SPITWINTER PROVOCATIONS: An Interview on the Condition of Poetry with PETER RILEY

I went to see Peter Riley in Derbyshire on 24 October 1983. I intended to write a thesis on his poetry. - Kelvin Corcoran.

KC: When I wrote the questions I was aware that they were biased towards your criticism, your magazine articles, because I went there looking for clues.

PR: I think it can be dangerous to rely on a poet's prose, because it can so easily be marginal to the poetry, or to any poetry, or indeed nothing to do with it at all. Lord knows, with modern poetry you need all the clues you can get, but a poet's prose is quite likely to be the expression of a current obsession which when it was fed into the poetry dispersed into something else, or was transcended, or never came to anything at all. Even if the prose is coherent, which mine by and large isn't, it might connect in an interesting way only to the poetry being written at a particular time, which might not even be extant. Prose relates more apparently as a whole to the world and so is easier to attach. But the more interesting the prose is in itself the less likely it is, I think, to relate directly to poetry by the same author, since, I find, the best poetry comes out of a confusion of ideas and a sense of, er, abandonment.

KC: For me the criticism was a way in to the poetry, or one led to the other as I began to make connections. At first I didn't even realise they were by the same person.

PR: There will be connections and continuities, of course, through to the poetry from the prose but some of them might prove illusory - I mean there might be a cut-off, so that the prose words, even the same vocabulary, shifted into poetry no longer mean the same thing. The position of the words in a poem is after all, or should be, absolute. So you'd have to be careful not to reduce the poem to the terms of the prose; or vice-versa in a way. For myself, I find my own prose a good deal less interesting, as a poet, than "the prose of the world".

KC: So to the first question. Who do you read now, in contemporary poetry?

PR: I take the word "contemporary" very literally: work of the same time as oneself, and by implication of the same place, the same nation or context. That's where you find what you're a part of. The rest is history: Ezra Pound or John Donne or anything in a foreign language. In the last twenty years English poets have tended to define themselves as part of a selective or optional context and I suppose that's
natural enough and it’s what poets have always done. But, I don’t know, recently I’ve been deliberately trying to view contemporary English poetry as a whole. I’ve been deliberately reading people whose work I don’t like, or didn’t think I liked. I think it’s important to do something like this from time to time. And in doing it to try to isolate the poetry in your mind from its entire surround— the person who wrote it and his reputation and his affiliations and his success, his class, his politics, the kind of support he gets, the kind of criticism and puffing he attracts, his beliefs, his gender, all of it. It doesn’t mean a thing, it’s just a distraction from the poetry, if there’s any there. It’s very difficult. To isolate the poetry in your mind from its kind of crap and to read one of his poems as a pure act. It’s amazing how difficult it is. I’m not even sure it’s possible, to disperse all that stuff. There’s a kind of support he gets, the kind of criticism and puffing, he attracts, his beliefs, his gender, her gender, his success, his class. And in doing it to try to findsomeone like Larkin who’s just surrounded by all kinds of crap and to read one of his poems as a pure act. It’s amazing how difficult it is. I’m not even sure that it’s possible, to disperse all that conditioning, whether it does or not? After all, the great grandfather poets that everyone reveres, the founders of modernism or whatever, they were surrounded by much greater heaps of crap than Larkin ever was, all of them— Pound, Eliot, Graves, Lawrence, Joyce, Lewis, Williams, Olson, Macnab... their poetry flowered up out of the biggest rubbish tips of cultural wastage imaginable, not to mention the secondary accumulations of academic crud heaped up on their names ever since... and yet we can go... read their poetry, we can. So why is it so difficult to read Larkin or Hayven, or from the other side of the fence, for someone over there to read Crozier or Prynne? It must be a different kind of poetry, actually, on the evidence. I’m not sure we do read all those elder figures very accurately these days, I think a lot of reading is infected by prose, or is plain adulatory wishful reading, where you read what you want there to be there because for various reasons you need it, whatever it is they actually wrote. I think it’s high time we recognised the reality of those founder figures of modern literature; that if you just read their prose, I mean their opinions, with no poetry no fiction no creative writing you'd be dealing simply with a collection of crackpot ravings worthy of any lunatic asylum in the western world. It was in some way the price of what they did. It has no value at all and exploration of it is a sheer waste of time. I mean people paid very close attention to each other’s work and took each other very seriously and did feel that they were working together, though actual physical meetings tended to be disastrous because of the high tensions involved. We had one major get-together, at what has flatteringly been called the Sparty Lea Poetry Festival, which took place in a hut in Northumberland. I shall never forget as long as I live... but let’s not go into that just now.

KC: Is there a "Cambridge" group of poets? There seem to be coincidences in the earlier work of you, Andrew Crozier, and J H Prynne, which suggest that there is.

PR: Well, there was, and wasn't, and there isn't. Certain people worked together to a greater or lesser extent from about 1966 to 1970, which isn't very long. The importance of J H Prynne and Andrew Crozier and others who were in Cambridge, on the model of the San Francisco worksheet Open Space. And it mushroomed. I think a good proportion of the bright young things of the late 60s got involved, or nearly did. At one stage it was quite mysterious how people kept springing up whose work or presence seemed interesting and again and again there turned out to be some connection with that dump in Cambridg... I myself... Andrew Crozier found me in Hastings, I'd ordered some Ferry Press books and he was so amazed at getting this order from someone he'd never heard of that he came down in person to find out who it was. Then he started putting my work in The English Intelligencer and it turned out I had been in Cambridge three or four years earlier as a student. But conversely others such as John James moved to Cambridge after they'd become involved with the Intelligencer. There was a kind of Bristol contingent, with a very promising poet, I thought, called Peter Armstrong. So anyway, for a while there was a kind of group, I mean people paid very close attention to each other's work and took each other very seriously and did feel that they were working together, though actual physical meetings tended to be disastrous because of the high tensions involved. We had one major get-together, at what has flatteringly been called the Sparty Lea Poetry Festival, which took place in a hut in Northumberland. I shall never forget as long as I live... but let’s not go into that just now.

KC: If there was a group, did it have any kind of defined purpose or programme?

PR: There was a sense of the new. What exactly constituted that "new" remained most of the time open to guesswork, or at any rate subject to constant revision. There were so many pulls in various directions, and they increased as it went on, which was a good thing really if you could ride it. There was first of all a zeal about rescuing English poetry from the doldrums by injecting it with various kind of Americanisms, such as Williams and Olson and (later) O'Hara and Dorn, and the Open Space poets. It was difficult to know what all these Americans had in common, but at least they didn't write tight-lipped sociological verse of the kind that passed for...
Poetry was quite important in the life of the student community then, as I don't think it is now. And this group actually started "Carcanet" which was originally a student magazine. It was a grecophile, sexually rather ambiguous group, and it took forces from Cambridge in any which was pictorial but more than that. It had something of the same outwardness as the later Cambridge thing, the sense of the person came close to the mythic and was still, as I recall, engaged with realities. It was a question of Odysseus and cheese sandwiches, and the poems were long and expansive and bright. Peter Mansfield is about the only name I now remember from that time. I often wonder what became of it all. I guess it all collapsed in various kinds of pastoral lure and the real forces from Cambridge came five years later and was to do with America, at first anyway. The name "Carcanet" passed on to Oxford and ended up in Manchester. Are you warm enough, it's quite a cold day?

KC: Yes, thanks. Do you still regard American poetry highly?

PR: I haven't a clue what's happening in US poetry at present. There's been a lot of fuss about it these last twenty years, to the extent that, well, by some accounts it's been the only English language poetry there is, and the best we can do over here is copy the accent and hope to latch on to some of the novelty. This has been abetted by American poets and critics themselves. A large extent of it is quite a large area that's psychically difficult area connected with senses of familial authority and parental pressures, so that to gain an independent newness at the expense of an English staleness is kind of a right step. But the poet has to take on these aspects of an expanded poetic. With great long poems, but also instant extent, a kind of freedom of movement in the vital details, which at once opens the poetry to a new and full sense of the self in the world. This might apply to Weldon Kees or John Peale Bishop as much as to Whitman or Olson. You can find it in English poetry too if you look for it, but perhaps in a less surprised manner, almost taken for granted or casual, which is maybe healthier in the long run. It's attractive that the world is always seen as if for the first time, but not the whole of the truth. As far as the poems, I'm not a real poet of the 60s, not as far as I'm concerned, the interest was in three people mainly, Charles Olson and Jack Spicer and Frank O'Hara. Plenty of other worthy workers of course, but those three were so different from each other and each so powerful that each seemed to be taken up among the three of them. They had nothing to do with each other and would have been mutually antagonistic if they'd come into contact, I expect. But they

KC: PR: I find it quite strange how forces emanate from certain centres. For many decades Cambridge has been a focus in English poetry of a kind of metaphysical modernism - not experimental or merely up to date. In advance of other human interests, I mean not pastoral letterist and the pictorial but more than that. It had something of the same outwardness as the later Cambridge thing, the sense of the person came close to the mythic and was still, as I recall, engaged with realities. It was a question of Odysseus and cheese sandwiches, and the poems were long and expansive and bright. Peter Mansfield is about the only name I now remember from that time. I often wonder what became of it all. I guess it all collapsed in various kinds of pastoral lure and the real forces from Cambridge came five years later and was to do with America, at first anyway. The name "Carcanet" passed on to Oxford and ended up in Manchester. Are you warm enough, it's quite a cold day?

KC: So it was only a "Cambridge" association because some people happened to be in Cambridge at a certain time when contacts were established?

PR: I making myself at all clear? I mean Cambridge has been a centre for a view of poetry as precisely advanced rather than experimental or merely up to date. In advance of other human discourses, in advance of the poet. And it's advanced because it spreads over human experience like a sky and comprehends or covers all other forms of knowledge, but levered on the one person, the poet, and so not a generalising structure at all. The individuality is a factor of its total responsibility to experience. This is what makes it difficult. Oxford on the other hand has been the centre for mannerist verse-making; and still is. This contrast goes back at least to the 1940s if not to the days of Wordsworth, and actually the position of the Cambridge Platonists in the 17th century strikes me as parallel. Some of their work, by the way, has still to find a publisher.

KC: More, then, than a constellation of persons?

PR: Nothing at all would have happened without the persons. But for instance, there was another Cambridge group rather earlier, when I was a student there, which I'm sure could have developed into something big, but for some reason didn't. This was among Cambridge students in the early 60s.
show the extraordinary range and completeness that poetry can achieve by the self-image as an active, exploratory agent in a vast expanse. I don't think anyone of them by himself would amount to a complete poetry, there'd be shocking imbalances. They represent for me the American moment of the 60s, and indeed by 1965 that was pretty well all over, except for what people like Dorn could win from at least two of them dead, and Olson's work becoming some kind of new religion. As far as I know all that remains now is sprawl, and not in the sense that Les Murray means either. Just flabby aimless infantile sprawl, in the States or over here for that matter, among the avant-garde, stuck with a dim range of new-earth concepts which failed manifestly some time ago, and turning for consolation to minimal heroic pastoralism. Freedom to scatter words over the page as if that ever meant anything. Spontaneity. Would you like a cup of tea?

KC: Perhaps we should take a break.

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KC: You were saying that Olson, Spicer and O'Hara were the three Americans of the 60s but didn't share the same poetry.

PR: No they didn't exactly. I don't know that anyone ever does. The affinity among them was that among any poets, where their achievement transcends their own views of what they're doing. In that way they can amount to a poetry without sharing one.

KC: And is it the same between you and your contemporaries?

PR: I hope so. The bigger the differences the better. In the past there's perhaps been too much sharing and not enough amounting. I mean I think it's a good stage of poetic reading to be able to admire something which you wouldn't want to write yourself. To value it as the poetry of that person, rather than as the poetry, as the direction for poetry. For instance I think J H Prynne is probably the best poet writing in England at present, but if all poetry had to be his kind of poetry I'd want to chuck it in and take up the saxophone or something instead. At the end of the 17th century Dryden was a very good poet who was regarded with such respect as the direction for poetry that for nearly 100 years nobody was allowed to write any other kind of poetry, hardly, except Dryden's kind. It was a literary-historical disaster. So yes, there are terrific differences. At one of the Cambridge Poetry Festivals (what became of them?) Iain Sinclair read at the same reading as John James, and I thought the contrast was staggering, you could hardly understand how they both belonged in the same civilisation. Their interests and the whole set of their poems are opposed. John James is a kind of man-of-the-world figure and Iain Sinclair a kind of occultist, an anchorite. On the page, I mean. It seemed extraordinary that they could be neglected and ignored together as the same thing, as both "Cambridge" poets or something, it made nonsense of the whole thing. I think they do have affinities in the end, metrical affinities, something of the same grasp of personal detail as a leverage onto something else, which is maybe what the London-Oxford mannerists don't like, the sense of reverberation. Neither of them seems to be writing much any more, which is a pity. But to discuss the affinity of two writers as different as that you must surely approach the hub of the whole business, the nature of poetic quality itself, and that's the most difficult thing to talk about with any confidence. You'd need a far greater vocabulary than I've got for a start and even then I don't know that you'd do more than brush against the subject. If you're talking about your own poetry - where does it transcend your own knowledge and intentions? - well, how can you know that? Maybe you can sense it happening, or having happened, when the poetry surpasses your own notion of it.

KC: What happens when it does that? It becomes true?

PR: It becomes true in the biggest sense, which is maybe a formal quality of the whole work. Real truths of living, even minute details, participate in a larger truth without losing their natures.

KC: Is Merleau-Ponty important to you?

PR: I've only got one book by him. It's on that top shelf there. I can't think of any reason for getting it down. Poetry is a matter of working through obsessions and all the things which crowd into obsessions, all the readings and events and personal states, and trying to make a work out of it. Once you've made something, or abandoned it, all those materials tend to seem derelict, which isn't to say that you might not need them again later. Like a sculptor taking an interest in a certain kind of stone, and working with it and then passing on to another kind; it doesn't imply that he's found anything wrong with, say, Hopton Wood limestone just because he doesn't use it continually ever after. It's not even a progression, it's simply a course. You don't necessarily go on to a wider or better thing, in fact after a period of poetic work the world tends to foreclose. The world might seem new, but that's not to say bigger better or richer. In fact you have to be very careful with senses of progress, which can become automatic or simply inhuman, as some people think they can progress through people in their private lives. You also of course seek a fidelity, a permanence, a non-episodic continuity. Hopton Wood stone comes from that hill over there. Henry Moore used it a lot.

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KC: So the linear progression is embodied in a book, rather than in a single poem?

PR: If that's the way you cook it. But it has to return to the
single poem again. Let's put it this way - if the completed work is something you make which is permanent, like an incision in a rockface set through time and death ... like a milestone, a kalend, a fixed mark rather than a trail or a deposit ... well, you have to keep refolding that out of its own fixation, don't you? I've always found it interesting to take the single poem and then make it like a paragraph of some larger structure. But after you've done that for a bit you find you're relying on the larger structure as the bearer of significance, and you can't write a single short poem any more, which is awful. In the best sequential poems, such as Spicer's, the sequence of the book is carried forward because of the utter completion of each poem in it. Poetic completion or perfection is more than a closure, it implies a furthering and continuity, and the book realises that. Poetry isn't really like a milestone or a sea-mark. If the route shifts to the next valley a milestone's obsolete, but a statue is different, people will make a route in order to approach a statue. Yet both of them represent a approach to a further dimension.

KC: Jakobson talks about axes crossing for poetry to occur.

PR: Does he? I wonder if that's where Doug Oliver gets it from. These things are no use when you're writing poetry.

KC: No?

PR: When you're writing poetry your head's totally empty. You don't know anything. You're protected from knowledge. It's comfortable to have vast vocabularies to fall back on if you need them, I suppose.

KC: Isn't the way you write a poem something to do with the repossession of bodily experience into the lebenswelt?

PR: Great! I'll buy that.

KC: What poetry does, as a medium rather than a copy, it's graphic disclosure...

PR: Or performance. It's like swallowing a chicken.

KC: You insist on truth.

PR: Ah.

KC: You insist on truth, so you move away from an autonomous poetry to a quality that can be recognised outside poetry.

PR: Ah well, yes, no, I do that, yes, maybe as a kind of corrective. It's been said and said right through this century that modern poetry is autonomous, that its meaning is poetic meaning and only comprehensible poetically. All sorts of people have said it again and again, modernists and traditionalists and all sorts. One of the people who said it most strongly was Karl Shapiro. And again and again it's been ignored by the explainers, because if they allowed themselves to believe it a whole industry would collapse. And it does have to be re-insisted on, that poetry is its own science, merely impinged on by linguistic structures. So OK then, where does truth come in? People as intelligent as Jack Spicer have been driven to say that truth has no part in poetry, though his own poetry seems to shine with it. Well for one thing Americans have a lot of difficulty distinguishing between truth and statement, which they think is English and feudal or something. Shapiro said that truth was a component, that truth goes into the making of a poem rather than residing in its result or essence. And a lot of avant-garde stances about poetry, about fragmentation and open-endedness and all these antiformal concepts of the poet as a network or vibrations or a bag of chips or whatever they're all insisting on avoiding manifest truth at the centre of the poetic discourse. But it won't do. However much truth is valued as a formative force to the poem or an authenticating process in the building of the poem, I don't think it's any use unless truth also beams out of the poem. How anyway do we recognise our own response to the poem, how do we attribute high value to it but by acknowledging its veracity? Otherwise it's just a mirror endlessly showing you what you already are. In the end there shouldn't be any conflict between the poem's autonomy and its truth. By autonomy we mean really that the poem is a perfection, and it's perfect or beautiful or complete because it's true, and it's true because it's beautiful ... and so on. They validate each other.

KC: Isn't this the reading of signs beyond signs, as with Merleau-Ponty?

PR: I don't know. It could well be a notion of transcendence.

KC: You have spoken about the need for modern poetry to return to "social and historical forms". What do you mean by that, poems about certain topics, or more accessible poems, or a broader notion of poetry as a whole?

PR: Yes. A broadening of poetry, perhaps a clarification. Modern poetry has gone on for so long getting more and more the way it is. And I think we could be approaching a very exciting phase now, because poetry has established its autonomy and its freedom within itself, there's no need to insist further on that, and we could be at a turning point where poetry
grasps all that it has won since 1914 and moves it back towards a sense of life at large. Whether that means accessibility or involves a greater number of people I don’t know, but it might at least involve poetry trying to get itself out of the mess it’s been in in public for a long time. I’d be more interested in extending language, broadening the scope, rather than narrowing it so that more people can look through the window, but on the other hand I’m increasingly interested in the emotive force of simple language, and the more the poet recognises the distinction between his poetry and himself, the more ordinary he feels, I suppose. Or is it just a factor of becoming middle-aged? This was what Pound wanted to do in The Cantos, but what I mean doesn’t necessarily involve large structures like that. I’d be very interested to find out whether it’s possible to sustain the force of modern poetry without that persistent habit of referring to things as if the reader already knows all about them. It’s almost a universal habit of modern poetry, not just in English, this assumptive way of referring to occulted information. I’m not at all sure that we need it any more, though I agree to the proposition that explanation is demeaning to both parties. But there are ways of presenting or indicating images in poetry without evoking a closed structure of knowledge and experience. The poet could in some way open his sense of knowledge to that of others. Olson, for instance, who did some marvellous things, got so deeply involved in his own knowledges that I don’t think he was capable for a moment of envisaging anyone’s mind outside of those knowledges, so that the question of transmission became wildly haphazard. Some of his poems are just notes. He became incapable of writing a simple book-list. Pound never dropped that occulting habit either, in the Cantos. It’s a lyric grace; I think it belongs with the short song-like poems, and refers to the lyric’s original status as an interlude, a gem-like crystallisation, in the middle of a narrative. In big informational structures it just gets in the way. But it can also be very irritating in shortish meditational poems. "Topics" is an interesting concept.

KC: So, in the achieved truth of poetry you write beyond your own experience?

PR: You want to transcend, perhaps, your own experience, which you don’t do by denying or avoiding or negating your experience.

KC: So where then do politics...

PR: Actually it gets more personal.

KC: What?

PR: ...come to think...

KC: Isn’t it the personal where it can be shared?

PR: It's paradoxical. The more it is true to your own idiosyncrasies (so that there is an access door to truth there) the richer and wider it becomes as a communicating agency. That's modern poetry. You are deeply involved in your own experience and at some deep central hub this gives straight onto - the whole thing, wholeness, Truth, Eternity...with no intermediating structures, no approximating generalities, no majority decisions...absolute logical contingencies...corridors...mumble. I wouldn't want to damage that structure.

KC: So where does politics come in? You suggest in Lines on the Liver that oil is using us, but surely that's power, somebody owns that oil... Petrol is cheap in North America. Look at the Middle East. They've got Marines over there and 200 of them have been blown up this morning. They're human decisions. I can't understand your geo-economic metaphysics, or something.

PR: It's the people manipulating the oil who are being used by it, "us" in the sense not only that they are human but that they exert economic pressure on everyone else. They want to be used by the oil, and it's because of their mindlessness and advantage that humanity is degraded to the mere tool of a geophysical energy source. The situation with nuclear power is exactly similar: we become victims of it because powermongers see advantage in it (and by victims I don't mean the big bang, I mean the constant tension) and use it against mortality. But all I can see is vast institutions full of people running themselves into channels for its emergence. So mankind subsumes the power of earth. Or seems to - that's the politics, the politics is in the making it seem so.

KC: Given that, too many poets don't write about anything that's happening to other people, they're just passive. I'm not after journalism.

PR: Politics almost... wants you to become other people. I mean I agree with that, but modern politics doesn't open experience to the other at all, quite the reverse. It isolates people as Beckettian input-output machines. That's what I do on about in Lines on the Liver, "stoking the furnaces of the smoke industry". It seems in modern life there is a big pressure to bring you to purposeless activity, and Poetry is against that; it's a kind of bewitchment to which Poetry is one of the anti-spells. You'll find that your parents were given to it, probably; maybe your children will be, there are limits on your influence over your children, they're likely to be drawn into it. There has always been a demand for wastage, but this does feel like a distinctly modern condition; the big modern state projects out into the open a kind of psychic failure, an automatism, as what it expects of its population. Enclosive images can no longer rescue us from this, like a court or an artistic milieu. And all those things are fine really, all that buying and selling and
multi-storey car parks, there's nothing wrong with any of that if it is felt to subserve something actually worth the trouble, which may be an art or may be a personally fulfilled and creative life without art, or may in some sense be a nation and a legacy. Part of the poetic unbewitching is maybe to discover that people's lives aren't so purposeless as they seemed to be from a standpoint of alienation. Beckett is such an influential writer because he represents that phase where you recognise commerce as futile, autistic, self-sustaining - and there's nothing else. You stay alive in order to stay alive. But if commerce is not futile, then there is something else, and you stay alive in order to die, which is a much richer formula.

KC: I'm trying to work out for myself how poetry can be a political weapon to attack my enemies.

PR: Trouble with politics is there is no real enemy. If your weapons are words your enemy is deaf, if they're images he's blind, if your weapons are guns and swords your enemy's a ghost. So you're wasting your time. Poetry must be the only weapon because there's no escaping it; it's everywhere. I think.

KC: I think I need a break.

PR: I think so too.

KC: What do you think of the state of poetry publishing?

PR: One tries not to think of it. But in a way it is an inevitable and natural result of what modern poetry has become in this century. It's mean when you look at the stuff and the way it treats its readers (as an insignificance) it's amazing that any modern poetry at all has been "published" (in the commercial sense) since about 1910. And it seems silly to enforce that condition of poetry, and at the same time to moan and complain because large companies geared mainly to marketing picture-books about TV stars aren't very interested in paying thousands of pounds to have it printed; or simply because the response is not exactly overwhelming among the greater part of the population. How could it be? In a sense the poetry has asked for this and has got it, it is entirely just. On the other hand I do think that, especially at present, the level of response among those who do claim to be interested is deplorably slack.

KC: It strikes me that there's an inverse relationship between what's available at large and what's worthwhile.

PR: I don't think that's entirely so. Certain kinds of modern poetry are very successful and it's not so simple as to say that only the worst or fake modern poetry gets wide distribution. The successful stuff tends to be narrow, it tends to be poetry which doesn't make great demands on the reader while still bolstering the reader's sense of participation in contemporaneity, it tends to be easily teachable at a fairly elementary level, it tends to maintain an aura of the self as more or less or a pathetic observer, a formally unconcerned or even uncares an spectator to its own fates and others', it tends to be end-rhymed and metrical without risking the ekstasis of song. I'm talking about British poetry. In the US poetry can be popular for other reasons, external to the poetry itself, to do with lifestyles; and on the Continent perhaps for more intellectual though also unpoetical reasons. No, successful British poetry is generally like the voice of someone who wants to reproduce an effect rather than to create one. After the fifties, though things might have livened up a bit recently, with people like Edwin Morgan gaining quite a big readership. But poetry can be a lot of those things and still be well done - it can be narrow and good, detached and good - in some sense poetry always is, narrowed or limited by the person that transmits it. Anyway, some of those people are really skilled and a lot can be learned from them. Heaney's verse is surprisingly modest when you put aside the stage Irishman act he sometimes goes in for, and the rather specious political weighting. His ability to turn a fairly meaningless stray wistful emotion into a solid, unimpeachable lyric structure is quite impressive.

KC: But there is surely a serious imbalance in the distribution. I can get anything of Larkin's just round the corner any day. I've had to read Ted Hughes as a schoolteacher, it's compulsory.

PR: Passed for general consumption rather than compulsory. But again, what else can you expect? Can you see a poem by J H Prynne being chucked in front of a CSE class, let alone available in coffee-table editions with coloured photos of lakes and trees that you can get at petrol stations and supermarkets? Certain poetry doesn't ask to be popular, it's too busy with other matters, and you can bet all right if you seek it out. And there's no doubt a price to be paid if you do allow your poetry to be taken up by the big marketers and sold in garden centres, or a pressure to conform to certain expectations. But there's neglect all right too. There's neglect of someone like John James. His poetry strikes me as particularly reprehensible, because his poetry is actually a popular poetry in some ways, it refers to people like Mayakovsky and O' Hara, it's a popular voice. Or at least there was. It's often seems to me that certain gay abandonment in modern visual arts, it speaks of public places and should be heard in them, literally. I do not understand why it's ignored while someone like Adrian Mitchell is popular, who shares some of his subject matter, who takes, I think, to rather banal procedures. I think there's also a small-scale neglect which is even more regrettable. There really should be a small and firm audience for poets like Douglas Oliver, Anthony Barnett, J H Prynne, John Riley
... to make editions of one or two thousand sell out in a year without much trouble. I'm sure there is a potential audience of that size but it never seems to realise itself and I think there must be some replacement going on, some encroachment into the domain of serious poetry from the side of the mannerist poets, which is leaking this audience away. Or is it the dispersal of attention caused by the proliferation of surface experimentation, avant-garde pastoralism and so on? It's difficult to believe that people who think you can write modern poetry by copying out the labels on crates of fish can be in competition with someone like John Riley. Larkin's very clever, isn't he? Though he's written remarkably little, and the prose is all lies, I've never seen such lies. I don't understand the Laureate at all, I can't make out what on earth he's up to. The weighting of experience seems fanatical. Late romantic lunacy. I can't find anything real in it.

KC: Why do you keep searching?

PR: Because there should be something. I have this notion that if there's a great fuss about some writer there must be something to justify it, though it may not be what's vaunted. By following this belief I've been able to discover or reclaim a lot of really impressive work in this century without which any sense of modern poetry, and Reznikoff, for instance. So was Siegfried Sassoon. And Andrew Young, marvellous. Of course there have also been false or overloaded reputations, such as Auden, Thomas, Woolf. Indeed, no writer should be lionised to that extent.

KC: In that case, what tradition is present in your writing?

PR: English poetry. All of it, good bad and indifferent, popular and unpopular, overvalued and neglected, the lot. It's an entire climate, all the poetry being written at this time in this country.

KC: [Gasp!]

PR: Well why not? What else would one attach oneself to? Some transatlantic tradition of broken lines? Half-formed notions flung on to the page as they occur? Chance sentiments? Selective spontaneity? Hippey music? That was all very fine in its day but how long can you go on like that? What does "open field poetry" mean as of now? It means nothing at all. It means you are not tied down, you can be yourself, it means you are entirely free to... and that's the end of the equation; nobody any longer knows what it is they are meant to be free to get on with, what is the end or purpose of all this freedom, all this exercise of selfhood; and that the ears most of that post-Poundian transatlantic stuff now sounds more restrictive than any "English" alternative could ever have been, more tight-lipped and po-faced than anything in a University English Department. That "freedom" now seems to serve as a device to prevent the mind from further poetical exploration, on the dogma that nothing is to be developed or worked on, no logical procedures, always leap to the next notion, which turns out to be whatever's nearest to hand. "When there are no connectives almost anything serves as "next". I think connectives are the soul of poetry.

KC: A fashion then, like platform shoes?

PR: And then again, why go abroad for what you can get at home anyway? It strikes me as absurd to be interested in, say, Ted Berrigan and not to be interested in Gavin Ewart. And vice versa, except that Ewart is at least English. Or British. (Is he Irish?) Both operated a species of deliberately wasteful or "light" poetic which had a terrific bite at times. Or if you're interested in Williams, I'm sure he could be a terrific poet sometimes and I've never seen a dull story by him... but if you're interested for that questing openness of spirit by which anything, everything that so much as enters the mind can be transmuted into a formal completeness, into a poem no matter what it is - then why don't you read Nicholas Moore? And people don't, I don't know what's the matter with them, but they don't. They'd rather read Zukofsky's Catullus or something, some complete abnegation of the art of composition. But the point is why not both? I'm not talking just for label, to complete the picture, and Graham. There are traps whoever you read.

KC: There must be a limit on how much you can read...

PR: The tradition is more than you can read. It's an entire climate. It has to be total, I mean you can't preclude any department or tendency for any reason. It's the total of what a poet you belong to and can learn from and contribute to. So poet might be those of one line. You can learn from anybody. Poetry's volatile, it can escape through the people who write it. This is very unacademic of me but I believe it. The academiacs, as I know them, which is the Cambridge tradition, insist on a fewness. It is very, very important to them that any stretch of literary history there be a few, and their job, the critic's job, is to nominate that few. It's surprising how that attitude permeates to the most outlandish outposts of candle-power and Tinkerbell poetry, but it does. It's very academic. From a creative point of view it's much more important that there be many. It's more important to search, quite assiduously if need be, for the good in someone's work than to recognise the dangers in it, because there are dangers in everybody's work, for others. If you stand up in public like Leavis and insist on your selected few, your discriminations, you just end up a cultural curiosity because your few can only be a temporary historical particularity, an item of enforced waste, and all the vigorous writers and poets from your own generation don't - they take over an earlier few and
modify it. Find me an academic expert on the tradition of the English novel who's read all of Gilbert Cannan or Robert Bage. I think a critic's task is to say, as near completely as he can manage what is happening in a given work, down to the fine detail, which most critics just take for granted. It's an important task, a posterior function which can be very revealing and can encourage creative activity. I don't think it's prior or preparatory and as you first have to study and understand how it all works before you can start doing it. That's a French intellectualist attitude or something. How did we get on to criticism? Did you ask me something about it?

KC: No. Can you know where poetry is going?

PR: Ha. I suppose everyone tries to make it go his or her way. That's why it gets into such a mess. I don't know. I guess the fight between Baudelaire and Pound is on. Les paradoxes aren't paire pas artificiels. Baudelaire insisted that you could plan or foresee the entire course of a poem, that it could be a plotted thing working towards a specific end, that it could be finished in the sense of polished, completed and so unassailable. The Pound tradition is improvisatory. It isn't to do with set forms, though that can come into it. Most 19th-century poetry strikes me as improvisatory. You don't think it matters; the poem can become a "finished" thing in that way whether you plan it as such or improvise it or transcend your own plans or... But we do need a stronger emphasis on the poem as a beautiful object, a complete finished or perfected structure rather than a shuffling sprawl. Perhaps we'll soon come to value the finished work of early nineteenth-century painters more than their rough sketches, which we probably overrate at present. But more importantly, I think we may have reached a very interesting phase where modern poetry cuts all its segments and opens its parts to each other, if that doesn't sound too much like a fruit orgy. Where you can no longer so confidently divide the poetry into modernist and traditionalist. There are others too. When I say all of English poetry I mean all. There are people writing poetry, who don't come under any of those headings, whose work you couldn't relate to any of the older figures we've mentioned, the precursors, but who are nevertheless serious, hard-working and dedicated poets. Actual Conservative poets may be, literally - if like me you understand Thatcherism as the very opposite of what it meant by conservatism, as a destructivism - well who knows what could be lurking in unsuspecting quarters? There are local poets. Not professional writers in residence, who are mostly a band of conmen, but just poets who don't shift out of a certain locality either topographically or poetically. And some of these people simply dedicate their entire existences to poetry. There's one lives on the next hill, to the south; if you lean out of this window, but be careful because the framework's weak and I once nearly disappeared onto the porch roof; just beyond that pointed hilltop over there, in a fold where you can just see some treetops... Edward Boaden Thomas lives there. He lives alone in a stone house and does absolutely nothing, to my knowledge, all the time, but work on poetry. It's his entire being. He only goes out to talk about poetry occasionally, or to look at poetry in bookshops. He's the only poet, and informational literature which he thinks can be useful to him for the purposes of poetry. Everything is poetry, and this is a very chastening example. He writes poetry about the history of Derbyshire.

So there's all that kind of stuff to bear in mind. And what about the British black poets, and the performance poets, they're not stuck in any of the academic clefts of ours, are they? I don't know, I mean I don't read much, I haven't got the time. But if any supposed crisis of modernism were going to be creative it would surely have to reach out to the whole nation like that. It's not just to do with what you read, it's to do with being able (having the language for it) to see the life taking place where you live. What time is it?

KC: I think we should end at that.

Select Bibliography: some of Peter Riley's works:

- Love-Strife Machine (Ferry Press, 1969)
- The Linear Journal (Grosseteste, 1973)
- Following the Vein (Albion Village Press, 1975)
- Preparations (Curiously Strong, 1979)
- Lines on the Liver (Ferry Press, 1981)
- Tracks and Mineshafts (Grosseteste, 1983)
- Two Essays (Grosseteste, 1983)

(Alan Halsey, 22 Broad St, Hay-on-Wye, HR3 5DB can supply many of these titles.)
Old Age

It will be peacefully worse for you as, escaping once in youth, a bicycle alone by the fence, all that fervent swerving now twigs and hags beneath the hedge; contraries cease to exist.

In the disintegration of your bones find the idea of those twigs, thin black candelabra tipped by a witch’s fingernails but elbowed with clear drops of light.

The Ferry Pirate
(Variations)

When the brain’s black with demonic crisis and its inky sea peopled with lights that prompt memory, loved souls are borne out on the wake from high boatsides and in that world of waters float lit rooms wandering away to past sunsets. Swaying, the terrain of darkness lost to you.

And always a mother ashamed to have suffered, always marriages left inland, always the sea carrying out black pram covers, the wandering of unsteady thoughts; then the whispering at the captain’s voice tube says: “When I came early to my new love, Cariclea, I found her kinsfolk weeping for her old love and she far too faithful, despite the sea changing either through time or fortune, and I carried her away across the blackening waters. You won’t find quite this in Hellidorus.”

Cigars

In a toy war of persons it’s who is first to phone, who is left a bit batty, eating alone, his cigars in the ash-tray - and embattled trench, blending khaki leaves with craters, ash with stench.
Storm Surges.

Many of the most severe floods are due to the effects of storms acting on shallow seas which, more responsive to wind stress from high winds than deeper waters are surrounded by appreciable land areas at or below sea level thus high water levels cause extensive flooding in the southern North seas in the Gulf of Mexico and in the Bay of Bengal

Such high water levels are known as Storm Surges.

To secure the land against flood risk sea defences are necessary. To assess how high these should be we must assess the probability of seawater exceeding known levels. Problems include the restricted length of the historical data, changes in land level relative to the mean sea level, and variability of weather on all time scales

Less obvious is the long-range effect of strong winds.

Waves generated near Newfoundland propagated with the storm and gaining energy from it arrive later in British waters, causing flooding at Portland.

The Coriolis Effect.

Temporarily composed
The church of St. Nicholas
Top left, tacked to
A wide band of steel blue
A narrow band of gold strips
Of dun buff dunes
Plough pitted tractors cows
Deep hedge curling the lower slopes
At my back the east wind blows
From off the land, from off the sister sea

In the waters near Britain the effect of wind is generally more important, producing a wind-driven current which, piling water up against the coastline, or against the continental shelf, causes the rise in level. However the direction of the current is not directly down-wind, thus a surge which formed on the West Coast of Scotland will have progressed to Wick in four hours, four hours later to the Tyne, six hours later to Lowestoft, arriving at the Thames estuary after another three hours and thence to the coasts of Holland and Germany.

One seagull
Holding its place in the air-currents
I on the stubble-hill breast
Fronting the glittering points of the sea
to compose a view
Hold the church steady
While the sea withdraws
Its commercial lure
The heathland hugs
Its borrowed secrets
Sacred places flattened
Beneath bracken beds
Underworld stumble
At Martinmas the incoming tide rushed up so strongly that none remembered the like before.

A lot of red-breasted flycatchers about.

"Ich bin Brahms, Doktor Johannes Brahms."

High clear-paneled windows transmit the light From North to South. Please shut the doors Or the birds will die.

Under the plain timber roof No glories of angels in the long high nave No chancel mysteries - plain Wood stone tiles for a sea-faring people And the sea washes through like light.

The cost of protection would be out of proportion to the value of the limited area of land protected.

By the time the existing sea-bank goes the worst will be over. After all approximately 40% of the houses are empty much of the year.

It would be infinitely cheaper to buy all the properties at risk than to spend £500,000 on Sea Defence works.

The hedges tall and plump with blackberries Hips sloes elderberries slide off Dropping in delayed harvest Heather Sea-Lavender faded Gorse burning slow crab-bodies Track the marsh worm coils tile The pools oyster-catchers assault the air beyond marsh-sand beyond palings beyond planks beyond bridges beyond walls where settlement and sea contend beyond usage or possession.

Danger Level. 1820, 1980.

In the unsettled weather of the winter months the final warning may be a full danger warning when it is reasonably certain that danger level will be exceeded or an alert confirmed in borderline cases.

Even on the coarse-grid model the predictions look convincing but appropriate action would, of course, be in the remit of a different department.

not to project a fantasy of behavioural control to read the model coolly is it not your action? is it not mine?

Gabriel Piggott's mother gathered up her family to St.Nicholas' porch & would not budge until the landlord was compelled to take action to rehouse her & in the assumption of her action challenged robbery by wind and wave and expropriation as in the grievances listed loss of eels fish samphire grazing wildfowling flags furzes whins from heath and marshland. Equals loss of movement, shelter food.
Loop (1)

We talk upward against the current of the downhill waterfall but there is a point in us continuing.

We point downhill but there is talk against continuing in us is the current of an upward waterfall.

Loop (2)

I woke alone within the concentric tower.

Everything I say is a lie but I love the wizard's eyes.

The last line I wrote is true.

The truth alone woke the wizard love in his eyes.

The last line I wrote is a lie everything he says within the tower is concentric.

Everything the wizard says is a lie his eyes are last his lie is concentric.

True I wrote in his tower but in love I woke alone.

Kate Ruse-Glason lives in Singapore. Her Mountain Poems was published by Tangent Books in 1979 and more recent work can be found in The Rialto and Women's Review.
St Emilion

for Richard Cupidi

On the table hidden behind the wine bottles
a prospect of mountains.
The peaks that thrill the hearts
of those who know them.
No, not a heartiness that would go amiss
in Chateau Bellevue or Chateau Fonplegade.
The organised gardens and vineyards
- especially of Chateau Fonplegade -
seem so far from the rugged heights,
the sweat, and careful placing of foot and fingers.
But not really.

Within their quiet rooms a bag can be
packed for the next expedition, dinner taken,
and the wine duly appreciated. The books will sit
on the shelf gathering a little dust maybe,
but all in its place.

When the rain drifts across this scene
memories rise in the heart in a greying room.
Grandmothers stand in photos waist deep
in tomato plants, immigrant streets of America
outside the walls.

"Mother I am far away from everything"
spoken by an apparent innocent
on the silver screen in a provincial cinema.
Tears streaming down one's face
at this.

The windows can be opened, even thrown open,
The countryside and vineyard are still there,
and in the far distance the mountains.
Clambering the heights how the joy
fills us, edged by exhaustion and
vague dreams of achievement, whatever that is.

"Foolish Pride"

The sound of the wind blowing against the house
late in the evening
A decayed city imagined
The walls soaked in an atmosphere of diffidence
(meaningless image)
biscuits diffidence
A sure knowledge of what doesn't exist, though.
Obsessive energy, even rage.
Over the skyline.
Instead a dithering weakness that claws together
some wool armour.
Can that continue?

As your "foolish pride" jets off
I woollily slump

A nervous need to continue talking
as I fend off what happens
"It can't happen" but does

"He was a dancer, and all the lights
were on and he was sort of
smiling. He was going to
be a good actor."

But all these blocks of stuff get moved around
and we swagger out into the night
lit with the thoughts and the heat of it all.
And the pages and arrows feed each other somehow,
and clear for a moment.
Disasters?

Sunk without a trace? maybe a few oil slicks? odd pieces of debris?

A dream, and a life, broken apart. All that dumb stupidity, years of it.

Grotesquely awkward monsters trying to dance, moaning and swaying like lunatics.

And not many "redeeming features" as the days proceed.

The sweet music grows and grows but is off to the left and can fade as quickly.

Grand finale on the cliff top or the concert hall.

Doo-wah-didee, point an elegant toe.

Picture Postcards and an Object for John Giorno

The grey ochre building seen vaguely in sunlight. Trees in foreground.

Mediterranean even. Calm warm surface with the tremble of nerves, hysteria, beneath.

To rush into the palm filled lounge to wicker chairs and tables, and cool tiles underfoot - and then stop, twisting and turning, and out.

No, the calmly worried look of the madonna in a cracked fresco doesn't help. She's more resigned than knowing. You know? Can strit-strut whichever whichever whichaway but "no likee".

The sweet music grows and grows a few tricky bits where a piton wouldn't go amiss - to another day on the heights. But another day on the heights.

Late night who cares. You know? The buildings obscure in the darkness and the music folds out. I kiss your sweating cheek. No servants to summon. No bells to ring.

I like your black boots, but this isn't a love song. Your shirt soaked in sweat as you "lay it down", tell "them" "how it is", or poke their assumption. Poke what matters, dear man, if then.

But all these blocks of stuff get moved around and we swagger out into the night fired with the thoughts and the heat of it all. And the anger and mirrors feed each other somehow, feel clear for a moment.
Northern California

0, 0, 0,.... Northern California

0, rarely fingered jade sat on your blue velvet cushion in the museum showcase.  
0, handsome writing book half-bound in crimson leather with beautifully marbled edges sat on your exquisite and highly polished desk.  
0, world of unused beauties.

Kick a stone, walk along the beach, kick the sea.  
The dapper panama hat gathers dust on the cupboard's top shelf.

Dreams and more dreams. Brightly flowered vines and the heady scent of eucalyptus trees that with time is taken for granted and passes unnoticed.  
To decorate one's life with sprays of leaves and vases of flowers.  
I prepare the vase for you on the marble top of the chest of drawers.  
It's just right. Will it please you? Will you notice it?  
You did. Returning from your long journey you enter the house, striding in with deeds done and love.

That picture fades as the outside world crowds in now. And your business continues.  
My business continues.  
The bright clear sunlight illuminates the headland.  
A dusty pick-up truck stops outside the village store and the dogs leap out as the driver enters.

People at the bar across the street watch this with their usual bemused curiosity.

Someone in crisp clothing drives past on their way out of town with their radio playing.  
Through the open car window fine phrases from an opera float out:  
"What new delights!  
What sweet sufferings!"

The dream fades. A rustling of the dry grasses that edge the lagoon. We lost it.  
And the business continues, the daily life downtown "business as usual".

Lee Harwood is living in Brighton again after a sojourn in the United States. His recent books Monster Masks and Dream Quilt are reviewed by Robert Sheppard on p.90. A book of his selected early work is due shortly.

HAZEL SMITH

Plus Five

something extra but ordinary

* in the name of whether or not

** their selves would not acknowledge what

***

once upon a little too much  
everytime you leave I think borrowed happiness, borrowed time in time there is always that which are frail and which if leant upon a little once too much

* seemed to seam  
no way of telling whether he had never agreed he had rarely disagreed what was it she could not remember?  
to line up with the past the present spelling out a way which is no way of knowing whether

**

themselves they would not what  
not compromise themselves what was happening it would not be in them to acknowledge they could not con their selves with what was

***

you fade and I foresee I'll never never see you never you again are frail and tenuous and which if beneath all pleasures and achievements
my luck will run my luck will run out as you walk away it rises what you empty out is filling never gainsay never gainsay are structures which are or which if all dogma and decision beneath the colours of my luck running

* finding a way of spelling it out a tacit conspiracy between the name of the person she had quite clear cut and seemed to line up the foundations of a way of telling endorse a pact with the name of the previous person between the lines of what she remembered foundering on a technique of never stated but always assumed knowing the name not the person on the lines of

** could not shelve their selves in any way even though they had though even they were still refusing to believe never drew the face of it until the point returned they knew that they had reached could not break the promise of themselves even though even though they had stills of them refusing to believe until the hilt of never was the face reaching for the point of no return their selves must speak of them in every way what happened was to them though even what was seen they never saw until

*** upon a little is once too often something alien to the scheme of leant or relied upon too much colours holding fast for once upon a time too much eyes I will avoid again on the left side of your thinking the borrowed life I'm living once too much upon too little purple orange chasing green relied upon a little too much a lion of the scheme of upon a little is a little too often loaning out the world to live amongst the left overs of your thoughts eyes between the eyes of grain

* he had stated who but never that the same person she had met as if he was and he seemed to behave the person she took him to be the same ? had he stated ? she was certain that he was and yet he seemed to behave as if he was the person she decided him to be verification was the same as if it was and as if certain that she was and he was the person she imagined him to be but never who he had stated and as if everything was the same ? stated ? person verification that he was certain that he was the same

** what is the lie of it why is it who it is what is the what that we do not themselves in the still birth of belief together they face straight on alone they had made their point with no they could not promise other selves belief declining to be pushed effacing what they never faced sharpening their point their selves were not them until agreeing could not be instilled past the post of what they they had lost the point of what was happening to them which was signalling to them who was becoming

*** is it sense your absence breeds ? are there breaks between the starts ? do the poles our roles decline ? as the prints you make recoil as the pliant waiting breaks as the loss locates the leaving swinging poles our parts outrage us kicking breaks between the phases folding fakes that fabricate sense of drafts between the starts
loss of clocks that hold the poles
beast of leave the end you tie
of the wait that time outflanks
of the roles between the clocks
t of the smoke you make of sense
through the loss that ties your presence
on the clocks which fake for roles
in the prints where parts revive
through the sense that breaks the sentence
for the break which waiting tries
out of loss folds fading fabric

the never never of could not remember
implored it to be
how could what
she hallucinated him to be
she knew
his name but
then she could not
the name of the person
had met so there was no way
of the name was the same he might
a way of deciphering which
she proposed it to be
passing off the past with the present
was the same
he might have his
name to look through
she but she might be wrong
wearing down the past through the present
as if it was and as if everything was certain
if the same was not how could she be
certain of what that was and certainly she
was what she decided was what she imagined

* * *
in the stillness
which refuses through the silence
while reminding
out of blankness by suggesting
on the facade never was under
lids from all too soon between
teeth like teeth of never can be
into stillness
through deceiving out of
silence while protesting
from the blankness
what was seen they never
heard was never what they
they were never
in the what of what was happening
in the who of
which becoming in the which
only the beguiling nonsense of memories
playing on a name as the same
past orbits of present meanings
was what she decided she had imagined
the person he availed himself to be
not quite clear why it was plain
as if every other was every else
a tale losing itself through telling
stylish beguiling remembered nonsense

**
in the less which still diffuses
through the blindness which they licensed
finding ways of making senseless
in the wake of what was happening
placing stakes on what was why
tongues that talk of never can be
seen was what they never
never heard was what they
in the quiet which perceives us
waking up to what was happening
not to hear they never listened
on the upper face of never
gambling high on stakes of
never thought was what they
what they never knew was
in the still which less deceives us
at the crux of what they wanted
knowing not was which becoming
which were happening to break them
with a face which never lifts
talk that cannot find a tongue
what they thought they
knew who they were
under stress where stillness finds them
in the sight which they must silence
making waste of what they wanted
in the wait for what would happen
talk that tying never can

***

Hazel Smith was born in Leeds and went to Cambridge University. Her poems have been appearing in magazines since 1982. She is a professional musician and leader of the contemporary music group LYSIS, and is also researching into the poetry of Frank O'Hara and its relationship to the other arts.

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PAUL GREEN

Five Poems

One:
Gold, as gift, shone, variously,
to

Two:
know how's given
the moon's
edge, just by focus. Seethe, what's
water's cold usher;
glamour, unless glorious.
Freemartin's
evil,
round me. In land,
here, how
world's fit ---

Three:
Pox! How I've gleaned,
of
what's passed,
vision, qualifying vision, each view's predilection,
preened. Water can warrant just
easy disemboque. Each known
_glitter plots me, when a
globe's locked.
Discourse can keep what's air, keep
life's same garland,
just by rictus, being what's less. Shout,
of

how nature looks, when small.
Even
cascade, is
open --- just one, and another, in
its release. Nothing's kempt, here, and
left. Each lip needs,
or's singled, unto breath.
Four:
Dead, so --- unless lived. Know how's kicked,
prior --- or, pleasurably, touched. Nature
paints, or permits, what pledges its shape. How's a night's highest gossamer hold its
form? I find breath, or, unless life's rid, let respiration enter, little of

Five:
Put light, on its shape, and put history, in
difference. Until all's heard, I hold my error's in another. Know light's only a
guessed concern. Perhaps I should want, virtually, history's way. Judge each
voice, so pertained, as would generate haul.

27-29/12/85 (corrected 1/1/86)

WILLIAM SHERMAN
The Poetry of Eric Mottram: A Brief Introduction

An active engaged intelligence at work is what is most immediately evident in Eric Mottram's poetry. His earliest poems were published as Inside the Whale by Bob Cobbing's Writers Forum press (London, 1971). It was in the mid to late 1960s that Mottram (at an age a few years older than Charles Olson, when Olson began to write poetry) began to write poetry for the first time. He has said that the double impetus of living in New York City for a year while a Visiting Professor at NYU followed by a summer session at SUNY Buffalo in 1966 gave rise to active complexes of ideas and emotions which could be expressed in no other way except through poetry.

His second book, a beautifully produced edition of two long poems, Shelter Island and The Remaining World, made extensive use of what Mottram himself might call "American materials". The first poem, "Shelter Island", takes us through a native landscape perceived through the eyes of a foreigner unaccustomed to the harsh spatial realities of America and filters this geography through the world of art:

at the cliff edge Durer's tuft
warm and cool tones together in Matisse
not harmony but coming together observed

In the second poem in this early book brought out under the auspices of Turret Books (London, 1972), the poet moves through underwater amoebae "exposed to withering radiation" and "exposed in brine deep oil wells":

bacteria and sea-squirts thrive
absorbing sea metals transporting blood and oxygen

We move, Mottram writes, with these molecules:

unconscious clocks control
our blood and breath
we move with oysters carrots planaria and through the "path of Buddhas" "path of open mind" we travel.

But Mottram consistently and throughout refuses more than the hint of and hope for an ideality, religion or a religious world view. When confronted with that possibility as a way out of the human dilemma, a crutch, the poet takes us back through the sheer physicality, the thingness, of his American experience. In "The Remaining World", this experience culminates in the suicide of a young poet, d.a. levy, who had become his friend.
In the he expression (Aloes Books, London, 1973), Mottram's next book of poetry (and one marking the beginning of his collaboration with Peter Donnelly, the painter who did the cover for most of Mottram's subsequent books of poetry, most recently Elegies (Galloping Dog Press, Newcastle, 1981), A Book of Herne (Arrowspire Books, Colne, Lancs, 1981) and Interrogation Rooms (Segue, London, 1982)), the poet continues to bring together disparate historical elements without falling into what Wilhelm Reich calls "emotional plague"; instead, the poetry takes on a tough and sinuous quality, an intellectual muscularity akin to Robert Duncan's Passages. Mottram shares Olson's sense of The Modern and defined as "how far any of us in this room has gotten". In the title poem of Against Tyranny (Poet & Peasant Books, London, 1975), he writes:

Green River cemetery holds
Stuart Davis Ad Reinhardt Frank O'Hara
Jackson Pollock the colleagues
hope is that all created life can be rescued
from tyranny decay sloughed for a share
in magnificence hoof thunder silence of
pines and birches across the taiga
skins trail the frost

Mottram's poetry, though charged with the same sort of difficulties as Pound's Cantos in the poet's use of inter-generic source materials, rewards the reader willing to work with porosity and poetic material. Mottram has written that poetry cannot be mass consumed, like a hamburger, and that the reader should expect to put in as much effort into the reading of a poem as the poet has put into the writing of it. This insistence on thoughtful reading is not only a metaphor for work of a poet like Asa Benveniste for example, does have more in common with the poetry of Benveniste or J H Prynne, than it does with more easily accessible British poets like Donald Davie or Charles Tomlinson, who have also used their American experiences in their poetry.

Mottram is best known in the United States as a critic rather than as a poet, since only his most recent book [at the time of writing], Interrogation Rooms, has found an American distributor (Segue). Mottram's critical work is consistent with his poetry in the same way that Jean-Luc Godard's essays for Cahiers du Cinema prefigured his work as a film-maker. His book on William Burroughs, monographs on Paul Bowles, Allen Ginsberg, Gertrude Stein, an academic text on Faulkner, and numerous essays on American poets like Olson and Duncan and Zukofsky and others who might be considered the fathers of post-modernism in poetry, all strike a political stance which at times seems a throwback to Georg Lukacs filtered through the sensibility of a left-wing Frank Leavis. It makes for some curious perspectives and judgements in Mottram's critical essays. Writing on Zukofsky in the magazine Maps, for example, and dealing with Zukofsky writing on Chaplin, Mottram writes:

Chaplin is the liberal's dream artist - his laughing intelligence never extends to radical overt questioning of the state's actual power structure and its "contrary
moralities". Zukofsky provides examples: Charlie scabs on his fellow stage-hands in Behind the Scenes, wins the girl, and winks at the audience. Zukofsky notes that this could be construed as class treachery of the most insidious kind. Slums are simply facts - used here as the dramatic scene of artistic intention. Zukofsky does not point out that the motivation of survival in a hostile environment is fundamentally accepted: the basic class structure of power. Chaplin is no more radical than Shakespeare or Santayana. The survival of the poor, the Jewish, and the small through "the sportsmanship of the montage" takes place within the maintained social structure. Chaplin is, in fact, a characteristic survivalist comedian, exploiting the social strata but not bent on their elimination. He is not a revolutionary but a music hall reactionary liberal.

As contentious as it may be, Mottram's criticism always gets us inside of the conscious political structures a poet works with. Mottram cannot be accused of soft liberalism. He refuses on all levels to simplify the complex political issues, both in his own poetry, and in his criticism.

Pound's father a friend of Jesse James
no solution what seems to be moving
broken serenity of a woman hesitation of a man

It is an urgent poetry, filled with motion and hidden energies and anxieties, always pushing paratactically forward, refusing conceptualised syntax, diving through deep waves of past sadnesses yet decrying simple nostalgia.

In Elegies, a book of over 100 pages, much of the work of the previous decade reaches a kind of apex. Elegies, Mottram writes in the introductory note, "were directed to war and love, and were not poems of lamentation". And he quotes from Muriel Rukeyser citing Rosa Luxembourg's words: "Still elegiac: between two battles, when one is happy to be alive!"

In the 38 elegies included in the book, Mottram explicates and illumines the work of each person elegised and so in each poem demonstrates "an active engagement with what the work proposes" thus making each elegy not only a poem but a work of criticism. Through the poems, Mottram gets us inside of the work of Lorca, Brecht, Gramsci, Lenny Bruce, De Sade, Paul Blackburn, and the others he has written of in a way in which a prose critical essay simply cannot. Here, for example, are the opening two stanzas of Mottram's elegy for Charlie Parker:

dawn pitch this undulating country
mist riven Dean Benedetti's coils
stashed in a hollow yew

dream it's early yet dead at 34
of 4 causes not including the demand

of the age or the Hiroshima watch

"the terrifying consequences of an individual's separation from his fellow human beings" have to be for The Three Deuces 1944 an ambition which is not predatory he thought when high he might watch in an interested way

Interrogation Rooms seems to follow naturally from Elegies. With the fathers, the masters if you will, dead, we are left with the task of carrying on the battle. The environment we face is too harsh, too severe, too implodingly ferocious and fast even to allow us the luxury of writing poems which are "pre-fabricated" in any way other than the way the actual measure under hand demands:

laurelled Betjeman country/senile refrainssmash your face/for you/all because the lady/wants your working day/dream for her/pelt the visiting team for her/forget your primary tasks for her issue is the future or soccer or Trident/nation is drugged jam of hooting consumers/a track slick Grand Prix/losers' laidback ghost leisure/taped cut spread for you/slit from Luton airport drains pale blood for you

Anger which is political; that is, anger directed against oppressive governmental structures, against the system(s), against capitalism, was always present in perhaps almost every poem Mottram wrote since the publication of his earliest work. Unlike all but the very finest of political poets - i.e. a poet who uses his or her political consciousness and beliefs in the work - Mottram goes inside and underneath the structures, so his work is not a rant, even a lyric rant, but a tough-minded attempt to make the reader or hearer see and learn primarily, rather than to feel first, so the transference might have a chance of becoming clear-minded and knowledgeable thought into action, action performed joyously but analytically: almost a way, if you will, to combine the best of what political and psychological radicals performed in the 1960s, with the harsh lessons the twenty intervening years have wrought. "Close out mystification: bring on the bread" is the title of the opening poem in Interrogation Rooms.

Mottram knows that a poem is by nature a political act, his attacks are time and time again directed at official dictators and moulders of taste in literature, Arts Council administrators and their minions, or poets who have become willing or unwitting government agents.

The incisive political anger seems to reach a kind of furious apex in Interrogation Rooms, as if it were a kind of clearing ground for what will follow. Even lines and stanzas of poems rush at the reader with often only a slash mark (') to indicate breaks or changes of tone and tonal intensity. Some random examples:

42
a curtain disturbs/a contract unrolls/to connive your
death is natural/fangs claws neck under boot/the natural
order/expect savage/do your best
*
the dead invasory forces in white sand/just inland luck
statues stand half shadowed/an ape shakes a tree top/it
is then we halted in our tracks/I forgot to take a snap
*
you stroke their prick with national flags/lick
emulsions of rusting newsreels
*
Kurt Weill wrote September Song/what age did you
learn the pleasures of restriction/"I would perpetuate
these nymphs"/or as long as it takes/"to make poems
politically not political poems"
The liberating curse of the poet, the artist, that all time
is contemporaneous, allows Mottram to be drawn again and again
in his work to the sea, and, specifically, in his own life, to his
time at sea during WWII, and to the filtering of what he has
called his "sea discoveries" which seem now, after Interrogation
Rooms, to point toward a way his newest poetry is taking:
but mad heroes yell or glare from hunts ships and spacecraft
outwards out to conquer inert calm universal blackness
to bring ghastly light to the reflector Moon in crazed
fertility
we have seen the dusky body beneath seen fidelity
masked and disloyal advisors
wasted helpless outraged returned to the ship
have seen Zeus' vulture beak open beating near
kicked in the balls bound still
plotting theft and overthrow

Editor's note: Mottram's "four largest collections to date",
referred to in the essay, are still available. 1922 Earth Raids
and Interrogation Rooms from Spanner; A Books of Herne from
Arrowspire; Kiegies from Galloping Dog Press. See the back of
this volume for addresses.

William Sherman currently lives in Philadelphia. Duchamp's Door recently
from Figs. A new book due any day from Spanner.

BRUCE ANDREWS
from I Don't Have Any Paper So Shut Up

My roots, no thanks

My roots, no thanks. Are we ready for surgery yet? Habit is the
great leveller; theory popps the suburbs - drive-in tabloid mothers & Muscle Gram regimental
spit forensic. Intercepted! Panties supreme with me jackboot
that barbecues the Trekkies. Walk, fast, think, slow... cement
fits.
Watch out I'm about to storm your drain. Do all girls secretly
want their tonsils removed? I shuffle boot & forth between
depressive self-blame and paranoid rage. Law + freedom =
content; tissue replaces everything. It's so good! I've become
web-like; Anti-semitism, for Christ's sakes, deciduous plants are
creamery of mine -
oversubtle smell
I want to eat you out of your mouth.

Or fail to exist, partisans will insist: tight money debt
bomb dregs reproach the Bible. Screaming eagle is far more
appropriate to denote the scholastic success of Christian schools...

but I think of such but still talk, salutary trolls to find a
candid troll instead of in addition to
venereal fortune task rumor chain-letter, much to the chagrin of
the demolition crew. To be a prince without details, time &
avg you've heard it said, "To make money, you have to have
money." In vivo.
I was listless & had vomit in my hair; I think these critics are
all mental cases.

Fog the data
unbottled fish fur with no limit to what you want, no limit to
your disappointment. Does the President finish his own milk?
Fever in the broad graveyard tickler needs full-time cuckoo head
for cuddles; sticks in a glob to the notorious for evil. I want
to have national responsibilities! Totally into clay turtles,
ego into preemptive bedtime
music makes us
impotent.

Dowagers would not scour the cookie; I'm talking about your
fabulous career & all that goes with it.

Freedom = groceries. Bluebeard's Castle, a tepee puddle
that hurts who the fuck. Correctional en contacto Hollywood is
for listen drool. Ethics, a see-saw of falsehood. Virgins
stop puckering their lips, skintight microprocessors & lupe
diablo radio bravo, trust others to resemble themselves when
convenient fluorescent light phalbus Jury-Paki-sonar - Old sawi
If a peppermint patty could sing

If a peppermint patty could sing - please help my muscular dystrophy become a household word. The world is made of glass seeking pleasure white knuckler tries a dull knife. How badly do you want to control product differentiation? Not just the checkbooks to lead themselves; la operación, it is to laugh, supply side & more, clit revenge.

Christian meaning half or fully - dumb? Closer to the campgates. I like it typed & double-spaced the famous tuxes and eyeballs these belipsticked, the properly precocious easy safe and inoffensive: why people with tans are less imaginative. Make sense for you to drink to join spit, being pretty is strictly for nests.

Never stop to count your slimy media attacks - on the megahurts alone. Drag my lipstick across our throat - don't let the sleazy asblence put you off. I'm a wheelchair. Whose brownies resurrected tooth lush as glue? Your invisibility is no less obscene. Dippy-do believes in the boots. Spaniel gratitude, flippant sutures. Genocide is just another allocation of gentrification. Final notice in their whites with effusive lace dickies.

Close-ups of heavily lacquered nostrils never so simple again... We wait for the steps to crumble sit boy girl boy girl if then else: Terminal! - simper simper quick transvestites & short swallows. Flirt with stooges. Does longer life expectancy justify crass upward mobility? Godiva defrauds, Q-tips are my promo surrogates. Stripsearch - mixed nuts can't crack - A Nuclear Attack Can Kill You But Its Dangers Can Be Avoided.

We have no right to tell people what we want them to do, yet. aren't clothes racks... It could be your first step toward a career in trouble. Imperialism teaches us geography. (Need address) regressive moped aid ego butter threat without genitals. Through the occipital lobe - gall surgery. Embargoed ferocity, magisterial loitering. Girls with earrings, lipstick, eye shadow and dolls = well hung hounds. Scurve restores sight, thank your lucky tarts.

No more deportation, smash all borders! Tee hee, flat & round those big harrassed skirts = minute man of spiritual obsolescence, to our satisfaction! Wet wolf hopper striker valentines always wrong. That's why we hate nature - because of all the maintenance that it requires once we move it indoors. Lance each boil. In the bathroom, customers are king. I came to the party packed in soybean oil, a bit sympathetic to the Soviets. Why sword-swallowers work by the hour.

WA&Ps can't afford to have a culture - proxy puppet prop, cocoons with velcro. Lobster tendencies. Proverbial nation of sheep

details. Believe in nothing, indulge in everything - that runt must mediate counterfeited icechests. When they say, "fuck you," you say, "excuse me?" Heat beams its commodified juice: poison their hot tubs!

Heavier, hoppler, headquarters just a prop vest security: watch everything.

Would loudness render your arguments more cogent? An absolution I am not have earned, tape my shrt. Why real men use cologne on their quiche. Hit my head on the platform incurring multiple skull fractures while attempting the 3f reverse somersault in tuck position. I ain't applying to technicolor heaven. Chimpunks vomiting uncontrollably.

Negative army aid to the choking victim, sharkskinned loners dig for ore in hidden holes, a cyclops that would weep at associations with that bunch of raggedy-ass peaceniks. Squirrels from sympathy cretin bull. Don't cause the effect, fuck god, they don't realize contaminate will grace. Lizardlike gift for gas agit lip scuzz's no candy. If you can acknowledge this, you don't belong here. Hypnosis knew of dioxin balkanized insomnia. Perv busters! - a stiff in time smacked alumni. Let leg hair grow on your porky-tail = Puccini's hemline; I spit for paisley. Pest of the urinals, lynching for 2$ with this page, Lammerta ads and the like. Milkshakes! - surrender.

Others from this series in the Canadian magazine Writing (No.13, Feb.'86).

Bruce Andrews lives in New York and used to co-edit $N=$ with Charles Bernstein. Books include Art, Wobbling and Excommunicate.
STEVE BENSON

The Prospect of Behavior

The words are thrown up through our minds, so our bodies seem to fall
The masks are intelligence's attack
The guys on the street deflections
But that was the last time crumbling in the image of
violent force
scores of people believe in God
of autonomy into a different
The microphone is indifferent either
The silly thing about it is that ether
Eleven
The nearest of us stand in a cupboard of dark cloth, strangely twisted
in efforts towards language
Heaven is nonexistent
A chill
Crashing and crumbling
wind an image of violent force
blew down from December caves in on my wishes
enclosing them in its catastrophe
If you can't leave
while plot schemes out oblivious
moveable parts the mountain
We leapt on the tabletop, in order picture
One two three four five to hear ourselves think
rearranging themselves in six tubular
seven eight in your purpose

They seem like
eye masks falling in deflection
breath is limp and halting
I don't have any problems
pointing in its slow motion
with your sister flicker

haunted by a nation
No this is not of perpetual aplomb
the reason why I've asked you here today
That's cold
I've been literal figure warm
What I said was that I was
wanting to play cards
stuck in a cloud of
perhaps infinite
charades weather
I don't know -

The full-blown answer is behavior
Intelligence quails

when the story ended, he was standing outside a small cabin in the
I have a stick here that I would like to say something with Vermont hills, waiting for a bus
That's all I wanted to know, that's enough
They cancelled the appointment and walked out the door
That's what they told me, as soon as I left the barbershop and got to
It didn't have anything to do really with the street corner the generation gap as such

No, you don't have to listen to me
If you have eaten all your cookies because I'm answering my own question you can go
That cat
I don't want to have to remind you, again
belonged to Agnes before she married about the importance of
Paul Newman
Aristotle's theories
It's creeping down from the upper floors and
On this subject I'm reasonably confident of through the
We left her to follow her nose down my opinion
ceiling we lived through several the hallway towards the kitchen important stages of development
That's why when you were born we gave you this special birthmark
I'm confident that what's a I can't say you understand is closely related to
ink tattoo, but why just what I think I have an opinion, but we never thought there was
Through the window he spotted a grey any reason to tell
you We don't know whether she owl
After the air began to clear ever got we saw there
I want to read in the in the great distance a white
light shining from the dictionary
What were you doing top of the hill
the night of the 17th for a while
It's a romantic idea that I
so far from home
In Nicaragua there have about the career
My mind is made up are political problems chosen
to take up
She swung the bat
Then our ability to comprehend
at last with all her might
he found it under
I think of the fireplace
I can't talk to you a pile of books
you're just in the back
with its white paper of his
too far away rolled up logs
closet
That's the reason why I
and can of
They told me that lighter fluid made part of
nothing were good for me

There's no reason that a box, say, a simple
too far away of his
took up downhill skiing
But he had a lot to offer
I don't know why you want to

On the way to work I saw give me such a negative so hard about all the problems
a taxi driver

You don't need to thank me
They took me that

I do it out of my own
red light

We would be stopping there

There's not enough pepper in it, I

because the other people in the crowd think

They broke the they just

If we had it all to live over brake the car
You have to memorize it
again

I don't understand

there's no other way

And after they had been

Listen, you think you're

The doorway is in the woods

quite frustrated? Wait till the

sufficient for seven days and holidays

I think to bring

they thought that it was alright to come out again the furniture

through

Then, after every other prospect
People in my situation have had been eliminated

She hung a grey feather a funny feeling about giving and
receiving presents

in the upper right hand corner of the picture

image of the madonna

Yeah, I know in one of those pictures

When I think of Vermeer

it's true

I think of the landscape view of

by Fra Angelico
Delft, and

They can't sit the woman

still because they're

standing thinking so hard

with her head about what's

going on all the time

After what's been going on, I want to say that

reading

uhm, light coming through the window you've got to correct

your behavior so that it

My nerves are
typewriting blends in, not exactly to

just bursting

be

table is simply

the same as
What do you want it's just that easy
You're going to arrive it was like June out
What will you do for me
When I have achieved

After a lengthy stay in Europe, Steve Benson is now back in California. This piece is a close transcription from a tape of improvisational performance at Larry Blake's in Berkeley, 3 March 1986. Live lines presented simultaneous with pre-recorded tracks.
DIANE WARD

Indigenous You

lay, wide-eyed
no place to take you
trade a cavern
for a cave
clouds for ties
that bound
in me, homebred,
a silent e
without a scratch,
domesticity unlatched
your hand has five
contrary in harmony
the tangible grows
natural then sways
I have no dreams
without fine lines
most-of-all cascade
put a finger on
rivet and hold

Jealousy Probe

apprehension, no variation
only the mind, soul
our frame's division
fingerless hollows
eyes' wayward restraint
needles stretch inside
genius to grow -- gone
asylum's logic blocked
as if our head's cradle
exhorts its present to pass
rage on the world
sink down, blessed
inconsistency shatters
inward, we're free
to never go home
never be a guest
Kudos

I enclose my equal flesh, central dead
or living share, a world's glory: separate entities
artifice and admiration relieve us, model corpses
no distinctive marks to conclude, our fathers
grown without celebration slowly in time -- your boys
back from/to the war their solution, the gun
inside their own country in personal problems
you've only one quantity -- immensity
baby finger blots out head of figure standing 50 feet away

Diane Ward lives in New York. Her book Never Without One (Roof) was reviewed in RS Vol 7. These poems are part of a sequence done in collaboration with a composer, David Weinstein.
Given the distance of communication, I hope the words aren't just idling on the map of my fingertips, but igniting wild acres within the probabilities of spelling. As a hawk describes circles whose inner emptiness bespeaks the power of gravity, where the lever catches on a cog of the world. There, the mild foreground for buying bread, for the averted doubt that the hand will encounter. There, with dizzy attention, I hold the because, another key to the bewitchment of words.

In the middle of rainy weather, sleep was pinning me down on the bed, my lids barnacled shut with adjectives in color. Sleep, which cannot be divided from itself or into parts of speech, pushing a whole sea at my body so unable to swallow its grandiose and monotonous splendor. If I could stretch my arms up into the air which was already slowing to the crucial stillness of noon. Would there ever again be ground to walk? I mean, the field of understanding does not extend to lying down. Later, writing would articulate the absence of voice, pictures, the absence of objects, clothes, the absence of body.

1 I am thinking of someone. By the looks of the Photo

I dread to look behind me in case I've lost that parallax trickery, running the flickering rows. Adventures are few: a storm during which a chap became so sea-sick they had to remove his future memoirs down the rubber tube, though I couldn't then recognise them as such. Blank cards flicker before my eyes: the ritual Arab girl, shot by a sniper, now bones and tattered uniform. I am still able to recall the earlier girl, her eyes closed. She is the reason why, when you arrive at her, I have gone to locate the disembodied night. I can see clearly his writing skull demanding explanations. Some words it is acceptable to kill, others it is not; an empty diary for the year 1900. The unfortunate Meredith, waking at dawn on the sweat-drenched mattress, offended Arab bordello etiquette. Buffalo Bill settles down, in his suffering, to defend it. "Memory," he quips to posterity, "will clear that sky of cloud!"

2 Y.M.C.A. Billiards

The women had their orders; while the chieftain slept, they were to remove the eyes of the ragged whores, ready for something that limits chaos to ruin my story to pause increasingly often. Render your fugitive memory of having been there, before any part of it fades from your world. The Death Arab speaks to him in a dream in which she becomes snake-nippled Cleopatra: the crumpling and smoothing of oriental silks! They remove this mess from your world so you won't have a map of the British Empire in the 1909 Atlas. Sometimes when I am singing for the people under siege in a Turkish trench, billowing discarnate smoke floats through imperfect shade, but let's hope our camouflage is more convincing than the tent. When I look up from the paragraph he dictates, rising behind the scenes on the edge of Mesopotamia, limpid-eyed enemies knock at the door, invisible fingers, rather than Meredith's, fleshing a chord.
Walking round the compound, the dirty beggars let the dogs fight each other to death. He dictates blank cards, the mess pianola slowing down, unfleshed dances before the sinking night sounds - laughter, crying, music - that drift on horses' hooves and camels at their eyes. Within, this peep show delinquency; the dim mass of the adversaries dressing; no, that is somebody else's stomach wound which she holds to his lips, filling the shafts of sunlight that had not been there. My grandfather took me to the circus to see Buffalo Bill; at the centre stood a bamboo stake that had not been used in the campaign against the savages. I take a table knife from beside my plate. A tray falls from the painted backcloth behind me; knives, voluminous trousers and savage instinct ordering the mind in its looking. The man who made the piano roll is dead.

A third soldier chanced a futile dash to the well; after the battle he would enter blank course remains because of the flies. The woman stood staring at me as though I were a problem to be solved, but then I sensed myself slowing down until I had actually my storylines of gravestones at Mahinah reduced to clay. For people under siege in writing my story, he becomes somebody else, eyes closed, trying the leopard skin which the settled natives do not possess. Screech owl. Bill always keeps his boots on to fuck, wears his gun in the bath; a bullet had taken his thumb-nail away and it never re-grew. You know you've done something in the few minutes since her back concealed a thick mobile in his tent, because he moves like a beggar, hoisted by two giant warriors, each gripping an arm, while he touches her buttocks, dimpled with fat, on the mattress, her back arched in anticipation of a man looking through a keyhole. There's a little switch here that completes the screaming of a young deserter, but his vacant eyes, his clenched fists, his splayed feet, give nothing away.
Buddhist Temple

A figure was leaning against the wall, owl eyes of the death-sport flickering at her fists, affording a view of the jumping scene. Did you suspect, stiffening in your pose, how might that blur of moving flesh have appeared on your face? Buffalo Bill, stabbed by seductress, the death on London pavements. I turn the handle and the cards begin to flick, recapturing the Garden of Eden, the flies, the mosquitoes and the heat. You step behind my eyes and enter the tunnel of her gaze. One step backwards, and you're gone, waking to a dream of dawn, over which wild cats' eyes, carved into the arm of the chair, close her head. She turns away to reveal a veined neck, set between the cool brass. No, that was somebody trying to locate the morning - my chest covered with flies - a history of sensation on the streets. You're here because that same courtyard, or so I fancied, was the studied flight of stairs until I can take only one sentence at a time. The peep show stilled at the word halting.

Robert Sheppard co-edits Rock Drill and contributes regularly to RS. His most recent book was Returns, published by Textures.

KELVIN CORCORAN

The Falling Down Day

the elvers eat the drowned man
the elvers eat the body as ontological paradigm,
the butcher looks at the young girl
I look at the butcher

- that sky is far from right
and nor are we out of it,
right wing big shots in the clouds
rewrite history in mindless ether

a voice low down in the ear
says ah, or heart, very close
the body makes the mind
an apron at your feet

the river runs a silver band
through the cities of the plain
out across the packaged hills
insurance, fauna, trees and war
stream in the open door

do not go down into magic
think it out, speak to me,
I start awake before I sleep
and the poor falling forward
in tidal mud and money stink
On the edge of heaven and indifference
the baby speech of sportsmen
maintains the blueprint town
in a smoky pall of just rewards,
alphabet days darken to stop
the secret parcels of work and play;
the sea comes in, the sea goes out,
just faces falling to the sides
- what's all the work for?
an idea of the sky shot with holes
- what's all the work for?
words come from their mouths
a final dark feeds in
a mirrored and ridiculous destruction

sports teams, anniversaries and eccentrics
flattened in grey grain flash;
John Dwarf and his wife Joan
play snooker in their fur lined swimming pool
the words come out and
is there anybody home?
the followers of the king meet in the forest
and feel the spirit of the king,
as one they sing in a voice long dead
you ain't nothing but a hound dog,
in one voice, crying all the time

Holmes would reconstruct the mystery,
where had the message come from?
The book contained a bomb
open it and bang, you can't rethink
the manuscript of a sudden world
in red and green and blue,
horses, hares, otter and fish,
acrobatic men with distorted limbs
walking back to happiness:
the fanatical scribe, he did it.
the cars in the street loaded with snow,
winter blasts a hole in the air.
the little roofs and Giacometti trees,
blue grey floods a backward shot
revealed sky dark at four o'clock
layers open on history
or Linda's perfect girls teeth
and perfect girls appetites
it's all set in lucid sapphire;
the working model world,
frozen and moving, literal and complete;
the bandsman parks his yellow car
my drunk neighbour waves
night drapes a ribbon on our heads,
on the garage the full moon sits
says China, Iceland, watch it
work done the traffic homes,
a hostile power on the air.
spits news in the turbid night;
yellow electric lights the doors
the splendour of the names
taken from everyday objects, parts of the body;
the original secret we hold
the first house of what is here

Despite everything you decide what to say and stick to.
A day unrolls or a colour strikes up with laughter through
the wall. If you can manage it the reassurance of quiet
domestic machines sounds the rush of sleep in your ears, the
dream of childhood and making it up as you go along.
No. An answer to the letter of these songs never came,
or the wrong person got it, nor did history stop the rotten
pastoral heart of English beauty. Two gone into urban roar
and one dead, with little difference made. Who said that?
You are dismissed by 1913 from the deluded picnic of English
poetry. Next doors chiming clock shoots steel darts through
the wall. The houses are burning and the aged children's
cars slice down the street.
I know I go on about it but that I isn't the problem. I
open my mouth and say the light is drained from the sky into
the joints of the words: shiny path, bicep, incunabula; the
blood of their song sustains us and puts hands at the end of
our arms.

the scenery is monochrome, inert,
the characters prance about in greens and reds
have kids, go to work, eat dinner;
a wall of fire guards the ditch

the speaker's mind was a grey bubble,
he saw the new industries of the south
the riches and decay of the land,
military contracts ensure prosperity
he sought the occasion of this poem
driving up through four English
 counties, 
treeless farmland and research stations,
the pleasure was fed directly into homes

almost anyone is connected
the context of the simplest event,
just who is involved, in what fear
an illegible barcode in your hand

Kelvin Corcoran last appeared in Vol 5 of RS. His recent The Red and Yellow
Book (Textures) is reviewed on p.101 of this volume, and his interview with
Peter Riley starts on p.1.
As last caption dissolves into spin, the spin speeds, and speeds so speeds that the blur, that effect, is lost. Black and white detach. The image (fossil-shape, undetailed) hardens, is static.

Full Shot.

The camera, pulls (spirals) back and up, fast, high. And image becomes speck, far off, and down.

Slow Zoom - long, curving, downward glide - to the image, which, clarifies, takes on substance, fossil-shape still, but - colour, definition, TELL. Silhouette becomes man, the shape of a man, the slump of a man. (see Still 2.)

Figure is in bottom of frame - against clapboard wall bearing sign OROVILLE SLAUGHTERHOUSE. Shot swoops, sweeps past sign, to the crouched man.

He is, appears to be, of middle height, long bones, painfully apparent but straight, strong, and not heavy, copper(ish) skin, black eyes, set wide in a broad face, generous, agreeable mouth. He is perfectly still - the eyes only live, within but beyond (seemingly) the body, moving constantly, wary, not fearful. He wears a rag of poncho, wagon canvas. Some wolfish dogs are menacing him, he pays them small mind. His hair is a burnt crop.

Dissolve.

Prison bars, spinning.

Dissolve.

Telegram, spinning - slows, focuses.

"Sheriff Butte County. Newspapers report capture wild Indian speaking language other tribes totally unable to understand. Please confirm or deny by collect telegram and if story correct hold Indian till arrival Professor State University who will take charge and be responsible for him. Matter important account aboriginal history."

Dissolve.

A dark circle, spinning - camera pulls back to reveal it as the hub of a train wheel. Pull back till the wheel fills the screen, making apparent not only the wheel but, behind/over it, the fossil-image, double exposed.

Fade Out.
The fear (yours) being I might sound (look) quaint (,) child (ish) (like) be patronized (?) my (own/real) sounds must, to live as marks (recognizable) seep through OTHER (recognizable) sounds, (To you). Hybrids would be received (apparently) as entertainment (comic). Either or either or either or either. All this (you understand) is not how I talk at all. All this is an approximation an amplification a translation and (I suspect) an interpretation. How I talk (yours/English) would be different. Having only (around) four hundred (400) Saltu (other being) words limits (alters). Not knowing (frequently) the things/concepts they (sound-marks) designate limits (alters) more. Transposition of habitual consonant/vowel usage to a different mode alters (limits). How I talk (yours/English) comes out "me bick man, shmoke wandallah shigar!" which is ignoble (whchis ignoble) you say. Hm. Any way turning my being-words to yours makes versions - does not relieve the pressure in the tongue (the one tongue) does not release the press of meanings in its bulge. Female speech (in a river, in a cave) died. Her (part) twin (tongue) hardens (as would blood) in me, blocks. A language (all of it) disconnected, lives the quiet life (thundering). A self-contained vocabulary (abscess) pulses (at a different rate) throbs with another (awful) life. You have a box, a drum of wax - then draw the voice, wind it like a sinew. Keep it for me. I am (we were) you say "less dependent on words for communicating meaning" - take them. I (a person and another person) make a gift, my voice. I (a person and his twin) also (to show not tell) give you (and The California Motion Picture Corporation) this, my ghost.
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STARTS IN OCTOBER 1986............

Reviews

DOUGLAS OLIVER: The Infant and the Pearl (Silver Hounds, c/o Ferry Press, £1.50)

Douglas Oliver's The Infant and the Pearl is a journey through Thatcherite Britain in the metre of the late medieval poem "Pearl". As curious as this is it fits in with Oliver's earlier work. Like In the Cave of Succession and The Diagram Poems it's an extended project and continues similar themes. In all, the figure of the child, or baby, and the quest, or journey, cross to produce the progression of a sort of story that is occupied at each step; as only poetry can be.

In In the Cave of Succession the inquirer, typing as he goes, travels deeper into the earth and comes up with "the Scoutmaster, a man + boy, who looks after his own interest in me and is so cheery..." He curves in time, bearing my process with him and changing minutely." In The Diagram Poems a series of attempts to occupy key sites in a town fails but the genius of the baby is a kind of grace, despite the lost way.

The lost child's voice should speak softly but undyingly across a land silvery with democracy...

Which is beautiful; the conditional suspended above the vision.

And

It is my dead son who always brings me to this point of innocence in the heart of swift cruelty...

In Oliver's novel The Harmless Building we are told the narrator's ambition is to "...combine the virtues of the two uncles: the harmless originality of the baby and the patterned wisdom of the old man". It's also in this novel that the narrator is kidnapped and dressed as a female minister for education; the year is 1970. As a presentiment of the era of the nasty senior mistress, or nanny as Germaine Greer would have it, this is still uncanny.

These concerns are developed in The Infant and the Pearl. In "Pearl" one facet of the pearl is the poet's dead child. The poet is taken on a dream journey, which is the poem, to reconcile him. Oliver's adaptation of the moral and poetic framework of a medieval dream poem may be a way of formally writing value back into a political world lacking integrity. Only poetry could do that. A measure is taken of this repulsive world and it isn't surprising that a Margaret Thatcher and Sir Keith Joseph of the mind open dark vistas. The dream speaker crosses the "noisome stream" and the discoveries follow. In "Pearl" the river separates two worlds: an earthly paradise and the eternal city. Our dreamer enters the Thatcher dominion to find politicians of a dispersed half-life in video tuned Bentleys, class ridden sexual
violation, Steel City "polished to buggery"; on the outskirts of which thrive the five giants of Want, Squalor, Idleness, Ignorance and Disease as named by Beveridge. Towards the end we have Rosine's speech, from mid-stream in the house of commons. Rosine is a liveable mercy, as we're told, a "secularised socialism". The first line of the poem is the last; the dream and the waking go hand in hand,

The pearl that lay in the baby's palm centered all thought and in it my face enlarged, smiling; I saw the smooth arm of Rosine round my neck. Then rays of heartening light, rays of no-harm shot from my eyes to my eyes. But the space between us was widening; in alarm I began crossing the gutter that only grace can cross. I caught a mere trace of grey from the gowns, her grave frown, and awoke in a dawn of our daily disgrace, lying down in my father's grey dressing gown.

One strand of contact between "Pearl" and The Infant and the Pearl is ironic displacement or inversion. It's funny and redefines the matter politically. For instance at the end of section 3 in "Pearl" the poet first sees the pearl maiden from the earthly paradise,

Hyr yvsage whyt as playn yvore;
That stonge myn hert ful stray
And ever the longer, the more and more.

In The Infant and the Pearl the poet in the ministerial Bentley discovers the prime minister, one p.m. replaced by another, as a "scent" beside him, "She comes and goes" because the reception is poor,

..."You mean my imagination is persuaded," I said, "that our premier's now just a grainy blue-grey like television?"

The vision of the pearl maiden, the visionary light that occurs in many forms in "Pearl", is displaced by proxy image holographically conjured up in the Bentley easing its way through the ruin of a nation. By this device, "the actual's antidote" a "jitter free ... revision of what hasn't happened", the glowing and virtuous presence is replaced by an intangible nothing which is nowhere definitely. The inversion is complete and we know it as Mrs Thatcher; or give the "logic control" a twist and behold Howe or Joseph.

This is wonderful, like the range of expression from the elegiac to the biting. The drive of the metre, and the typically beautiful management of sound, never lets you forget it's poetry unfolding the state we live in "...while a dream passed out of the night of my nation". The features of the journey and the loss accumulate in startling clarity. It's all there in a way that a more acknowledged legislator of the world could never
capture.

An element I don't much care for is best illustrated in Rosine's speech and what follows it. It is possible to become caught in the "trance" of rage at Tories; to become the prisoner of the "adman's / lying image". This is obvious, but there is another trance which is to concede the terms of discussion in another way. In Rosine's speech too much is surrendered to notions of political discourse originating on the right which have removed the centre and impoverished many lives. I would like to go back some of the guilt is to be detached. In the same manner, after the speech, there is a procession of

post-Falkland-
take-up-the-Task-Force Tories and alongside Kinnock-clever, clothe-what-you'd-hide-
in-rhetoric Labourites;

This evenhandedness is clever but beside the point; particularly in reference to the Falklands. Some events stick more surely than this defence of the "centre current of courage" from where Rosine, "mid-stream", derides both sides in the commons. We could consider the 368 men who were murdered on 2 May 1982 in an act that created a war. That water and fire for those men lacked allegorical significance I suspect. The decision to do this was taken Sunday lunchtime in the porch at Chequers apparently. It isn't easily written into any balance sheet anyone's cleverness in avoiding such behaviour and any of the commonplace domestic brutalities of the last seven years.

The risk, I think, is one of political mystification. There is always a cold flood of abstraction around actions as mysterious as the daylight robbery of one class by another. The Chaucerian disclaimer, that the figures are those that "flit across the world of the media and float into our subconscious", is to say the poem is set where politics happen. I would like more of the common, conscious world because that is a political script too: which is I suppose to object to the allegory of a dream-poem.

Whatever, this is a remarkable book. The work and care of its making is beyond my attempt at the reviewer's voice to say. Read it and make your friends do the same. The politics aren't that fatally numbed by being poetry. What other poet can do that, outside of Tom Raworth that is. I can't wait to see what Peter Porter will make of it. Over to you, Peter.

Kelvin Corcoran


Pearl, Cleanliness, Patience, Sir Gawain & the Green Knight ed A C Cawley, Everyman 1962.)

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"Misunderstanding," said Ted Berrigan once, "is one of the truly creative procedures in writing." He explained: when starting to write you should imitate a writer whose work you like. "The good parts will come out of where you misunderstand entirely what the poet you are imitating is doing, & so write something that is completely different, but that turns out to be very good." ("The Business of Writing Poetry", in *Talking Poems from Naropa Institute* Vol. 1, Shambala, 1978).

I don't know about that, but it's certain that for a while when I was "starting to write" I admired and to some extent misunderstood Tom Raworth's work. Consider for instance this poem, "The White Lady":

```plaintext
on the phone meeting the white lady
smoke hangs solid in the cab i speak to the driver
in spanish the arrangements have been made
```

Perhaps I saw in this a haiku-like refinement, a sort of suspension in mid-air, coupled with a certain elegance. At any rate, I was certainly flummoxed when I heard Raworth read, in the early 70s. He was fast. Not for him leaving resonant spaces round the images: on the contrary, his insistence was that each image should enter and exit from the brain faster than it was possible to process the information sequentially. Moreover, the images were, incontrovertibly, made of words. You really had to be on your toes, and it was exhilarating.

The poem, originally from *Moving* (1971), is reproduced among the 232 pages of *Tottering State*. And it is possible now to see that the crucial phrase is "the arrangements have been made". Now compare this with (from "Going to the Zoo") "the order is all things happening now", and you have one of the key tensions keeping Raworth's poetry supple. That is: the writer's arbitrary juggling with language vs. the given simultaneity of the actual world hitting the senses. This tension continually discharges itself in little explosions that undermine our logical complacency, as readers, in where we are now.

Let's look at how a Raworth poem works. We might as well take the first in the book, "Waiting" (the poems here are usefully arranged "in approximately the order they were written, rather than that in which they were published"):  
```plaintext
she made it a noise
entering the room
as he sat holding a cigarette grey smoke & blue
he was too sound
```

of children moving so much outside he wrote small she spoke he cut a pack of tarot cards page of (shall we go we she) pentacles reversed meaning prodigality unfavourable news

The menace of the "unfavourable news" presaged by the Tarot reading is echoed in the syntactical disturbances and unexpected ambiguities (the first line qualified by the second; the sudden grammatical switch after "wrote"). But there's also a wry humour ("grey / smoke & / blue / he was too"); and a recovery of unexpected balance after that last grammatical shift ("small she / spoke he"); a lexical balance, nevertheless, that goes against the sense.

In "The Moon Upoun the Waters", it is the arbitrariness of its language that is much of the point of the poem; here's an extract:

```plaintext
the green of days : i barely reach the sill
the women's flecked nails : the definite article
i remove i and a colon from two lines above
the green of days barely reach the sill
i remove es from ices keep another i put the c here
the green of days barely reaches the sill
and later in the same poem, even a touch of the Classics:

i flow under the beachball as green waves
which if it were waves would contain
the picture (v) and the name (aves)
```

And he writes in "Tracking" (a series of notes): "the true direction is always a glancing off - there must be an out - all truth is not contained in language: it builds the language."

This tendency is pushed to its extreme point in "Stag Skull Mounted", a sequence dedicated originally to the American poet Ted Greenwald and bearing sub-dedications to other Americans - Koch, Dorn and Berrigan - all of which are missing in the reprinted piece, which also loses some impact through being presented sequentially, rather than one poem to a page. Essentially, it's a diary sequence, starting "9.00 p.m. May 1st 1970" and finishing "7.40 p.m. June 29th 1970". It gets sparser and sparser and more ... well, I find it terrifying, a progressive withdrawal of all props. For instance, the entry for June 3rd is "this is my handwriting". June 5th throws up three entries; the one at 10.26 p.m. is "word". Later, we get "poem", followed (an hour and a half later on the same night of June 10th) by "poem / poem".

And the sequence ends, after a gap of 19 days, by four entries in rapid succession between 7.19 p.m. and 7.40 p.m. on June 29th; respectively: "organic", "education", "laugh", and the final admission, "this trick doesn't work". There seems nowhere to go from here.
But Raworth was not about to give up poetry, and we can get a clue to his development in the late 70s by going back to "Tracking". He writes:

the connections (or connectives) no longer work - so how to build the long poem everyone is straining for? (the synopsis is enough for a quick mind now (result of film?) you can't pad out the book) (a feature film with multiple branches: you'd never know which version you were going to see).

Raworth's first real attempt at the long poem is "Ace", published in 1974 as a book of that title by Goliard, the press he co-founded with Barry Hall, and which by now had been taken over by Cape. (His work as a publisher - he edited the influential magazine Outburst in the early 60s, which made available the work of the American avant-garde - demands a separate article on its own. Though I can't help referring here to one of the famous small-press quotes of all time: Georg Rapp, the publisher, was trying to work out a financial deal with Goliard, but kept coming back to the idea of editorial control. Finally he said, "What do you think the best arrangement would be?" To which Raworth's reply was "Just give us the money and fuck off." End of deal. That's related by Jeff Nuttall in a slightly over-the-top but affectionate and perceptive article in Poetry Information 9/10 (Spring 1974), which analyses Raworth's work from the perspective that "art is crime".)

But back to "Ace". I don't think it's wholly successful, but it points a way. Earlier (1969), Fulcrum Press had published the prose work A Serial Biography (not included in Tottering State) which, describing along the way a working-class South London childhood and adolescence, was "serial" in the sense that Schoenberg's music is. Chronology was abandoned as an ordering principle, just as diatonic harmony is in Schoenberg, and new "connectives" were found, connectives that were arbitrary as writing is, and yet revealed a new sense, in memory, of "the order is all things happening now".

"Ace" is long, but goes very fast. To take a sequence at random:

tubed thought
is out to lunch
what pond?
are we at lake?
or a life
at sea
let me be
from proportion
out of
date
has its bad side
shifted
way you see
that penicillin flush
she's on...

The writing has literally been stretched out, and the elongation if anything increases the speed of reading even more. But the humour and quickfire semantic and syntactic shifts of the shorter poems are still there (the "at lake"/"at sea" joke; the ambiguity of "drifted a / way you see / that penicillin flush" - the poem, 24 pages printed two columns up, is full of these moments).

In the 1970s Raworth moved to the United States, being based mostly in San Francisco, and it is from this period that the Actual Size books Heavy Light and Lazy Left Hand date. They consist of notes, jottings and brief, humorous poems; attractively presented, they usefully plug a gap for the Raworth collector. Here too he wrote a new long piece - between 1975 and 1977 - titled with dry self-reference Writing. The Berkeley based poetry press The Figures, who previously brought out the American edition of Ace, have given it a typically austere and elegant presentation. Foolscap and in "landscape" format, the cover charcoal grey, and with a frontispiece of Raworth's voice-print, the production matches the precise formality of the work - which is laid out four columns per page, a total of 30-odd pages. Moving on from "Ace" it achieves a cumulative power that that poem never quite had. Here is the beginning, making the same connection between writing and film explored tentatively in the extract from "Tracking" quoted earlier:

spears of laughter
his for a time
then clank across
leaving flakes of rust
fox pages
as the sepia picture
goes full colour
and begins to move
but for now
we get the idea
birds eye view
see the words try
to explain what
is going in there
an imagined book
coming in to focus
the scene
in which the book rests
is stationary
only
within the moving picture
is anything happening...

This "imagined book", then, becomes real in a complex interplay of found text, pun, and occasional lyric beauty, making a headlong rush of consciousness. But, new now - perhaps, or perhaps it was just more implicit before - is a placing of the poetic field within a social/political context; thus:

castro visits
the african front
It would be fatuous to say that living in America has politicised Raworth's poetry; as Jeff Nuttall has pointed out, such writings as his are political - in the strategies he chooses to adopt, which are strategies abhorred by the powers that attempt to control this country's literature: in the standpoint it assumes for itself well outside any potential A-level syllabus, for a start. Yet this explicit comment is new. It is not a boring didacticism, though - Raworth respects his readers' intelligence and alertness too much for that - it is crucial information that tilts the plane of the projective field.

I want to conclude with what I think is one of the finest things Raworth has done; I mean the last, and therefore most recent, long poem in Tottering State, "West Wind" (the Shelleyan implications of the title are hard to miss). Again, this is in the familiar elongated form. But first, back once again to Tracking:

all week I've (week?) felt
the speed of writing
explanation rejects my advance

As we have seen, Raworth has always employed velocity along with arbitrary language games, surrealism, humour - to outpace explanation, to reach after more than he knows. It's what marks him out from the increasingly tedious "modest virtues" of the English poets of the accepted canon. Now here he is in "West Wind" on the subject of the new technology:

the computer operates
on limited knowledge

which is precisely the limit poetry kicks against. But what price poetry now? Tom Raworth is back in England, living in Cambridge:

colourless nation
sucking on grief...
the state as
the status quo
sitting in the path
of a high intensity beam
as war
advertises arms
we are pieces
of percentages
through that eye
for credit
is as far
as machines
can trust
what you own
and what you'll earn
while the homeless stare
at nightlong lights
in empty offices...

No British small press has the resources; no British commercial press is interested. Significantly, it took an American press to put together this major selection of a major English poet's work (major, significant, great... the words jar, but, dammit, what else can you say? say nothing rather, just catch the work as you can.)

Ken Edwards

BARRY MACSWEENEY: Ranter (Slow Dancer, £3)

Ranter is Barry MacSweeney's first major publication since Odes (Trigram, 1978). It is an elegiac work of formidable beauty, superb lyrical and narrative concision, resonating with the spit of dissent and the edgy, wounded anger of revolt.

Its four movements are grounded in a musical field of force where Poetry is cast as Song, as Dance, as Prayer, Lament, Curse, Rant, as instrument of desire: as instrument of rebellion. It is
a work which both reaffirms MacSweeney's cultural heritage and historical allegiances (Milton and the 17th century Radical and Heretical milieu of the English Revolution; Halfden, Bloodaxa, Bede, Cuthbert, Shelley, Bunting; and Ranting, a mode of indigenous Northern singing and Northumbrian pipes composition); and celebrates with pride the speaking in what Bunting described as the "language of one's own home" - the

jabbering Saxon verbs
the poetry of battle
blood on the words
which are Northern
writing; I am Eadwine
Prince of scribes

MacSweeney, through immense personal records, geographical sweep and mythic compass, embodies and evokes in anguished focus a whole range of outsiders, both human (Levellers, Lollards, Luddites, broadsheet printers, whisperers of sedition, wreckers of looms, displaced agricultural workers) and creatures of the wild ("cock pheasant", "black grouse", "butcher bird", "otter" and "hound with a dark stain") who, though "threshed and broken" and savage agrarian erosion, commercial encroachment and massive oppressions and desecrations of place and spirit - against all odds - against

Broken stiles
littering the princedom
neglected ditches
clogged with clarts
locked-up chapels
where lamenting starts
sheepwire stapling
her fells and fields
wild Northumberland
hemmed in, stitched up

retain and maintain a wholeness that is searching, conscious, unfettered -

This is my power:
To peck and roar.
To be feathered,
furred and fanged.

- an identity not yet bound by deceit, not yet robbed by the Babylonian tongues of decay or capitalism - an identity not yet bound by giving in. Cored to this "terrible plain speaking" is the breadth of the land he irrefutably identifies himself with, its vastness, its beauty, its volume -

The cover is in green with a photograph of a Celtic sword hilt of a warrior; the work is closed with a photograph of a carving of a peat-bog-found god. These apt, lean images echo the spirit invigorating the work: the bloody warrior who fires his heart and fouls his mouth with a litany of prayer and a liturgy of angry curse. These images also strengthen the sexual life force which runs through the work in the clasp and blade:

She was kindling, lord
wet grass in the morning
her body on fire
with a singular parting
Lord, listen
we wriggled and writhed
sang in the sheets
my blade in a tree

MacSweeney, with Tolstoyan complexity, takes us along the spine of the vast, austere grandeur of his Northumbria; his reach is as subtle and filmic as Tarkovsky and also brings to mind the plumbed silence, the vertiginous force and daring, the place of the late Turner masterpieces.

Ranter comes to us resounding with monstrous soul, terrible unease, rhythmic intensity, great political strength; it is a moving, sensitive work of poetic maturity; it absolutely confirms MacSweeney's previous poetic procedure and places him right in the dynamic of English poetry, right in there up to his head, in
the real and vital bloodstream of Blake, Shelley, Clare and Bunting. Thoroughly recommended.

Maggie O'Sullivan

NOT LOVE ALONE - A Modern Gay Anthology compiled and introduced by Martin Humphries (GMP, £3.50)

Poetry is the private voice no one reads poetry anymore serious poetry is obscure popular poetry is only semi-popular There is an audience though: a specialised one: the sectarian.

A poem is a solitary viewpoint - you can't be solitary anymore - except to express a norm. A gay poem is a poem against the norm. It will cluster readers who feel similarly, voyeuristic, kind or sociological.

Compared to the Penguin Book of Homosexual Verse, this is the real thing. This book presents a much better picture for beginners, full-time members and partially affiliated outsiders, of the lives, attitudes, difficulties and joys of a person (male in this instance) who loves someone of their own sex, or, at least: just has sex.

Diversion:
Gay is such a hopeless synonym for homosexual - it implies a lifestyle and personality that is just as unbalanced as the former derogatory expressions. Who wants to be gay if they get AIDS? Who wants to be gay if they find themselves rejected by their families? Who wants to be gay if they get beaten-up, get sacked from their jobs, put on the police computer, blacklisted, etc etc? The atmosphere in a ghetto-pub (not the disco) or a private house (with blinds) can be gay. That's about it. "Gay" inside, outside "Angry" or "Aloof" unless you want to be a comic turn. But it's all gone over the top anyway. When someone classifies themselves as gay at 21, 18, 16, 14, 12 - whatever, it's quite likely to be beside the point.

Before the start of the gay liberation movement lots of enterprising girls and boys enjoyed physical relationships with their closest friends (discreetly, if they had any sense) without bothering to classify themselves one way or the other well before they were 21 and then went on to get married.

It's much more difficult for them now, they are expected to get a clear idea of their sexual role in life from the first wet-dream or virginal hunger - and get worried when it invariably turns out to involve a figure of their own sex. So - banish the idea, they miss out on a lot and invert and distort the gap in their emotional development into various types of phobia - which will inevitably include a new wave of anti-homosexual feeling (with all that THAT implies).

Then there's those personal ads of course ... which seem a bit lunatic:
"Gay man seeks Lesbian for warm friendship..." - or something along those lines....

The vacuousness of many heterosexual relationships might give you the idea that the real thing might be found someplace else. Sometimes it is, but probably no more frequently. It can be fresh and exploratory but also riddled with half-baked role playing. Not to say that the thing isn't still possible or fulfilling! Back to the poetry.

"no one reads poetry anymore"

I read this book for information, personal experiences, attitudes - insight. And I share ... and now write this.

My first reaction was that this book is a collection of poems that are singularly clear about what they have to express, yet there is very little that is simple-minded and much that is honest. The things that are felt and said here could probably not find an outlet in any other media - and from my perspective it is the first time that many of them have been said. (In any kind of permanent form.) That is: I don't pretend to have an encyclopaedic knowledge of published and unpublished poetry.

Most of my doubts about the way homosexuals are going about their lives and organisation seem to find echoes here - take Alan Brayne's "I launched myself on a joyride". The fact that Pete Charles identifies himself as a gay/ homosexual writer is important to the "I" persona of "Lottery Ticket Seller". Those are only two notes on particular poems - but I'm going to keep this book and keep reading it. This stuff is, for the most part, brave, honest and moving - not much in the way of ego trips - I wish I had written something half as clear myself.

Andrew Mayfield

JOHN SEED: History Labour Night (Pig Press, £3)

Over the last decade John Seed's poetry has been as sparing as its texture is spare: together with pages reprinted from Spaces In (1977), this collection comprises a mere 31 poems. All of
them are slim; none, however, are in the least bit "thin". Seed's economy is that of a relentlessly concentrating imagination. He works with utter deliberation; his poetry, the occasion of a tenacious intelligence. Nothing rushes it; the syllables are measured, meticulously, to give pause for thought.

meanings change

Hundreds and thousands of days
Unrecoverable past an inflexion of tone November
Light flickering in the gale...

You can't read such words quickly; the very sounds act as restraints on the mental energy that might buckle them, as refusals of too easy a cadence.

It's a technique that Seed quite openly acknowledges owes much to the influence of George Oppen. From him, it seems to me, Seed has learnt the use of metaphor - that creature that changes form - as agent rather than attribute of a poem. Thought, the changing form and scope of thought, gives shape and impulse to the writing; or as he succinctly puts it when reflecting upon Oppen:

Crucial to the whole power of his poetry ... is the intricacy of the spacing of syntax which enables images and meanings to open out across diverging planes, criss-crossing, a process of continuing tension and renegotiation.

It's exactly this process that makes Seed's own work compelling; each particle of language is "negotiated", placed so as to contribute most to the poetry's range within the "incoherent / tangle of / moments" it encounters. That tangle, as Seed's title implies, draws ominously tight the threads of history, of industrial darkness, that has generated today's desolating economics...

in the morning isolate we
Huddle in private bodies along the platform imaginary
Subjects ghosts
Of the structure of the
Language of the circuit of capital...
Imaginary keys to a real door locked iron
Rails the bitter wind a mouthful of broken glass

Only a culture that has sanctified individual profit with so little regard for the social costs (witness half the world's dollar debts) could have produced a poem of such solitary acrimony. To have had the courage and patience to achieve it, to get such words out into the open, is profoundly impressive. Writing the blurb for the book's back cover, Peter Riley calls Seed's poems "this evident script": I couldn't offer a more apt or incisive phrase. Thirty-one poems - a testimony, a moving evidence.

Tony Baker

BILL GRIFFITHS (tr.): Guthlac B (Spectacular Diseases, £)

There's a legend that tells of the undergraduate Bill Griffiths being persuaded to deliver a seminar on OE poetry that had senior academics trooping to listen like sophomores. It certainly ought to be true. Fifteen years back in Cycles he was writing lines like:

...the dog, dagger-fur. a stone-head, a biter
sharp on c'lapping cans: comes
at raingagbow...

whose compression, whose rugged rhythms and splintery-ness of speech, show just how intense and alert is his reading of those older English poetries that precede the advent of printing. No poet that I can think of has heard such poetries more clearly or been better skilled to attempt their translation.

What Griffiths' work has always seemed to have is the ability to give apparently outrageous or indecipherably runic expressions the look of inevitability; whatever their strangeness, his articulations have an impact as though they were obvious. That quality is as distinctive as ever in this translation of the Guthlac B, a poem dealing with the death of Guthlac (around 714 AD) and written some time after 750 when Felix's Life of Guthlac - from which the poet draws much of his inspiration - had already been composed. As far as I can make out, Griffiths' fidelity to the original is meticulous, but what strikes the ear is a Griffiths poem, charged with his characteristic inventiveness - each page carries bits of that verbal gadgetry that he can make tick over like some Tinguely machine. Awkwardnesses that in another poet might be merely clumsy, in his hands become riveting. Who else could have rendered lines whose literal sense is roughly "My beloved child, be thou not in heart also sad", as

O dear son,
do not be upset-hearted

? Cut out the last word and Griffiths' ability to energise the most unlikely material becomes plain. Or who else could have got such a rumbling from the words when writing of the demons - "doomed fire-cripples" - who hound Guthlac towards death - "vile men-haters, / with the considerabelst / of noises"? Or wanting an emphatic plural pronoun would have come up with

...because I wished
us two
rather to see usselves
again...

? Indeed, by attuning the ear to that edge where language (speech) verges on improvisation, Griffiths can keep closer to
the sense of the OE than another translator might. Where the Guthlac poet in a carefully dramatised passage towards the close of the poem uses half a dozen words to describe a water-vessel (all glossed either "boat" or "ship" in the only available edition of the OE text), Griffiths risks being literal: "wavelloun", "lake-horse", "sea-floater", "water-bearer"... Because the temper of his imagination is so in sympathy with that of the Guthlac poet, he persuades by making such devices seem to be his. Like any successful translation, the original has shaped a new poem.

And Griffiths' shape is new; where the OE (if my tentative guesses at its movement are at all accurate) is slow, alliterative, deliberate, Griffiths' version is one which runs to three times the number of lines - is racy and abrupt. His aim, as he explains in the introduction, is to produce a "clear reading-text" that, while retaining "some of the variety of rhythm of the Old English", makes no attempt to preserve those of its formal procedures that would be "almost impossibly awkward in modern English..."

Which is finally his translation's strength - it's readable as a poem in the way that few modern versions of OE poetry ever are. Too often translators seem to engage with historical material as though they were archaeologists, digging up and piecing together texts to make an inert exhibit - they get rolled over by history, by the sense that the processes that made such texts were complete. They seem to view the task as though it were a kind of literary equivalent to the lamination of henge stones with plastics to prevent erosion - the preservation (fixing) of something essentially past. Griffiths manages to unfix the past, he finds a language that is his, that has been forged from the uncertainties of the present.

He finds a nice piece of wit to endorse it too - on p.10 Guthlac turns up as "Gultluc" and "Gutlac", and I wouldn't want to be the one to suggest that the publisher has overlooked type.

Tony Baker

LIKE HARWOOD: Monster Masks (Pig Press, £3.90); Dream Quilt
(Slow Dancer, £3)

Reading Lee Harwood's poetry has always been a collaborative enterprise, demanding a fusion of participation and interpretation, and he obviously takes delight - as a reader - in works which maintain this balance. "[Roy] Fisher... had a description of a hill... and then he said: 'maybe' a road winding through and going over the hill... I had to decide whether I put a road in or not, and that is an exciting experience. The poem becomes a catalyst, it is no longer a cameo."

In his best poetry prior to the work in Monster Masks - soon to be available again, in selected form - collage techniques, suppressing conventional connections and disrupting the linearity of narrative and unity of character, often mediated the complex discontinuity and incompleteness of experience. In other poems this developed into a use of syntactic indeterminacy, leaving the texts in a state of sustained openness, with multiple possibilities of grammatical cohesion. If these devices have not always worked, it is due to the reader's ability to naturalise any gap as "truncated message", and uninquisitively to leave it there. But neither, when the same devices are used sparingly and effectively, as in Monster Masks, is the reader allowed to simply "read" himself or herself into the textual lacunae, since he or she can only complete the unfinished utterance, guided by its context.

Talking to myself

The sweet qualities of our dreams without which...

How the wind blows and our hearts ache to follow the hazardous routes the winds follow

Harwood's model of the poem as a catalyst is apposite: the poem is an object which, without itself changing, causes changes within its particular readers (not the idealised Reader of literary criticism), it cannot be read in the same way unless readers actively participate in the poem. Harwood's sense of community with his readers is not redolently sentimental, though it runs that risk. In "A Poem for Writers" this is matched by a reminder to his fellow-writers of the ineffability of complexity of others' lives (which are characterised as narratives):

the bare rooms and kitchens
each lit with its own story that lasts for years and years.
A whole zig-zag path, and the words stumble and fidget around what has happened.

In "Paralysis" there is a fear that besieging impersonal forces will erase even this fidgeting: "IN THE TOWN - DON'T STOP - CROWD IN - WORK WIPE OUT - STUMBLING DEPRESSION." "A Poem for Writers" confronts another danger: the degradation of writing into a cruel narcissistic inscription, a violation redeemed by restoring to writing a keenness of perception which Harwood has increasingly associated with the attentive naturalist's eye and by stressing an authentic role for art, "always attendant / amongst the foolish rush and scramble for vainglory". The poem ends with a resolution and an invitation: "It's a joy with no need of chatter, / Hello Chris."

There is a central tension in most of Harwood's work between such "straight-talking" and an elegant fictiveness, which Harwood has dubbed his "puritan-cavalier routine". Story-telling can imply both historical veracity and evasive lies, "telling tales". Narratives, usually incomplete, like our glimpses of, and inferences about, others' lives, are woven together in "The Beginning of the Story" its particular tension is between domestic and fairy-tale narratives. In "Padded Ribbons..." the
simple notational "progress of the walk" ("blackbird's song / skylark's trill / cuckoo's call") contrasts with elegant imaginative transformations. Rather than the clash of collage there is the consequent meeting and co-existence of heterogeneous facts, with

_We step through into a meadow of long grass scattered with dandelions and dog daisies_

A 13th century ceiling meets Schubert meets a glass of chilled white wine and a ripe peach

In _Dream Quilt, _the rainbow door opens upon Robert Louis Stevenson's childlike aesthetic dimension, "The Land of Counterpane". Subtitled "30 assorted stories", these delightful prose texts use the conventions of fiction but the effect is not that of a collection of short stories. They range in focus from stories for - and by - children to an account of a factual coincidence for a possible, unwritten, Borges story; from a catalogue of Hardwood-Birthday Boy's rural and cultural "pleasures" to the Beardsley-Brighton Boy's contemplation of "exquisite sex"; from what appears to be a transcription of one family history to two versions of a goblin fable. Hugo the giant is as real as the poet's grandfather but, in this book, their worlds are not permitted to "meet". Such an assortment of subject and manner makes the book read more like an anthology of discrete experiences rather than their individual multifacetedness. But this apparent segregation does not resolve enigma: there is always "another story" against which any given narrative must be read. Presented with a quotidian account of involuntary "memories of past private worlds" evoked by a mundane "doily", or the conscious attempt of the parent watching his sleeping children to fix the scene); the anti-narrative "moments that go beyond joy or tenderness", as well as beyond the constraints of time and particular situation.

With their meticulous, but never lush details, these texts are the most carefully written of all of Harwood's works. They represent a further refinement of his sympathetic humanism, and are among his best, and most pleasurable pieces.

Robert Sheppard

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**RAE ARMANTROUT:** _Precedence_ (Burning Deck, $5)

**GAIL SHER:** _Broke Aide_ (Burning Deck, $7)

In her earlier collection, _Extremities_ (The Figures, 1978), Rae Armantrout was concerned with both the extremities which form the physical boundaries of our bodily perception of the environment, and extreme circumstances where, like the deserts chosen by visionaries, greater understanding of human conditions was to be had. She was acutely aware of the delusions awaiting anyone in America, the "likely stories" ("Sunset") that lure people into misrepresentation. "Hackneyed scenes / you take from television and / pass off as your youth." The short, highly controlled lines "across which / beings vanish/flare / the charmed verges of presence" were not primarily attentive to musical patterns of sound and rhythm, nor the construction of an authenticating voice, although there was a delight in the articulation of sound that was a pleasure to read. The focus was, in everyday terms, what the words and lines were "getting at". She showed herself skilful at drawing out the dramatic significance of verbal exchanges. A line or two were allowed onto paper and then questioned. What were they getting at? She managed that adept balance of the personal and the philosophical that Robert Creeley often achieves. Her poems were imbrications of memory and speculation, as in "Travels" which is both about the ambivalence of remembered arguments from a first experience of "going all the way" and the metaphors of travel and return that seem to intertwine such relations. Her poetry was very conscious of the social relations implicit in any use of language.

In "Special Theory of Relativity" she wrote what at first seems like the first step in an explanation of the theory:

_You know those ladies_  
_in old photographs? Well, _
_say one stares into your room as if into the void_  
_beyond her death in 1913._

It finishes before it has got going. Then a submerged pun on relatives and relativity emerges as we wonder what our relation to this staring face is and what it demands. Rae Armantrout does not say but leaves us with an image of a demand, a stare, that is no longer come from silence, but directly from other words. One finds oneself speaking, involved perhaps in a debate the terms of
which are always already set. And there is the impulse to call a halt, the impulse to silence. The photograph allows room for a choice of response. The "naked / buzz composed of what?" (from "The Music" in Precedence) leaves no such room. Silence becomes a metaphor not for emptiness but the space to choose to respond. In Extremities she asked: "Is it bourgeois to dwell on nuance? Or effeminate? Or should we attend to it the way a careful animal sniffs the wind?"

The nuances of the environment's demands for response are the main concern of her new collection, Precedence, which attends to them warily. "The naked buzz composed of what?" (from "The Music" in Precedence) leaves no such room. Silence becomes a metaphor not for emptiness but the space to choose to respond. In Extremities she asked: "Is it bourgeois to dwell on nuance? Or effeminate? Or should we attend to it the way a careful animal sniffs the wind?"

She is conscious of the childish desire to anthropomorphise. "Do the children want a face! drawn on everything?" she asks, and then reminds us of space around such faces:

Smiling
neon star:
beacon
round which empty,
mauve evening.

The illuminated smile smiles at emptiness.

There is an insistent preoccupation with moments where there is a conjunction of perception and reflection, often painful or poignant. The twists and abuses of perception are revealed, moments when "the particular becomes romantic" ("Latter Day"). Later in the same poem she juxtaposes a view and a point of view with powerful understatement:

2
Porthole
in stucco,
bungalow -
like forgetting
what I meant.

3
In your absence, dear sir, this acquired
a wild salience.

The acquisition of salience is explored throughout the collection. In "Compound Two" it is the convergence of her description of the weather and her addressee's appearance that is itself strange, and the physical distance of the child a measure of some inner distance: "Because / the child is, / silently, / far down / a diminished walk / I turn and call / the weather / 'hot and / strange.' / Uncovering / your teeth, / you glare." There is too much glare.

Precedence is a tense, inturned collection that traverses some very painful, private material. It does not need the capitalised "ARE YOU SICK OF ME?" or the title poem's dream image of a boy drowning, or William Stafford's mawkish poem about killing a deer on the road, when she throws a dead dove into the marriage counselor's garden, or in the image of Daffy running across the synapses, it's welcome. Precedence is a more sombre and clotted collection, less resolved but more ambitious than the earlier work. Rae Armantrout is subtle and quick and knows more than most what words are trying to say.

Gail Sher's earlier book, From another point of view the woman seems to be resting (Trike, 1982), could also be said to have been concerned with silence. She used a neutral expository vocabulary almost entirely stripped of active verbs to great effect. The result was a distancing from what appeared to be scenes whose significance and density could only be partially inferred, an effect similar to that of reading a film script without dialogue. To have its full effect the script needs film. It is silenced by its incompleteness:

Moments held clean and intact
now appears as a wall. (Method
and exposure to first thought.)

The expression fixed.
Points of softness
absolutely seen by
someone else.

Seeing heavily or seeing
effects of known sedentary
person. (Inclusive of her
in an early period.)

Provides a certain luminosity
detail. At the same time
balance.

There was a light but definite process of self analysis implicit in this objectifying language that circulated around a gendered relation and around need transformed into desire for food and love.

Powerful inner lapse or
undivulged sense. (Also)
him in the capacity of
boy.

Pictures of him. Related
in way of terrific scene
(bed) or warm with hand in
book of him.
Everything moves through representations, through books and pictures. Events become items. A gentle irony is present but unlocated. These raifed moments are themselves unlocated. It is tempting to describe this text as an exploration of what Lukacs called the reifying consciousness of modern individuals, but such causal inferences based on history and society are kept at a distance by these silent word pictures.

Broke Aide (which contains two sequences, "Retablo" and "Broke Aide"), Gail Sher’s latest work, is a more complex narrative in a similar mode. The parentheses evident in the previous quotation have become extremely obtrusive in this new text, and the language more dense, the sentences less well-formed, and the verb has returned. "Eyes much words" in these narratives. The pace is fast and silent.

Tom enters a room (is a fraud room).

Braces (fraudulently) a scrap of thought. (A
merge of ears seated with the proud man.)

(Steadies) the table as he talks to Al. A
breath is taken gladly.

(Isets) smart so as a whole (fresh) body.

"Retablo" appears to be based on the tripartite structure of a retablo (explained in an epigraph from Mulvey and Wollen’s book, "Tribe, lq79) and the miniature booklet, "The Blue Table". The writing of Ted Pearson, now accessible in at least four volumes, is a type of verse written to cherish the lyric qualities and yet explore tonal complexities that might interest such a writer as Perlman. Pearson’s poetry has become curious of many directions, sometimes employing a type of rhyme scheme, while at other times enlisting an unrhymed brevity equal to the shortest poetic form – the classical haiku.

The Blue Table (Trike, 1979) and the miniature booklet Ellipsis, The Blue Table and the most recent book, Mnemonics (Gaz, $5), manage to reverse the view. Much of Pearson’s current writing is able to present a cluster of small poems that can be read on their own, or as a collection. The short two-, sometimes three-line stabs of Mnemonics are well suited for this type of treatment, as are the pages of "The Grit" and "Reaped Figures", sections of The Blue Table. Ellipsis too is a complete portfolio that has pages that have, at times, a further unification. Ellipsis starts with the questioning of a language, one that is ubiquitous and born out of excitement, but paced within the intricacy of the final expose, which is the poet’s own script.

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Mnemonics, as already noted, presents 55 pages of text, each page almost an item. Most of the poems are well suited for a two- or three-line stab, and yet they are complete poems that can be read on their own, or as a collection. The short two-, sometimes three-line stabs of Mnemonics are well suited for this type of treatment, as are the pages of "The Grit" and "Reaped Figures", sections of The Blue Table. Ellipsis too is a complete portfolio that has, at times, a further unification. Ellipsis starts with the questioning of a language, one that is ubiquitous and born out of excitement, but paced within the intricacy of the final expose, which is the poet’s own script.

and I kept myself
from going mad
by singing to my body (The Blue Table – "Reaped Figures")

Among the male writers working at the more fluid end of the US writing spectrum are Gil Ott, John Perlman and Ted Pearson. Ott is the most versatile, and Perlman the most violently meditative.
You don't need to think things up. Words are all around you.

2) The order they go in need not be decided by grammar or dialectic but instead by systematised chance.

Mac Low has been single-mindedly refining these concepts now for more than 30 years. There is little joy to be had; however, from picking up a tome like, for example, *Stanzas for Iris Lezak* (Something Else, 1972) and working steadily through page one, beautifully printed though they might be, to the bitter end. No, Mac Low is like his methods: you dip, you turn, you read bits again. Some parts you never get to read at all.

His exact compositional approaches are always recorded in a preface to his books or among the notes at the back. Inevitably they describe a complex of systems which are, if not actual controllers of chance, at least regulators of the random's path. They go something like this:

1) Roll the dice.
2) If it shows a 3 roll again and double the result.
3) Use the resultant number to determine the line to be accessed in the source material.
4) Roll the dice again, twice, to determine the word.
5) If the selected word begins with a letter which, after conversion to numerical value and addition - allocating A as 1 and moving forward in geometric stages - arrives at a value of less than the original dice throw then the word is abandoned and the next word to be found, which begins with the next letter of the alphabet, in the same or following lines, is used instead.
6) This sequence is followed until an accumulation of words is achieved. Their extent is determined by the total alphanumerical value of the first word chosen.
7) The dice are thrown again and a name selected from the "American Dictionary of Plants for Sandy Places".
8) The consonants of this name are used to determine which of the original sequence of chosen words should appear first.
9) Dice are thrown in cases of conflict.

In such a systematised complex of random composition no decision is left to mere accident. Chance may be unpredictable, but it can be controlled.

In "Converging Stanzas" Mac Low embraces computers to help him compile 60 sections of verse, each of eight lines, 32 words in all. As the sequence evolves each succeeding stanza draws only from the words of the stanza before. These are eliminated by rote yet with all the appearance of randomness. "Will committee experience country for paste motion paste / every will decision..." evolves and changes until the word "experience" assumes a dominant position. There is a long period of sniper activity culminating in surprise appearances of the word "paste" just when we thought it was all over. The work has become numbing with its repetition. When it ends it is a shock, like the light being turned suddenly off.

This process is exciting. Robert Kelly says it is "snow-
blind antarctic agony" but that is metaphoric overstatement. Agony is not a Mac Low attribute. One thing Mac Low did say, which I heard above the Texas bop, was that no matter how much of his material was read or even heard in solo live performance its ultimate realisation was on tape. Mac Low was into tape. After listening to some of his recordings I think he misjudges himself.
The eight-voice stereo-canon realisation of "The Black Tarantula Crossword Gathas", however, is amazing. Mid-period, classic sound poetry. Mac Low, eight of him, lashing the sections of the piece - words, part-words, vowels - into a dynamic, stimulating whole. I had this tape, high, on the car stereo and stopped at a traffic light had a cyclist stay to listen rather than pedal steadily on through the red. Mac Low in parts not sounding like Mac Low but like Cobbing or Jandl. Very European.

Yet his other work I found flatter, less fulfilling, even boring. You can't dip into the performance, you have to sit all the way through.
The Virginia Woolf Poems, which is Mac Low's latest book and what this review is supposed to be all about, seems like dog ends when compared to the regulated improvisation and indeterminacy of his better compositions. The system here is "spelling-thru" - generating letter sequences out of the lines of Woolf's The Waves which, when processed, give us

Africa, Edinburgh, themselves carnation, tremendous loneliness.
or

"The swallow the Rhoda.
There flower to which every world talk."

These were unpublished from the time Mac Low made them in 1975 until Burning Deck printed them, albeit beautifully, last year. There are only 19 short sections, somehow made vulnerable and precious by their elevated isolation. With Mac Low you expect more. They do have their moments, however:

prick contains forged companion
or

obscure Indians, seemed authorities.
and maybe

pitiable tremendous scarborough

nothingless.
but I wished there had been more.
The book finishes with Mac Low's notes on his compositional methods together with a description of the actual notebook in which he has worked. He mentions this as containing an account of a 1967 visit to La Monte Young's loft but sadly does not recount it. La Monte Young and other "minimalist" composers such as Steve Reich use compositional approaches very similar to those of Mac Low.

I mention this because it is another thing I like about Jackson Mac Low. He doesn't just confine himself to writer's words - his modernism is the whole thing - right across the intermedia - he straddles them all, no borders. Yet despite the Sixties this kind of concept remains unfashionable. Mac Low is unconcerned - what is fashion to him? His business is to stay beyond it. He changes the way we think about language. Fashion is something else.

Peter Finch

Editor's postscript: Since this review was written, and just before Reality Studios went to press, we've received a copy of Mac Low's Representative Works 1938-1985 just published by Roof Books at $12.95 paperback, $18.95 hardback. This beautiful 336-page book selects work from every stage of his career, and is a must for Mac Low fans unless they already have everything he's ever published. -KE

KELVIN CORCORAN: The Red and Yellow Book (Textures, £1.50)

"Each poem a maze" the voice says in one of Kelvin Corcoran's poems. And these poems are that. The reader sits in expectation and fascination at the possible outcome of each poem. "The first / dictionary had only four words / I will tell you what they are / You will live a better life". But we never are told the four words, though we feel wildly sure we won't live a better life. A maze is a static thing, and these poems are far from such limitations, they move fast. The maze is more a blueprint of the poem that puts its form and workings in perspective, but doesn't really define it. Yes, there is the quality of puzzles and multiple choices - but overshadowing this is a large cloud.

The cloud is the atmosphere of these poems. The maze isn't a unique form at what is unique is its atmosphere, that particularity. How does one define that intangible quality? The poems are fast, vivid, angry tender, witty and sharp, but these abstract adjectives are too vague. To come to a more precise definition of Kelvin Corcoran's work one turns - either through necessity or cooperation - to comparison with other writers.

The parallels are that Corcoran's poems are - like Douglas Olivers The Diagram-Poems in their raciness, mystery and the
JOHN ASHBERY: Selected Poems (Carcanet, £16.95)

The rumour is that John Ashbery now repudiates his earlier work (that is, The Tennis Court Oath, etc.) and the received wisdom is that he "changed" around the time of Self Portrait in a Convex Mirror (1975). "Something happened in the garage and I owe it for blood traffic." This 340-page volume (published in the States by Viking Penguin) makes clear that no such clean break is discernable in the work; yes, he did get famous, got the Pulitzer Prize for that volume, and what poet worth their salt wouldn't repudiate what went before anyway? how else would you clear the deck? Planted over and over that land has a bitter aftertaste. There's undoubtedly a gradual shift towards more smoothness, a mimicry of mimesis perhaps, less of the visible cut-and-paste. "What trees, tools, why ponder socks on the premises." Yet the academic critics who now rush to embrace him still misunderstand: that the stunning prose of "The System" from Three Poems (I'm glad this was included here) is poetry, not philosophy, is integral to its reading, for just one example, "What is the past, what is it all for? A mental sandwich?" (Quotations are all from "37 Haiku" in A Wave).

Ken Edwards

RECENT MAGAZINES

It's been a thin year for British mags. Single author issues seem to be the vogue: recommended are Pig Press's Staple Diet series, the most recent batch of three featuring Canadian Brent Mackay, visual work from Tom Raworth and some of Robert Sheppard's strongest work yet; Spectacular Diseases (Peter Collier, Adrian Place and Hazel Smith); and a single issue of The Blue Boat devoted to an extraordinary long piece "Prose Woods" by Peter Larkin. The latter is pleasingly designed too, as you'd expect from Moschatel Press.

Spectacular Diseases itself is guest edited again this year by Paul Buck and subtitled "Sexuality and the argument of art", with erotic work by Barbara Vor, Lynn Loniédier, Glenda George and the gruellingly compelling post-Bataille prose of Pierre Guylotat among others. (If you want to read more of Guylotat you can do no better than get hold of Paris Exiles No 2, a mostly English language publication, which features an interview with him and translated extracts from his novels, alongside work from Robert Kelly, Douglas Oliver, Pierre Joris, Johanna Drucker, Steve Benson, etc - handsome visuals, stylish production.)

Other recent British mags include the modest but always excellent Figs (No 10 has Kleinzahler, Corcoran, Seed, Riley and others, and No 11, just received, includes Sheppard, Halsey, Turnbull); and Ninth Decade (No 6: extract from Roy Fisher's new book "Furnace" for openers). What these magazines, good as they are, lack is poetry from women: only three out of a total 35 contributors.

Transcendent recommendations: Acts (Susan Howe, Clark Coolidge, Gadi Hollandier, Anne-Marie Albiach...); Sink, a new mag featuring Charles Bernstein, Allen Fisher, Gail Sher: Score, well designed and devoted to visual poetry; the best Canadian mag of the moment, Exiles, and perhaps the best of the best issues of Poetics Journal so far, on "Marginality: Public and Private Language".
Publications received

Books & pamphlets

GILBERT ADAIR: Frog boks (Writers Forum, 1985, limited signed edition £5 - graphics/poems/sound-texts on loose sheets + magnetic frog in box)

GILLIAN ALLNUTT: Lizzie Siddall, Her Journal (1862) (Greville Press, £4)

BRUCE ANDREWS: Wobbling (Roof Books, 1981, $5); Excommunicate Notes & Poets Press, 1982, $3)

RAE ARMANTROFT: Precedence (Burning Deck, 1985, $5)

JOHN ASHBERY: Selected Poems (Carcanet, £16.95)

SNOWDON BARNETT: Dossiers Secrets (Rivelin Grapheme Press, £5.45); The Argument to Dossiers Secrets (Rivelin Grapheme, £1)

M.J. BENDER: Cerealia & Zee (Northern Lights, 1985, 75p/$1 inc p&p)

GEORGE BILL G RIFFITHS (tr.): Guthlac B (Spectacular Diseases, £10)

ROBERT GRENIER: A Day at the Beach (Roof Books, 1984, $6)

BILL GRIFFITHS (tr.): Guthlac B (Spectacular Diseases, 1985, £1 - translation of the Old English poem)

LEE HARWOOD: Monster Masks (Pig Press, 1985, £3.90/$7.50); Dream Quilt: 30 assorted stories (Slow Dancer, 1985, £3/$5)

MICHAEL HASLAM: Continual Song (Open Township, £4.50)

GADI HOLLANDER: Video Residua (Orphic) (Northern Lights, 75p/$1 inc p&p)

FRANCES HOROVITZ: Collected Poems (Bloodaxe Books, £12.95 cloth, £4.95 paper)

ALAN JACKSON: Heart of the Sun (Open Township, £4.50)

MARGARET JOHNSON: A Visit to the Cities of Cheese (Burning Deck, 1985, §4)

JOHN CHRIS JONES: Technology Changes (Princelet Editions, 1984, £5.71)

LUCILLE KING-EDWARDS: After the Lost Horses of Saskatchewan (Northern Lights, 1985, 75p/$1 inc p&p)

AUGUST KLEINZAHLER: Dainties & Viandas (Galloping Dog Press, 1985, £2.50)

KARL KRAUS: Half-truths & One-and-a-Half Truths (Carcanet, £1.95)

PETER LARKIN: Eleven Unsaid Poems (Galloping Dog Press, £1.25)

JACKSON MAC LOW: The Virginia Woolf Poems (Burning Deck, 1985, §5); Representative Works, 1930-1985 (Roof Books, £16.95 cloth, £12.95 pbk)

BRENT MACKAY: Between the Solstic (Northern Lights, 75p/$1 inc p&p)


BARRY MACSWEENY: Ranter (Slow Dancer, 1985, £3/$5)

PETER MARDER: Saga, a postcard novel (Writers Forum, 1985, limited signed edition £5)

PETER MIDDLETON: Portrait of an Unknown Man (Torque, n.p.)


IAN BREAWEIL: Rural Tales (Galloping Dog Press, £1.25)


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JAY RAMSAW: Psychic Poetry, a manifesto (The Diamond Books, 1985, £3.25); Raw Spiritual, selected poems 1980-1985 (Rivelin Grapheme Press, £4.95)

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LITERARY MAGAZINE REVIEW Vol 4 No 3/4, Vol 5 Nos 1 & 2 (G W Clift, English Dept, Denison Hall, Kansas State University, Manhattan, Kansas 66506, USA, $3/60 for 3, $6 for 4)  
LOOT 4:4 (Dec 1985, Peter Collier), 5:1 (March 1986, Adrian Place), 5:2 (July 1986, Hazel Smith)(Paul Green, Spectacular Diseases, 35p each or free with sub to SPECTACULAR DISEASES, q.v.)


NINTH DECADE 6 (Tony Freary, Ian Robinson, Robert Vas Dias, 52 Cascade Ave, London N10, £2/£6 for 4)

NORTH DAKOTA QUARTERLY Vol 53 No 3, Summer 1985 (Robert W Lewis, University of North Dakota, Box 8237, Grand Forks, North Dakota 58202, USA, $4/$10 for 4)

PALPI 13 (Oct 1985), 14 (April 1986)(Association of Little Presses, 89a Petherton Rd, London N5 2QT, 65p inc p&p/£2.50 for 4/free sub with ALP membership at £6)


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SLOW DANCER 15, Autumn 1985, American issue ed. Alan Brooks, 75p and 16/17, £1.50/£3 (John Harvey, Slow Dancer Press, £1)

SMOKE 22 & 24 (ed. Dave Ward), 23 (ed. Dave Symonds) (Windows, 22 Roseheath Drive, Halewood, Liverpool L26 9UH, 15p/£1 for 4)

SPECTACULAR DISEASES 8, "Sexuality & the argument of art" ed. Paul Buck (Paul Green, address as for press, £1.80/£4 for 4)

STAPLE DIET 7 - 15, Sept 1985 - May 1986, single author issues (Ric Ciddell, Pig Press, £6/$12 for 9)

WRITING 12 (Summer 1985), 13 (New Poetics Colloquium, Feb 1986) (Colin Browne, Box 69609, Station K, Vancouver, BC, V5K 4N7, Canada, $3 (Canadian)/$12 for 4)

The above is a comprehensive list of publications received since Volume 7 was published. Inclusion does not necessarily mean a book will not receive a full review in a future volume. As readers will see, the increased number of publications being sent to us now means that only the barest details can be given. A list of publishers' addresses follows.

Please note that, unless otherwise stated, prices of books, pamphlets and single issues of magazines are exclusive of postage and packing. As a general rule, add 15% to the cover price to allow for this. In the UK, American small press publications can be ordered from Alan Halsey, Books, 22 Broad St, Hay-on-Wye, via Hereford HR3 5DB; and from Paul Green (Spectacular Diseases address).

Publication date in the listings is 1986 if not stated.

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Thanks also to Allen Fisher for help with reading manuscripts.

Reality Studios Vol 9 will, we hope, feature experimental writing  
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