference, each lead object being iconic of the class of animals in the world. What could be more appropriate than the idea of lead references? As one would expect, the procedure cannot hold firm the tidy relation of image to real object and soon the ‘ABLE TREBLE FLIED / limbs’ are caught in a language that is struggling for articulation and flying off in other directions, ‘able’ indeed, not just doubly but triply able, except that the word to name this power, ‘treble,’ falls short of being able, and suggests weakness, which the third word, the neologism ‘flied,’ confirms as it compresses together many equivocal terms (fled, flee, fly, flayed, lied, elide etc.). O’Sullivan’s poetry has increasingly mapped this movement of modernist struggles to compel articulation from language that seems historically more resistant to recognising interconnectedness than ever before, and tracks this one particular move, that from ordinary language to neologism, with brilliant originality. Like a number of earlier modernist poets (W.B. Yeats, Robert Duncan, Ted Hughes all come to mind), she finds help for her poetics of the act of naming the world in occult and shamanistic writings, but unlike them resists the justifications and consolations of system. Her work also draws on utterly non-occult writers such as James Joyce, Gertrude Stein, more recent writers such as Clark Coolidge, Michael McClure, and Barry MacSweeney (the Odes especially), for whom the single word’s expressiveness is a gift and mystery to explore, and above all on the women contemporaries she anthologised in Out of Everywhere (Susan Howe, Joan Retallack, Lyn Hejinian, Rae Armantrout, Wendy Mulford, Geraldine Monk, Karen MacCormack, Kathleen Fraser, Caroline Bergvall and many more), who have so extended our awareness of the interweaving of intellect, passion, body, gender, history, voice, text, the visual, and the acoustic, in our words. O’Sullivan brings something new to this genealogy too, a sense of the energy released as words break open, the word emerging only partially, neologistically, from utterance. Anguish, grief, joy, puzzlement, recognition, excitement, anger, pity—these and many other shifting emotions are integral to her work with those everyday avant-garde practices of neologism, the compression, display of creative power, and gifting of the friendship of making meanings together.

The OED offers these definitions of ‘neologism’ amongst others: ‘the use of, or the practice of using, new words’; ‘innovation in language’; ‘a new word or expression’; or the ‘tendency to, adoption of, novel (rationalistic) views in theology or matters of religion.’ These definitions sound innocent enough (though those who adopt new rationalist perspectives from within religious communities have often been
the target of attack—think of Spinoza or the current split amongst Anglicans) but the examples of usage tell a different story. W. Taylor says that neologisms are always quaint. Disraeli argues that neologisms help fertilise the ‘barrenness of our Saxon’, revealingly aligning neologisms with foreign cultural influences, since it is widely understood that the Normans and other immigrants have historically played this role. Thomas De Quincey sums up the doxa with typical epigrammatic flourish, making connections that persist up to the present: ‘Neologism, in revolutionary times, is not an infirmity of caprice.’ (1912). When speakers and writers use neologisms of whatever kind, they usually do so against a background of suspicion. Webster’s dictionary is explicit about the dangers of neologising; a neologism is either ‘a new word, usage, or expression’ or ‘a usu. compound word coined by a psychotic and meaningless to the hearer.’ In this case the infirmity revealed by use of a nonce word is taken as a sign of madness (some forms of schizophrenia do manifest themselves as rhyming glossolalia).

H.W.Fowler, in his classic account of good usage, *The King’s English*, whose title underlines the nationalist sentiments that support his views of language, sums up common-sense beliefs about neologisms at the start of his book *The King’s English*. He is wary of a widespread impulse to make individual lexical innovations in the form of what he calls disparagingly, ‘nonce-words,’ relying on the submerged pun on nonsense to convey his disapproval and adding a catalogue of failings:

Most people of literary taste will say on this point ‘It must needs be that offences come; but woe to that man by whom the offence cometh.’ They are Liberal-Conservatives, their liberalism being general and theoretic, their conservatism particular and practical. And indeed, if no new words were to appear, it would be a sign that the language was moribund; but it is well that each new word that does appear should be severely scrutinized.[…] The progress of arts and sciences gives occasion for the large majority of new words; for a new thing we must have a new name; hence, for instance, *motor, argon, appendicitis*. […] Among other arts and sciences, that of lexicography happens to have found convenient a neologism that may here be used to help in the very slight classification required for the new words we are more concerned with—that is, those whose object is literary or general, and not scientific. A 'nonce-word' (and the use might be extended to 'nonce-phrase' and 'nonce-sense'—the latter not necessarily, though it may be sometimes, equivalent to nonsense) is one that is constructed to serve a need of the moment. The writer is not seriously putting forward his word as one that is for the future to have an independent existence; he merely has a fancy to it for this once. The motive may be laziness, avoidance of the obvious, love of precision, or desire for a brevity or pregnancy that the language as at present constituted does not seem to him to admit of. The first two are bad motives, the third a good, and the last a mixed one. But in all cases it may be said that a writer should not indulge in these unless he is quite sure he is a good writer. 8

A changing world will require new words, especially for the discoveries of science and the inventions of technology.’ and a living language will require renewal by inspired additions to the lexicon, even if the inventor may be reviled at first. These inventors are likely to be writers (Fowler doesn’t seem to consider the enormous contribution made by everyday discourse to the fund of new vocabulary, except in the case of low slang), who labour under a moral obligation not to invent words.

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unnecessarily. The good (male) writer is allowed to invent occasionally, a permission which could almost be a sign of such status: we can recognise the really good writer by the appearance of such coinages, a claim legitimized in English by the enormous prestige of Shakespeare and his many apparent neologisms which subsequently entered the language as useful terms of everyday discourse. But if you are not Shakespeare, not certain that you are a ‘good’ writer, then watch out. Fowler was writing a century ago, but The New Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics (1993) is not much more encouraging: ‘Neologisms (new coined words) tend now to be associated with novelty more than freshness, and sometimes with strained effects. The very word indicates they are not common currency.’

You know that a poet is onto something important when the reference books deplore the very linguistic practice they are improvising with.

Behind such negative attitudes lie fears of social upheaval that anarchic linguistic invention appears to be an omen for, as De Quincey implied. Daniel Rosenberg has recently argued that the preoccupation with neology during the French Revolution marks the ‘consciousness of change so crucial to the period.’(367), and that its opponents thought that language was one of the most active zones of conflict. One of the most unusual attempts to set the revolution on its proper course, to improve the expressiveness and articulacy of the language available to the new nation, was the dictionary of Louis-Sébastien Mercier, La Néologie, ou vocabulaire de mots nouveaux, à renouveler, ou pris dans des acceptions nouvelles (1801). The issue was where power over language lay, with the arbitrariness of institutions or with the people, and a prime target was the authority aggrandized by the Dictionnaire de l’Académie française. ‘Mercier adamantly insisted with his contemporaries that new words must be accepted when they address reasonable needs. But his vision of neology extended much further—to words produced by imagination and even by happy accident,’(Rosenberg, 374), and he recognized the importance of the street as the source of vital new words. This awareness of the sociality of even acts of verbal invention is why he can say with such conviction that: ‘Neologers are everywhere, in the market halls just as in the Roman Forum, in the stock exchange, just as in the Senate. They are everywhere where liberty makes genius fruitful, where the imagination operates without constraint upon the models of nature, where thought can enlighten authority and defy tyranny.’(Rosenberg, 376) Mercier’s great work is set out as a dictionary because he believes that this force of change lies in the word rather than grammar and syntax, and he offers a list of words that he believes the world needs: anecdotiser, ininventif, ininflammable, inabstinence, paroler, républicide, scribomanie, are a few that give the flavour of his inventions (compare O’Sullivan’s coinages such as amuletetic, engouled, outlered, unheavied). To make neologisms was to celebrate creativity, freedom and a confidence in a revolutionary future—all ambitions that partially explain the anxious tut-tutting that most linguistic and literary authorities direct towards neologisms (a fascinating recent study of inventiveness of current American slang by Michael Adams celebrates many of these same virtues, claiming that slang engages in ‘a veritable canasta of language play’ and consequently displays many poetic characteristics).

The extreme case of Mercier suggests that neologisms are signs of social instability, of aspirations to intervene in the historical process. He was particularly aware of the significance of onomatopoeia and its alleged role in the origins of language in pre-civilised peoples. Philippe Roger explains how Mercier justifies his neologisms with a discourse of Rousseauist primitivism that I believe also resonates
with many features of Wallace Stevens’ interest in onomatopoeia and neologistic sound words:

L’idiome du sauvage n’est pas un paradis perdu, ni un Éden qu’il faudrait retrouver. Il est en chacun de nous de «faire» un tel idiome. De telle sorte que l’inévitable apologie du Huron centrant la parole sur le verbe, l’incontournable référence à «l’onomatopée familière à tous les sauvages», ne sont guère pour Mercier que l’occasion d’insister, une fois de plus, sur la centralité du mot, cette «charpente réelle» qui suffit à l’édifice de la parole et de la pensée. Le mot: tourjours lui. Si Mercier, linguistiquement parlant, n’a que faire des sauvages, c’est qu’il a les mots: les mots «rudes et sauvages», justement, qui «dominent la grammaire». C’est qu’il suffit de cette croyance, elle-même sauvage, aux mots pour faire du néologue un barbare bénéfique. En ce sens, la profession de foi «je serai un barbare» résume au plus juste le projet néologique de Mercier. (Roger, 346)

O’Sullivan’s poetry is also very interested in ‘un barbare bénéfique’, and in the roots of onomatopoeia, but like Roger’s version of Mercier, she sticks with words, however neologistic. Primitivism elicits a technologically sophisticated, rational as well as affective response in her poetry.

*Palace of Reptiles* plunges the reader into a world of neologizing, and in doing so it refuses a certain type of Modernist contract with the reader (exemplified by Ezra Pound’s *Cantos*): time spent looking up a word, a reference, a history or an academic source will be rewarded with new knowledge of our historical condition. It takes only two lines in the opening poem, ‘Birth Palette,’ to meet unknown words whose Modernist credentials will be decidedly ambiguous, and they are just heralds of what will follow:

Lizard air lichens ivy driven urchin’s pry to a pounce.
Scribbled terrestrial traor, the paw actions tainy blee scoa, blue scog. In eat, gashed harmonica stresses to skull icon, jigged but shower, Crushtative bundles,
Doc, Owl, the Hare mantled in a planetary pivot.
Vulture-Jar, dragonfly & waterbeetle are we, each veil of the glide species. (11)

Start by looking in the dictionary for the first words suspected of neologistic tendencies. ‘Traor,’ ‘tainy’ and ‘blee,’ are all unfamiliar, but are they neologisms or simply very rare words tucked into a corner of the OED or Webster, or perhaps the lexicon of some other language? The first word I find in my OED, just visible in the field of the magnifying glass, is the word ‘blee,’ meaning ‘colour of the face,’ complexion, and by extension, appearance or form. The dictionary is unusually disparaging about the term: ‘a purely poetical word in M.E., which gradually became obs.in the course of the 16th or early in the 17th c. (not in Shakspeare); but being frequent in ballads and metrical romances it has been used by one or two modern poets.’ Blee is clearly a word which the OED regards as unnecessary, ‘purely poetical,’ and one which could have conveniently been forgotten if not for these annoying poets—the ‘one or two’ says it all. It is not often that dictionaries insult the words in their care. This entry is a reminder that there is a politics and economics of the lexicon, and some words are entrepreneurial while others are virtually
unemployable. Although recent literary theory and linguistics has insisted on a functional equivalence of signifying capability distributed amongst all signifiers equally, writers and even lexicographers often recognize that words vary in their power to do cultural work.

The dictionary has no listing for ‘tainy’ but it could be an adjectival form of ‘tain’ (tin) which is listed, although this adjectival or adverbial form would be even more unusual than this already obsolete noun. ‘Traor’ doesn’t figure at all, and might be all that is left after the word ‘extraordinary’ perished, appearing where we might have expected some such phrase as ‘extraordinary landscape’—or history or life. ‘Scog’ is tricky. The dictionary lists a range of words, ‘scoggin,’ ‘scoggery,’ ‘scogh’ and a whole range of variant spellings, although not, as far as I can see, the simple root ‘scog,’ and provides a series of meanings including buffoonery, a wood or copse, a valve, and branchings of these core meanings. No wonder the dictionary occasionally has a go at poets. The boundaries of individual words are hard enough to demarcate, their spellings, pragmatics and semantics all promiscuously mingling with others over time, by usage and misusage, without the poets keeping alive obsolete words that were never needed in the first place, or what is worse, improvising their own. I hope no-one sends a copy of Palace of Reptiles to the office of the dictionary. If they see this and her other volumes they may have a panic attack at the thought of its implications for their project.

But just a minute. Webster has heard of ‘scrog’ and blames it, sorry attributes use of the word to regional British English: ‘dial Brit : a stunted shrub, bush, or branch : scrub.’ A stunted word. Webster has not however heard of the word ‘tain,’ nor does it throw any light on ‘traor.’ A search of the Internet yields further support for the idea that this is a fusion of two phonemes from the word extraordinary, although from the website www.vancourier.com I learn that a Mali musician has the surname Traor: ‘In the musical powerhouse of Mali, Rokia Traor’ stands out in a number of significant ways. Traor, is a female singer/songwriter, a rarity in the West African nation. She also writes lyrics that emphasize independence for women, not exactly a common refrain in Mali’s patriarchal society.’ In fact this is a relatively common surname in Mali, and another musician has the same name (a later issue of The Vancouver Courier spells the name Rokia Traore, a reminder of how spelling and names are also subject to ‘occiputal distentions’). Although I am reasonably sure that the poet did not intend such an allusion, now that I have found the name it starts to set up a side-performance in the interpretative arena. The idea of a woman singer songwriter of great power whose work emerges from the desert terrain of sub-Saharan Africa, a scribbling terrestrial Traor, won’t go away now. Even the less useful information that SCOA is a much-used acronym, variously employed by the Sprint Car Owners of America, the South Central Orienteering Association, and the Saluki Club of America, starts up a speculation that this or other words might be an acronymic, acrostic, or some other hermetic code for nouns that cannot be spoken without prolixity, and the risk of a danger hinted at everywhere in this poetry’s traces of a buried violence.

The internet is especially interesting as a means of finding out whether a word is a pure neologism because the internet is the nearest thing we have to a complete documentation of all current usage; if a word has any circulation at all in any type of discourse it is likely to turn up somewhere on an internet page. Consider some of the oddities in the poem ‘Theoretical Economies,’ a poem in the form of instructions for a magic ritual or conceptual art-work. A search for ‘hundridder’ in ‘Theoretical Economies’ yields nothing, so it comes close to certainty that it is a complete
invention though it does sound like a variant on ‘houndrider’ or ‘houndridder,’ the sort of gothic name that Tolkien and other fantasy writers devise. ‘Gorple’ turns out to be a place in Yorkshire. ‘Walkenon’ is also a neologism although there are people with the surname Walkenon. The phrase ‘zanza-zinc’ may not be a neologism, since ‘zanza’ is apparently a trade-name for a number of companies including a record company. These neologisms and neo-neologisms occur after the early passages of the poem offer a pastiche of what might be a black magic ritual or an allegory for the reading of a poem in hope of transformation, personal or social. We are told to hang up a banner, place small simulacra beneath it, and then ‘drip / random li(n)es of order’ onto this ‘toy medium’ (to borrow a phrase and its implications from Daniel Tiffany). The results are what the poem ‘Doubtless’ describes as ‘STILL STILLS OF BROKEN LETTERS’ (36), a deliquescence of order, syntax, capitalized words, word fragments, and these simulacra of words, the neologisms. The ending of ‘Theoretical Economies’ hints at a purgatorial state of transformation, a late winter moment before new life:

RED

BEES
APART
owl-sha
conks clays-under splashing. Abundance. weeps. (21)

The missing half of the hyphenated addition to ‘owl,’ probably the word ‘shaman,’ is ‘man’ in this oozing, watery landscape where the industry of bees is more promise than actuality.

The neologisms in ‘Birth Palette’ are of course not singular words, they are firmly embedded in a complex poetic structure that exerts its own field of force over them. English language conventions governing word-order encourage a first reading of the opening line in which adjective, subject-noun, verb, and object-noun follow in a neatly jointed sequence. ‘Lichens’ would be the verb to represent the action of the air on ivy, and the second half of the line, ‘driven urchin’s pry to a pounce,’ a subordinate clause that describes the particular ivy. This explanation represents a possible split-second interpretative stance that is likely to be abandoned just as quickly; the metaphorical usages and syntactic foreshortening required are too unlikely. The opposite alternative would be a non-syntactic reading that just takes each word as an ostensive gesture—there’s a lizard, notice the air, see those lichens and the ivy—or what might be identified as a series of one-word sentences—it or they are driven, the child’s curiosity will lead to something, perhaps to the attempt to seize hold of its object of attention. Neither account is quite satisfactory, not least because the most salient aesthetic display is the fugue of phonetic sound shapes that are both sonic and visual. Lizard / lichens; lichens / driven / urchin; to a / traor / scoa; lizard air / scribbled terr--; or the many variations on the vowel combination of i and e. This pattern holds together the field of meanings generated by the commonality of words for animals and inanimate landscape from which tentative propositions do emerge—‘dragonfly & waterbeetle are we’—only to dissolve again in a paratactic shift of syntax—‘each veil of the glide species.’

Extended out over the two pages of the poem these effects cohere into an intense image of a wild, Darwinian landscape, in which all sorts of animals, even domesticated ones, express a predatory attention to other life which they will consume.
if they can. Moon, sky, sea, earth and water are the scene of this life. We humans find all kinds of animal metaphors and symbols of ourselves in ‘the glide species’ on an ‘earth scalded,’ and the challenge is to understand the extent and responsibility of our empathies and recognitions, our ‘heart size,’ as our ‘options falter.’ You could say that the poem belongs alongside a British pastoral tradition running from the Romantics to Ted Hughes, and be reassured that those men did not write in vain, but you would miss the degree to which it conveys the resistance of this wild plenum to appropriation for spiritual insights or implicit allegories of the instinctual drives, as much as genetic modification by any commodifying form of inquiry. Her poetry also sidesteps a negative theology of poetic language, and doesn’t claim pure otherness for the wilderness ‘beyond all cognition, nor an absolute unknowability that could only be presented in the non-emotive, anti-rhetorical manner of soi-disant science. This poem will not let itself be confined to one register and introduces phrases from both financial reports (phrases that could be read as inversions of the poetry’s entire metaphors, so that all these animals become signs in a zodiac we might read for its horoscopical politics of the Stock Exchange) and neuroscience (the line from the later part of the poem, ‘“twas all moon down in the brainstem’,” could elicit a reading in which spider, ‘lemony pig’, and ‘deers’ could all be archetypes or ‘asterisms,’ working like starry psychic aneurisms in the skull’s cosmos-containing brain).

At this point some comparisons with other contemporary poets who use neologisms occasionally will be helpful for underlining just how richly semantic neologisms can be. Philip Whalen’s poem ‘Sauced’ is a well-known poem thanks to its inclusion in The Beat Scene, where it represents a Beat aesthetic, joyful drunken synesthesia. 17 It is also an example of a poet playing with the idea that neologisms are psychotic. The line, ‘A Trio for Jaybird, Telephone & Trombone,’ inverts and transposes the syllables as if this were a musical composition, creating words such as ‘trambone,’ and ‘telebone.’ Even in this early, and relatively simple poem, the neologism knowingly plays with ironic self-reflection on the social stigma of the self-invented word, especially the tendency to treat them as signs of mental aberration. A more subtle use of neologism occurs in Fanny Howe’s poem, ‘16:18,’ from the sequence of poems O’Clock:

Sometimes a goodbye

seems a bee’s
done buzzing

early: purrs
in hair, furred

for the sting.
Fear’s then

a hurt-leap.
Time comes in

like the words
Sit down.

Your nerves

Middleton-Neologisms and Sound Poetry in Palace of Reptiles
The poem uses ‘earily’ for the pun eerily/like or in the area of an ear, and ‘hurt-leap’ for the pun on hurtle/hurt leaps, interrupting abruptly the smooth flow of cognitive intake through semantically recognised words. These neologisms also contrast with the opaque ordinariness of the phrases used for everyday exchanges, and which in the current painful situation carry enormous unarticulated force. Emotional turbulence associated with a moment when simple phrases of welcome are failing creates the condition in which the signifying excess, and slight eeriness of the neologisms, becomes possible.

In his text ‘Albany’, Ron Silliman writes that ‘Rubin feared McClure would read Ghost Tantras at the teach-in,’ and one can see why even someone as used to street theatre as Jerry Rubin might feel that yippie agit-prop might not be ready for a poetry of such unregenerate sound poetry and its visceral neologisms. This is the first tantrum, I mean tantra:

GOOOOOOR! GOOOOOOOOOO!
GOOOOOOOOOOR!
GRAHHH! GRAHH! GRAHH!
Grah goooot! Gahhh! Graaar! Greeeceeer! Grayowhr!
Greeecee
GRAHHRR! RAHHR! GRAGHHRR! RAHR!
RAHR! RAHHR! GRAHHHR! HRAHR!
BE NOT SUGAR BUT BE LOVE
looking for sugar!
GAHHHHHHHHH!
ROWRR!
GROOOOOOOOOOH!

Rubin’s fear is the poetry’s force. This is a practice that Maggie O’Sullivan might seem to endorse at times. She prefaces In the House of the Shaman with one of those deceptively legitimate uses of ordinary language with which Gertrude Stein challenges us: ‘And each of us in our own way are bound to express what the world in which we are living is doing.’ McClure assumes that expressing the world means that ‘a dahlia or fern might become pure speech in meditation’ if we are able to ‘listen to inner energies a-roar.’ Silliman’s opening (incomplete) sentence in his prose poem ‘Albany’ implicitly dissent: ‘If the function of writing is to “express the world”.’ The statement is left unfinished inviting the reader to receive this as both the answer to a missing prior question about texts, and the first half of a conditional statement whose consequence will have to be inferred by a reader, unless the second sentence (‘My father withheld child support, forcing my mother to live with her parents, my brother and I to be raised together in a small room’) is taken to say implicitly: ‘then here is what I must say.’ Although the second sentence of ‘Albany’ does exemplify expressive, autobiographical utterance, the ‘world’ has become the poet’s situation, where he is ‘coming from.’

When Silliman was interviewed by Manuel Brito, he pondered neologisms in two short poems, ‘Blod’ by Aram Saroyan and ‘Thumpa’ by Robert Grenier:

Thus, as is virtually always the case, nonsense is a particularly complex instance of sense itself, not its erasure or Other. Here, thumpa is a ‘non-word’ that points to a
surprisingly large body of other ‘non-words,’ all of which exploit the social category of the non-word as an aspect of their own agency. The onomatopoeic loses its force if we don’t acknowledge its special condition and thus becomes ‘only’ a word.\(^22\)

Aren’t O’Sullivan’s nonce-words almost illegal immigrants to the linguistic community, seeking asylum from scenes of horror that the poetry cannot directly name? What else could the adjective ‘terrestrial’ qualify after all? ‘Traor’ marks the impossibility that any of these well-used abstractions would answer to what is needed here. The phrase ‘scribbled terrestrial traor’ suggests that the text is attempting to reflect on its own process, its hastily written vision of the earthbound, mundane world, so that the third word becomes a sign of some kind of failed articulation. Is ‘traor’ then a guesstimate that doesn’t make it as a word, an attempt to utter a sound that will become the necessary word? Can one discern the faint outlines of words such as ‘trawl’, ‘traitor,’ ‘treasure’ or ‘extraordinary?’ It certainly seems significant that the first of these occurs in a reference to the act of writing. One can imagine an unlikely reading of the phrase as meaning something like: I scribbled so fast the word ‘terrestrial’ came out as ‘traor.’

My discussion of neologisms has so far concentrated on modern poetic tradition, but neologising has a much wider range than this, in scat and comic books, for instance. Frank Miller’s Batman knows all about the necessary extremities of scat. Some moments of intense engagement can only be greeted with a cry like ‘SKRRAKK,’ although the good bourgeois of Gotham probably share the views of the television news presenter who explains that the dark knight is known for his ‘wild animal growls, snarls, werewolf surely.’\(^23\) Is O’Sullivan’s practice a form of poetic scat, a Bob Cobbing-inspired update of Ella Fitzgerald, a counterpart to Bobbie McFerrin in *Beyond Words*? Scat? There would seem something a little like cheating in making poems of invented words if the words were only scatting. Lost for a word whose phonemes will fit exactly into the tune? Make one up. Scat is actually very difficult to do, because the precise articulation of the words, and the degree of semantic coloring that remains in the nonce word are extremely hard to control with the voice attuned to familiar grammar and lexical coloring. Fantasy writers know that sparing use of strange-sounding neologisms can evoke their otherworldy scenes very effectively. Ursula K. LeGuin places a glossary of ‘Kesh’, the language of the people documented in her novel *Always Coming Home*, a culture living far in the future whose economy is ecologically far advanced though reticent in its use of technology. ‘Goutun’ means the ‘twilight of morning’ and ‘kach’ a city, and ‘arbayai’ is ‘handmind’, physical work done with intelligence, or the results of such work.\(^24\) In the last example, the invented word requires a more familiar invented portmanteau creation to explain it, and this points to one striking feature of these words: they are most evocative when they refer to something that is slightly beyond our understanding or perception. The neologisms in *Palace of Reptiles* and the other books do work with these auratic effects, yet this, like the scat, is only a part of what is happening.

One way to follow the phenomenology and event of these words further is to ask about the neologism itself. What is a new word, how can it be? Isn’t a word no longer new the moment it is uttered or written into the record of our interactions? Isn’t the neologic that of the almost new, the almost fresh, already slightly eroded by exchange in the wet mouths of users and the fading neurones of memory? Neologisms proliferate. There are Joycean punning neologisms, prelinguistic cries, words patched together into temporary association, in-group words, private twin languages, evanescent jargon, the comic book language of Batman, the quasi-neologisms of trade
names—this is only a small selection of the possibilities. They are troublesome too, they may not all be new, but simply misapprehended or unfamiliar. Misprints are easier, they can be ignored once the disturbance to smooth reception has been set aside. The inventions of scholars and writers are trickier, because of the extended claims that will accompany the word itself, and the challenge to the reader to accept the word into specialist use and comprehend the existing verbal deficit that makes its coinage necessary. Often it is only another specialist who could decide on the viability of a new term, or even know just by reading the account in which it occurs, whether it did gain any sort of temporary currency.

But to write like this is misleading. Neologisms are not only ubiquitous, their diversity resists such rationalising taxonomies. Such putative words form an infinite set whose cardinal number is higher than that of actual words, because for every proper word (but what one is beginning to ask is such a word) there will be a nearly unlimited range of variants that shade off into entirely non-semantic vocal or alphabetic effects. No firm set of categories? Does this mean that generalisations about the scope and character of neologisms are impossible, or unreliable, or at best highly provisional? It would do if a mapping of neologisms relied on taxonomy, but the problem is different, and not unlike the difficulties that once afflicted the field of research from which this metaphor is drawn, biology. Once observant scientists began to check the members of a species in great detail they tended to find that they were all different, and also noticed all sorts of half-way hybrids. A marine biologist friend of mine once complained that the biggest problem in making a census of river fish in the Wye was the abundance of intermediate forms of the fish that then resisted classification. The answer to such dilemmas that researchers have developed over the years is to recognise that all living organisms are variants, that none of them are pure forms of the species, because that is how the complex chemistry of genetics actually operates.

Maybe neologisms are not all as easy to spot as the ones whose alphabetic form is dissonant. When we read the word ‘traor’ in O’Sullivan’s poem we reach for the dictionaries, perhaps run other searches, and conclude that it is her own coinage, because the arrangement of the letters and sounds does not correspond with any existing verbal paradigm. Our word recognition faculties make their demarcations on formal grounds, and this seems entirely obvious. But some neologisms will not be identified by this method. All words in actual use have traces of neologism in them, usually concealed by the familiarity of forms. The poets were right. Words are hairy, fleshy, wild; they usually dress to hide it. Some modern linguists have recognised that linguistic value must work like this, that words must always be twisted a little, revalued slightly, misunderstood, even, in the eyes of the philosopher John McCumber, be poetically interactive, where poetry is a synonym for the beauties of distortion (beauty is mostly achieved by simplification of elements). When the politicians talk of ‘weapons of mass destruction’ we don’t know what they mean, not least because what they mean will only become clearer, if it does, in the future, and its use in the present is interdependent on its many other uses, most of which cannot practically be known by one individual. Robert Pippin describes the dilemma of modern moral life in terms which illuminate my point. He says that ‘what I am in fact thinking consciously about my own attitudes, or what I think about others, might but need not have much relevance to what opinions and beliefs may rightly be attributed to me about such matters. I may never have ‘actually thought’ the opinions I do have, and what I consciously tell myself I believe may not at all be what I believe.’ This is also the epistemic problem with meaning in language for
modernity. What is said, in ordinary conversation, in the newspapers, on television, in our popular novels and other textual arts, lives with an awareness that what is meant consciously may not have much connection with what will be seen to have been meant when the event has had more time to realise itself in our historical awareness.

Linguists and philosophers who have pursued these arguments are primarily concerned to refute models of perfect communicability, the supposedly noiseless transmission of thought from one mind to another with no loss, and no creative development, that they allege inheres in the standard models of language. For those who try to work creatively with language to discover more about the world, even this recognition remains constrictive. There are also an ethics and an aesthetics of this neologistic condition that are potentially of great interest to poets. If meaning is not appended to the word like charms on a bracelet, from where it can be readily identified with the help of a dictionary, but instead meaning is always unfinished, hairy, not quite glimpsed, and still growly with the body’s formation of sound, then how do we achieve the subtle understandings that meaning can bring? Create a waxed logical language of pure mentality? Or work with the words for better understanding? Logical languages have enabled thinkers to achieve remarkable insights, but they only operate within tiny subsets of the continuum. Working with the imperfections of language, which we ordinarily call style, rhetoric, and expressiveness, has a much better record. Words in use normally achieve the articulation of new insights only incrementally through intense usage by which gradually they unfold though to itself; even ordinary supposedly well-defined words (well-defined in the dictionary at least) can have a semantic deficit as far as understanding is concerned, if they are not hurrying about in verbal exchange.

Modern poetry has now run through a wide, inventive and extending repertoire of verbal techniques which seem at first hearing to bleach meaning from words, phrases, sentences and texts. Repetition, parataxis, catachresis, phrases without verbs, unconnected sentences, words from different registers crushed together, partial phonemes, absent contexts, absent referents, and sublimed abstractions—these and many others associated with writers since Stein, Pound, Williams, and other early modernists, have lifted poetic language away from the attested literalisms of science and the would-be familiarity of media speech. Almost all attempts to justify or explain these practices begin with the idea that ordinary language has become contaminated with ideology, worn out with over use, and lost all precision or accuracy as a form of thought. Always defamiliarize and dereferentialize: this is the cry. During the past twenty years it has become possible to interpret the entire works of pre and post World War II modernist writers, especially poets, as language projects. Signature styles and habitual preoccupations are now read as prolonged commitment to inquiry into features of language stained with invention for the poetic microscope: speech acts, nominalism, metaphor, assertion, the sentence, parapraxis, catachresis, logic, and phonematics. Noticing explicitly that William Carlos Williams often replaces the use of neutral direct statement to an anonymous audience with modes of address that presuppose a specific relation to a particular kind of recipient pulls interpretation away from the obvious tendency towards a biographical reading, however nuanced, of his poems as a record of the life of a doctor, artist, father, husband and lover. Now we notice continuities with the significant emphasis of lyric poetry of the past on its direct address to a lover or friend, often to named people, admire its ethnographic attentiveness to the different forms of social relation embedded in discrete communicative acts, and notice that it anticipates speech act theory. Charles Olson was once read as a new kind of historian. Now attentive readers are most likely to
notice that he extends across three volumes an investigation of a voice, constructed largely through expressive use of commas and line-breaks, that is capable of introjecting all the histories that he can find of his own life-site or ‘situatedness.’

These earlier Modernist poetries appeared to resolve only slowly into language experiments. Contemporary avant-garde poets, however, often present their work first and foremost as a linguistic enterprise. The sentence, the phrase, the word, have all had their proponents, both formalistically and sociolinguistically. Or, as Maggie O’Sullivan expresses it: ‘In words, other rooming for what is at RISK inside out in language. Oppositional dialogues, realities, cartwheels, sway substances, Language Undeniably, Ably drowsed, dowsed even.’(PR 68) But this tendency to see these bodies of poetry as linguistic projects makes linguistic concentration on one feature of language the only form of inquiry, making the mysterious wh that prefixes most interrogatives ‘the onlie begetter’ of late Modernist poems.

O’Sullivan is not quite of this company although she has almost always been read in this context. A brief parenthetical list of words that might initiate different forms of intellectual inquiry points to why. She plays with the sound of the interrogative in ‘Theoretical Economies,’ where the homonymic row and column reminds us that not all questioning sounds are the prefix to questions:

(whatll wattle wambw
wha
white
whe
who)

From the standpoint of the linguistically-turned reader, a neologism such as ‘wambw’ exemplifies O’Sullivan’s own signature mode of linguistic inquiry into the edges of verbal intelligibility where the dictionary gives up on words that may or may not have some currency in speech or specialized discourse. Her poetry is of a scale to be considered alongside those other poets in the language laboratory.

The poem ‘Now to the Ears’ suggests that the relation to Modernism is more self-conscious, more critical, and even its neologising less reducible to linguistic effect than our current assumptions about the aftermath of Modernist poetry might suggest. Up in the ‘leaf dens’ of a wild landscape, common animals, hare, crow, raven, thrushes, and other creatures call and dance, ‘all summer long’, as Yeats wrote. Near the end of the poem we have the single isolated line, ‘the waste of it,’ a trope which for almost all readers of contemporary poetry is now saturated with its uses in T.S.Eliot’s poems The Waste Land and Four Quartets, poems that are actually linked by a similar line in Burnt Norton: ‘the waste sad time / Stretching before and after.’ Allusions to Yeats and Eliot are unsurprising in contemporary poetry; these were the modern poets most widely read by young people at school and in Higher Education. The allusiveness is muted here, and it is not evident that immediate content recognition is the point, but this does not mean that we should ignore it either. As so often in contemporary avant-garde poetry, we sense that an argument is being conducted with the poetics now represented by these mentors of earlier generations. Eliot, as I alluded earlier, talks of words that ‘slip, slide and sometimes perish.’ Maggie O’Sullivan’s words do actually slip, slide and break apart, but the result is not the breakdown of social hierarchy and loss of relation to divinity that Eliot fears. The scope of this contestation of the right to represent the modern condition comes into
sharp relief in the final lines of ‘Now to the Ears,’ where punctuation becomes more prominent than the restrained vocabulary it hedges round:

sob –
tick (ticca) –
told. te. me.

Don’t Only Dance

shimmish? (30)

A hyphen, a pair of brackets, three full-stops (periods), capitalized words, and a question mark, are a strong presence in a sequence of only five short lines and ten words. Their excess diacritical presence marks an emotion that has already been signalled by the content of certain words (grief, wastes, wailed, choke, sacrificial, skull, boned, bandages, tombs, torched, scream) which either express intense loss, mortality, or danger, and belong to a register of language for extremes of human suffering.

Consider this punctuation in more detail. The poem is centre-justified, and this as always takes away the line-break as an add-on reservoir of punctuation whose role as a pause for incorporation as metre, syntax and breath intake, is so integral to the history of printed poetry. On the spinal median the words spread out equidistantly towards equated line-endings and the consequent equivocation of stop. Ordinary left to right reading of the words is shadowed by a counter-current that is as much rhythmic as semantic. Simply put, the centering of a text as asyntactic and non-narrativized as this, turns every line into a phrase unit whose initiating moment of stress and intonation, the usual ways of voicing a metric, is delayed until the entire line is known and the reader has to negotiate this uncertain launch into the middle of its affairs. The line has always already begun when the first word in the line is read.

Now consider the dash. No poet can now use the dash without invoking Emily Dickinson, whose use of this flexible marker as a point of transformation that would otherwise require cumbersome phrasings and punctuations, remains a landmark as striking as Walt Whitman’s use of ellipses for similar, if more limited, purposes, in the first edition of Leaves of Grass. The dash has something of the force of a gesture pointing out a salience—as if to say, ‘so you see, this is what these words lead to.’ Like Whitman’s ellipses, it also allows time to pass; the unfolding expression can start in a new momentary configuration, fresh in the suddenness of new time. Most striking of O’Sullivan’s innovations is however the semanticisation of the dash. In these final lines, it also becomes a code word, a neologism without letters. The fifth line from the end reads: ‘sob –’ and the dash could be a shorthand equivalent for the word, and for the sound which is almost certainly likely to be non-phonematic anyway. We can think of this as saying that the dash is a sign for the sob. Its recurrence in the next line could be a recurrence of the physical emission of grief after the two words that suggest time and a mysterious, because neologistic, ‘ticca’. This word characteristically seems to be an amalgam of at least the words ‘ticker’ (clock, heart) and ‘wicca’ (pagan magic), and the mind tries to make this work before alert attention calls a halt and admits that although its sound is homonymic with that of the clock theme, the look of the word denies this. The dash adds its own noisy linguistic silence. Is the sequence of dashes a line of silent neologisms for the words that they accompany, a series of transformations that can only end in silence, the dash that
promises more, but cannot tell us how that more will be connected to what preceded it? Rational interpretation wants to reject this possibility. Its appearance in one’s response to the poem is part of how the poem’s neologising creates doubt and glimpses of semantic possibility that cannot be reached.

The full-stops, and the capital letters in succeeding lines, have similar though opposite effects of lending weight, either at the beginning or end of the words, so that the line ‘told. te. me.’ takes forever to utter the three words as if this telling were uncertain, forgotten, or a burden, and the following line is continually abandoning what it was trying to say and starting again, except that in both cases the line seems (apart from the disjunctive punctuation) perfectly grammatical and therefore a unit itself, moving fluently on. The dance of syntax is resisted as the injunction not to be like the birds and beasts of the air and earth and ‘dance.’ Here the poem might have finished, except that then it would simply leave us with warnings and fears. Instead it pulls off a startling new move, and ends with another mysterious neologism that once again shimmers on the edge of intelligibility, this time melding words for dance, quickness of movement, and light (shimmy, shim, shimmer, skittish). Iconicity of language makes this possible as much as the glimpse of the remaining outlines of words partially melted together. Because we don’t and cannot know what this word’s interrogative means or even what kind of action it invites—an answer, an action, an agreement—the poem leaves us with only our ears sure. We read back to the opening of the poem and there is the invitation again:

Now to the Ears

Having journeyed to the Place of the
GIVERS

there is here

flicker. fleur. de. feather. fly. VOICINGS

on the shape
of storm novembers— (27)

The poem seems occult when first read, because its literalness is not in the form of narrative or statement, but in a form of enacted ritual. Stormy Novembers are what is given shape here, the landscape of a wintry closing down, a dying back of plants and animals, the cries and loudness of landscape unmuffled by foliage, and the symbolics of a season that tests our belief in renewal and continuity. Each successive line of the poem takes us further into the shaping of these Novembers, where there can be no arrival at a conclusive statement of what this experience is.

A poetry that works with the nonce word as a key instrument in the sound risks reductionism and consequent dismissal. It is no accident that Maggie O’Sullivan’s work has sometimes met the kind of angry incomprehension that the Dada artists courted. Her poetry however, as I have argued here, is very far from any programmatic desire to shock readers and overturn convention. It is deeply traditional in its attentions to continuing crises of language and its deeply interwoven poetic critique of other contemporary and earlier Modernist poetics. Its use of neologism calls attention to the scandal of neologisms for our beliefs about language, and even some of our most advanced theories of the textual condition, but its mode of inquiry is
pre-programmatic. The idea of a systematic inquiry of the kind practised by many of
the poets of the past fifty years is set aside, and to some extent challenged, although
never through such organised methodologies. Emotional intensity, its demands for
recognition and transformation, its pointers towards intellectual possibilities and
mistakes, is her preferred mode of poetic working. Its ‘stem-suns’ to be ‘worded later’
from the ‘wreakage’ of language from the borders of nature and culture is a new
Ecology in poetics that recognises the indeterminacy of speciation or exactness of
words. Language overspill, unfinished words. What did you say?

Notes

1 Maggie O’Sullivan, ‘Doubtless’, Palace of Reptiles (Willowdale, Ontario: The Gig,
2003), 42-43. Hereafter PR.
2 Charles Bernstein, ‘Foreword: Maggie O’Sullivan’s Medleyed Verse’. In: Maggie
3 Stephen Voyce, ‘The Xenotext Experiment: An Interview with Christian Bök’,
Postmodern Culture 17:2 (2007), 38. Online at: http://pmc.iath.virginia.edu/text-
only/issue.107/17.2contents.html.
4 See extracts from an interview with Maggie O’Sullivan in: Nicky Marsh, Peter
Middleton, Victoria Sheppard, ‘Blasts of Language’: Changes in Oral Poetics in
Britain Since 1965, Oral Tradition 21:1 (2006), 51, 57 etc. Available at
5 A referee for this article points out that there are different types of vagueness,
notably the restricted code described by Basil Bernstein, which enables people with a
shared habitus to converse in words that they hear as precise because the words are
understood as referring to a shared contextual world, and the sort of vagueness, that I
have attributed to différance and to O’Sullivan’s coinages, which invites speculative
filling in that can open up new areas of thought. An example of the first kind is found
in the way Henry James derives comedy in The Awkward Age from the dissonance
between high emotional tensions and the banality of verbal expression in the dialogue
amongst the inner circle around Mrs Brookenham (as for example in the discussion of
the ‘boat’ in which Aggie is supposedly afloat, a metaphor that completely baffles the
outsider Mr Longdon (Book IV Chapter XV) Henry James, The Awkward Age ed.
Vivien Jones (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), 130). An example of the
second kind of possibility is explored extensively in Gillian Beer’s Open Fields
(Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996) where she argues that ‘new scientific and
technical knowledge allows the poet to contemplate with fresh intensity intransigent
questions which grip language in all generations’(168). Her chapter ‘Translation or
Transformation? The Relations of Literature and Science’ explores the issues.
6 Maggie O’Sullivan, ‘Narcotic Properties,’ 16.
7 Pablo Neruda, ‘Ars Poetica’, Residencia en la tierra, trans. Donald D. Walsh
9 For further discussion of science and language in poetry see the following articles of
mine which are part of a larger project on science and poetry: ‘Strips: Scientific
language in poetry,’ Textual Practice 23:6 (Dec. 2009), 947-958; and ‘Can Poetry Be
19


13 I also discuss this same material on the political history of neologisms in my essay on Wallace Stevens’ fascination with non-semantic sound words: Peter Middleton, ‘The “Final Finding of the Ear”: Wallace Stevens’ Modernist Soundscapes’, *The Wallace Stevens Journal* 33.1 (Spring 2009), 61-82.


16 Tiffany argues that both lyric poetry and science work hard to make the intangible somehow perceptible, and that science has a long history of using models and ‘toys’ to do this, whereas poetry uses lyric images. The gulf between the enormous authority of contemporary science and the apparent epistemological bankruptcy of lyric poetry can be bridged in part by tracing the parallels in their use of toy media: ‘Science has become the final arbiter of what constitutes a real body, whereas lyric poetry appears in the public eye to be little more than a toy medium, apparently immune to the obligations of realism.’ His ideas could be extended to O’Sullivan’s interest in models such as her ‘lead animals’. Daniel Tiffany, *Toy Medium: Materialism and Modern Lyric* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 246.


27 These issues are further explored in my essay ‘Charles Olson: A Short History,’ *Parataxis* 10 (2001), 54-66.

28 See my *Distant Reading: Performance, Readership, and Consumption in Contemporary Poetry* (Tuscaloosa: Alabama University Press, 2005). Issues of performance are also discussed in ‘How to Read a Reading of a Written Poem. *Oral*

30 Phrases are from ‘Narrative of the Shields’, In the House of the Shaman, 64-65.