

EDIT TIDE

QUID rocket-launches into double figures. With this issue the dirempted whole is staggered across a week or so, part I pre-empting the term (in this case part II) that completes it: this is to separate the contra-chaff of responses to issue 9 from the contra-chaff of reviews, poetry and script of every genus that follows. You now hold between your forceps part I, *responses to issue 9*. The three contributions published here differ with respect to their mode of response. Keith Tuma's essay is not predominantly about *QUID* 9, but ends with some reflections on my previous editorial, sent out first of all as an e-mail, wept into the void of self-spilling *schwarze Milch*. *QUID* 10 part II will include my reply. Allen Fisher offered his poem in response to 9; I asked him if I could include it here and he assented. Scott Thurston first sent his note to Andrea directly; I publish it here with his permission in the hope that Andrea (or anyone interested) might continue the dialogue. That means *you*, Amartya Sen et al.

As usual the project here is to keep the continuum plugged-in—please do intervene. That goes for the noise-wing of the *QUID Gesamtkunstwerk* too, commodified so far in three CDs and likely to go from strength to strength. What do you think of the music coming out of Middle Class Records, Fenland Hi-Brow, Kakutopia? Is THF Drenching the new William Langland? Write to harangue. As preparation for which, listen to the objects themselves:

- ✓ Q1: *The Gongs of Peace*
- ✓ Q2: *Andrea Brady, Lissa Wolsak, Drew Milne* [long readings by each poet]
- ✓ Q3: *Low Bleb Score*

All these are available from the editor, £5 each including p+p. For track listings see www.barquepress.com. This editorial includes an advert and says nothing about *current affairs*. The complement in part II *may* make up for this.

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KEITH TUMA: INTERLOPERS AREN'T FUNNY¹

This text revises a talk delivered at Birkbeck College on May 9, 2002.

Poetry, Ed Dorn said, might be classified like beef—ground chuck, flank steak, sirloin, and so on. If that's right poetry anthologies are beef tips, morsels drowned in editorial sauce. The meat can be tender but one might wonder where it came from. I have always hated anthologies that include one or two poems by hundreds of poets for the way that kind of presentation promotes the idea of poetry as memorable nuggets—chicken nuggets maybe. Golden treasury, garland, dead flowers: let's stick with beef. Whatever else the anthology Nate Dorward and I put together for Oxford University Press in New York is, it is at least a heaping American-style plate of tips. Others will have to say whether it is better or more useful than comparable anthologies, but there will be no denying that it is bigger! You think I am ridiculing caricatures of national identity already grown up around this book? I am quite serious: the book might have been bigger still. British and Irish poetry might be generously inclusive categories: a simple idea really. More than one napkin required for all of that sauce.

Most poets don't like anthologies but view them as a means to other ends—pointing readers to work of value to be found elsewhere for instance. Editors more or less invested or arrogant might view them as opportunities to define poetic accomplishment or possibility. We viewed the book as both means and end, hoping that we would point readers in specific directions while also trying to put together something readable as a book. But we had no illusions about completeness. If we could not be comprehensive, we could be idiosyncratic, and in the process not only promote work too little known but force comparisons via juxtapositions—Philip Larkin's poetry next to Bob Cobbing's by virtue of their birth dates but also W. S. Graham's next to Peter Riley's because that's the way I read the book sometimes, as most will, picking and choosing. The polemical poetry anthology usually tries to offer a view of the poetry of designated period or type with some closure. An argument names and defends principles of selection more or less coherent or shapely. I did my best to avoid such an

¹ This text should include footnotes and a list of works cited. The latter will perhaps appear if the talk is rewritten as an essay for another publication. The former might be in effect included as part of any elaboration on the remarks toward the end of this text in response to the reply anticipated.

argument and, while the anthology is polemical, it is not so shapely. It is messy. In a way its argument is enacted in that messiness. In the preface I mention wanting to push forward varieties of modernist and neo-modernist poetry neglected in Britain and Ireland, and I also speak of a “critical pluralism.” The pluralism is not rigorously defined because it really couldn’t be—not as an editorial principle. It was more a background assumption than tool to hand. Any “principle” for inclusion I offered might be easily refuted by pointing to specific poems; this much I knew. So the reference to pluralism really indicates a willingness to tolerate contradictions. We wanted to reject the kind of winnowing literary history that informs a book like Edna Longley’s *The Bloodaxe Book of 20th Century Poetry*, which appeared after our book was published but might have been predicted for the way it extends the work of other recent “mainstream” anthologies, serving up (mostly) the same poets while bragging about a rigor that turns out to be only parsimonious. Longley reduces poetry to lyric (of a kind); we wanted lyric and almost everything else (with some exceptions we did put aside the popular). Longley wants a canon; we wanted to make canonicity a question. Our book is too big to be taught in a semester, a textbook one can barely get one’s hands around. If the premise of the book unfortunately, inevitably promotes the quaint idea of national literatures, no nation will be able to swallow entire or barter for this book, least of all the several of them providing poems for it. There is a deliberate refusal to sketch the history of British and Irish poetry in the book’s preface; we have had enough of the narratives of dawning and declining nations.

The difficulty of obtaining a wide-angled or even adequate picture of British and Irish poetry in the United States was one subject of my book *Fishing by Obstinate Isles*, so the irony of finding myself the OUP anthology’s editor was not lost on me. The earlier essays had tried to sustain some degree of self-consciousness about the way they were probing poetry often new to me, as to most Americans and also many British readers. *Fishing* argues few points and instead tries to analyze commentary about British and American poetry as it has led to unhelpful generalizations about their relationship. I complained that in some of the more influential accounts of the period there was too little reference to modernist and neo-modernist poetry in the UK and too much rhetoric of nation and national-identity. In particular the book burbles a polemic against American cultural nationalism. So, having confessed my blindness in one book and finding myself rewarded for that with a promotion to the role of expert for the next one, I

had for comfort only the suspicion that comparatively few in the United States or Britain were in a better position to edit such an anthology. While we knew that in specific (especially American) locations our anthology would be made to perform authority, we were uneasy in whatever expertise was presumed or advertised to be ours, preferring to think of the book as emerging from and making possible transatlantic conversation about British and Irish poetry. A stone tossed in the pond rather than a monument on one or the other side of it. A speech-act one function of which was pointing to the unmanageable size of a body of poetry too often taken to be altogether manageable by American readers. Knowing our luck in landing the book allowed us to recognize that we'd need a lot of help to make it, and we got that, from acquaintances and others we sought out as also from critical studies of British poetry. Nevertheless, when picking poems I tried, where possible, to start from scratch—though of course one never starts from scratch.

We knew that the anthology would be more controversial for readers in the UK and Ireland than readers in North America. In the United States, where there have been few anthologies of British poetry published of late, the effort was and remains to have the book noticed at all. British and to a lesser degree Irish poetry are destined to remain specialized interests in the United States, and probably even the apathetic response to one's professional interest in them as "a field" will continue to be caught up in clichés and bad history. In influential sectors of the academy, the very idea of reading poetry, and especially British poetry, suggests the dilettante, means irrelevance or cultural conservatism. Only a *New Critic* given to "privileging the lyric" would bother in the first place! For these and other reasons the kind of revisionist readings of American literature that have preoccupied American scholars in the last decades have barely touched British poetry of the 20th-century. We were determined to advertise the necessity of that kind of scrutiny, if only for the few oddballs and professional losers who might still care to pursue it. As for the UK, we thought that our efforts would be seen there either as welcome or unwelcome depending on points of view already established and mostly immovable. At best, which is to say if we were lucky, we thought we might apply some pressure to the people intent on carving up most of the pie for themselves by offering a view from an elsewhere where they mattered hardly at all. We had early confirmation of our intuitions about the book's nastier reception in the UK in one reader's report commenting on the proposed table of contents and promising the book a good

“kicking.” Against such evidence that the book would not be happily received by the Laureate and others one of our correspondents thought that silence should be expected, or silence from those in possession of significant cultural capital. This same correspondent advanced a thesis about the influence of the civil service on British life, noting how difficult it had been in the past for advocates of any British poetry at odds with a “mainstream” or center to provoke a response from reviewers and critics resolute in their agreement about what constitutes value in poetry.

Using our correspondent’s language I suppose we can say that it was Sean O’Brien’s review in *Poetry Review* that “broke ranks.” Since I am only an observer of British culture, an outsider, I read O’Brien’s review with an eye toward seeing what it could tell me about British literary politics. I pondered the suggestion that the anthology’s editor lacks a sense of humor and said to myself “True enough, Tuma is a dull sort, impossibly earnest!” I tried to reconcile this charge with another in the review stating that my unfunny book was, in the end, worth only a laugh, a real hoot. It was the work of a “zealot” who nevertheless might be written off as bumbler, Superman’s nemesis Bizarro spreading chaos in the world. I was flattered by this allusion to the comic book anti-hero (though I’d never heard of him). It was this rhetoric rather than O’Brien’s anti-American posturing or complaints about academic leftists and experimental poetry that I found fascinating, or at least worthy of consideration. The anti-Americanism pandered to popular sentiments in Europe about George W. Bush’s proposed missile shield and clearly did not run very deep, for if O’Brien has no interest in the way British poetry is received in the USA how can one account for his obvious disappointment with our book? I might have included truly important living British poets had I only consulted the right people, he wrote, but had missed my opportunity—very sorry about that. It must be that O’Brien imagines that there is something to be gained from American attention, so little of that attention having been offered British poetry in recent years.

O’Brien’s review performs disdain. Is that too banal to contemplate? It happened that I was reading and teaching Antony Easthope’s *Englishness and National Culture* when I had my first glimpse of it, and Easthope’s book helped me make sense of some of its rhetoric. Easthope writes that

The comic can be invoked not just to defy theory but because its mere presence can perform an act of total closure; the idea of 'a good laugh' can be drawn on with confidence as a way to stop discussion. English national culture, profoundly secular as it is, seems to treat only two things as genuinely transcendental—cricket and its own sense of humor (162).

The second sentence adds a gratuitous insult but the first stands as description of O'Brien's review, which "breaks ranks" without admitting the need for real discussion, which is to say without breaking ranks at all. Diatribe about the book's selections and anger concerning a supposed act of cultural imperialism squeeze into a chortle more believable but for blood already visible. Defending O'Brien's sweeping dismissal of the living poets published in the book several months later in a letter to Poetry Review, David Harsent demonstrates his understanding of the work O'Brien's review hopes to do by huffing that there is simply no talking with "no hoppers," his goofy phrase for poets identified with neo-modernist and exploratory poetic practices. It is true that such poets are amply represented in the anthology, which nevertheless also had room for poetry not typically associated with such labels, for 'the hoppers' I guess it is. Any critical pluralism the book's introduction mentions, any co-existence of modes of poetry too rarely seen together, should not be tolerated, Harsent rattles, because too much is at stake, though apparently not enough to say what that is.

Harsent and O'Brien do not have to say what is at stake in extending the boundaries of British and Irish poetry recognized by anthologies and other books because closure is the prerogative of power. Insofar as O'Brien and Harsent have been answered—in letters to Poetry Review and essays in PN Review about the review, in Tom Raworth's online commix satirizing Harsent's letter—the audience appealed to by both writers has been revealed to have its own distinct limits. This is one lesson of the book's reception: that it makes less and less sense to speak of one center of power in British poetry. Reading those several reviewers of the anthology who are associated with small press poetry and sectors of academe I am reminded of the familiar fault lines: small presses and elements of the literary academy have long been at odds with literary journalism in Britain. As it began to dawn on me that had O'Brien not written his review I might have had to write it for him one poet included in the book wrote me that Harsent and O'Brien could be altogether trounced in academic circles while the poetry they admired still found a home in the TLS or, as a last preserve, the sixth form. Even the

tight little island of the British poetry economy is this large, as possibly also this able to absorb or diversify.

All of this is unsurprising and I fear boring. I can say anecdotally that the experience of reading British and Irish poetry in bulk while sitting at home in the United States has made some of the distinctions reified by critical discourse appear suspect, some of the strife among camps petty. That is easy for an outsider to say. Take the poems of Patrick Kavanagh for instance. Having entered into the project with the idea of boosting the profile of various modernist poetries I thought had been neglected in England and Ireland, I was prepared to find the Irish poetic modernism of Beckett, Devlin, McGreevy, and Coffey of greater interest to me than the work of the more celebrated Kavanagh, whose poems few have discussed beside “international modernism”. Style, subject matter, even “general current of feeling” (in his advocate Seamus Heaney’s phrase) should have made this more famous poet of rural life dull beside his more cosmopolitan peers—given my assumptions. But one reads poems one line at a time, trying to meet what’s there, and I will admit that by the end of the day I was not at all certain that any of the modernists I name above managed to write a poem that interests me more than parts of Kavanagh’s long poem *The Great Hunger*. Modernist poetics has among its catalog of platitudes the idea that the poet might systematically disorder the senses, but I have met little stranger than these lines by plain speaking Patrick Kavanagh:

Nobody will ever know how much tortured poetry the pulled weeds of the ridge wrote
Before they withered in the July sun,
Nobody will ever read the wild, sprawling, scrawling mad woman’s signature,
The hysteria and the boredom of the enclosed nun of his thought.
Like the afterbirth of a cow stretched on a branch in the wind
Life dried in the veins of these women and men:
The grey and grief and unlove,
The bones in the back of their hands,
And the chapel pressing its low ceiling over them.

Some will find these lines prosaic to the point of ungainliness, and the whole passage derivative of Thomas Gray. The lines are indeed mechanical in their stressed and loaded adjectives—“pulled weeds” for the silenced common man, “enclosed nun of his thought” perhaps a less conventional figure if troublesome for its gendering and like “low ceiling” obviously aimed at the effects of religion on Irish life and character. But I’d

have the writing for the visceral image of the cow's afterbirth—one line might do it—followed by the condensed and complex “The grey and grief and unlove.” These lines remain with me as other lines from the anthology, some of them considerably more famous, fade—that outrageous simile. In other more recent poets I find simile the most predictable marker of the poetic and despair that so much has been left to it, but here is one that works like crazy! Or so I thought. I cannot explain such matters systematically, and it was not always judgment but something closer to intuition that made this book—impressions, the feeling that here was something that I'd found or heard that seemed different and fine.

I should say a few words about how the anthology came to be in the first place in the event that anybody cares about that. Those facts do matter, as they made for—they name—material limits. The anthology began as a survey circulated by the senior editor of the textbook department of Oxford University Press in New York. He mailed three or four pages of questions to American academics in the field, asking them if they thought a new anthology of modern British poetry would be timely and useful. He meant to find out if the book would be used in college courses in the USA. I wrote a few comments on this survey, offering little detail. I wasn't all that interested and never expected that the book would find its way to me. But I did say that I thought the book was a good idea, why not, and I had a few hopes for it that I listed. I forgot all about the survey until one day the senior OUP editor, Tony English, showed up at my office wanting to talk. I think that he was on campus speaking with another of his authors, and he stopped by my office for reasons that are still unclear to me—perhaps he liked those few remarks I had written on his survey. We talked about the book a little and I told him more about what I thought it might look like and why he might be able to sell a few copies. I remember saying that I would want the book to include a fair amount of a modernist and experimental poetry too little known in North America or the UK. I told him that there already existed among Americans an interest in modernist and experimental poetry, so there was reason to believe these same readers would have some interest in British modernist and experimental poetry. And that while I would want a book that might challenge existing views of the field, to the extent that these mattered at all in the USA, I'd want to be fair to the canon too. I used that term “canon” quite casually in the conversation (also “British”), as seemed necessary for the deal I suddenly imagined. I said that I'd want the anthology to include some of the poetry that had emerged from

the coalition identity politics of the 1970s and beyond—so-called Black British poetry, feminist poetry—arguing that these were subjects many professors teaching courses where the book might be used had shown themselves willing to discuss. Mr. English asked about the poems I would place first in the book and if I would include Yeats, adding that “if Yeats is in the Irish are in.” I said that certainly I would want to include Yeats. Near the end of our conversation, he expressed his opinion about the book’s marketability, noting that the book had no competitor in its primary market, the American college classroom. I thought he was overestimating the number of current courses where modern British poetry is read. He said that poetry was sure to have a comeback soon.

Later he wrote to a few professors on his MLA-generated list asking them if they would recommend me for the job of editing the anthology. A contract soon arrived and I saw it had funds for a manuscript assistant. I queried my correspondent Nate Dorward asking him about his willingness to participate in the project by preparing annotations for the poems and the manuscript itself. With contract in hand and Mr. Dorward on board I started reading poems with the idea that we had roughly 18 months to make a book that was to be 750 pages. We were required to submit a tentative table of contents, and there turned out to be six or seven readers for that, two of them in Britain. All but one expressed enthusiasm for the inclusions. A few names and poems not represented among my first choices were suggested; a few poets and poems on my list were questioned. Several concessions were made to these readers, Eavan Boland for one. But the book’s general outlines and most of its inclusions were not questioned, and we found ourselves with a kind of freedom that editors of books like this rarely find, and to their credit Oxford New York did not limit this freedom as we went along, even as I was careful to say that I thought that some of what I was including in the book would be controversial. I attribute this partly to editorial good will, and partly to other factors including the size of OUP NY and a market awareness or logic calculating the demand for revisionism among American academics. Tony English never lost sight of the fact that most of the book’s readers would be in North America. He was more concerned about budgets—going beyond our page count or he budget for permissions were more pressing issues for him. Some of this might well make the book appear to be opportunistic, but before one condemns it as such imagine that a book like the one we made would never have been possible if it had the closer oversight of a large and

“distinguished” editorial board. Our book is not except as a typo *The Oxford Book of Twentieth-Century British and Irish Poetry*, and this is no accident. Funny that some in England have taken it for that. As far as I know OUP UK has had little interest in the book.

I did not enter this project without having read some British poetry and the criticism about it, so I would be mightily prevaricating if I did not admit that there were poets I knew had to be in the book if it had any chance of reaching the readers it was designed for. I did pay considerable attention to the quality and quantity of criticism written about specific poets and had, thanks to personal contacts, the luck of access to criticism that some Americans and British readers have not seen because it is published in smaller journals. That is to say I recognized that for a book like this there is weight in precedent that it did not seem practical to push against. I could not for instance cut back Auden's work as radically as I might have given my own tepid interest in much of his poetry, and so I sought advice concerning my selection there from someone who was reading him with great passion, John Matthias. I also looked for advice about selections from work I felt too close to. In Tom Raworth's case as for a few other poets I asked Nate Dorward for suggestions that I might ponder, and he provided good choices that I usually accepted, sometimes adding this or that. Thus for some poets editing the book involved deciding upon particular poems and not the fact of inclusion. But beyond a very few names like that there were hundreds of poets I felt obliged to read closely, contenders I'll call them as long as I am going on in this informal manner, names I knew as names or something more, poets whose work I had or had not read seriously or lately, poets in the dozens of anthologies I surveyed or who were discussed or mentioned in critical studies of the period or in magazines or simply poets whose work I found on library shelves. For some years I had been asking a number of poets and critics I respect for names of neglected poets—I owe Clere Parsons to Andrew Crozier for instance. Dorward sent boxes of xeroxes from his extensive archive of small press poetry, and I made heavy use of library loans to supplement my own library. I did not read for selection chronologically but was conscious in scanning poems that I would be hard on work that was weakly derivative of a signature style already sure to be represented in the anthology. I wanted diversity, difference, eclecticism, anything that would counter the idea that British poetry was easily characterized, a narrow field of practice. I suppose I read for language “charged or energized in various manners,” to

use a phrase of Ezra Pound's, understanding that it is possible to describe quite a lot with that phrase.

Andrew Duncan has suggested that my choices show comparatively little interest in the political struggles of Britain during the last century; he detects a failure of sympathy. He remarks on the anthology's paucity of political poetry from the Thirties and Seventies, though I think he fails to say that I include poems by Charles Madge. But I did have little interest in weighing in on British politics via the inclusion of particular poems engaging a specific subject matter or emerging from a discourse or moment. As I say in the preface, examples in an artform (as maybe I should have put it) took precedence, though I recognize that such distinctions are convenient, unsustainable. Duncan calls the book a casualty of Atlanticism, and I will certainly accept that I read English, Scottish, and Irish poetry against backgrounds that include heavy doses of American poetry. This does not mean that I find nothing of value in efforts to distinguish among the work of poets or to suggest the importance of contexts and particular traditions. But only a zombie can fail to see how poetry has been shaped by cross-cultural flow. If I cannot help but hear Charles Olson and Robert Creeley in reading lines by Andrew Crozier, or Louis Zukofsky in Allen Fisher's "defamiliarizing _____*38," I also hear English poets in Americans. It seems a non-starter as an issue but I can't, it seems, escape it. For now I will only say that the idea that my Americanness is reflected in my selection of poems is not an important criticism of the book's contents. It is a way of avoiding discussion of poems that some critics would rather ignore.

It cannot be said often enough that a book like ours required accommodating or admitting contradictions, before and after decisions about its contents. A full account of individual selections and my efforts to imagine before or after the fact reasons for including one or another poem might go on for 500 pages. The anthology's incoherence is so obvious to me that I am bewildered when someone points it out as if they had noticed something that made for a flaw or caught me out as a fraud. Whatever good I might do some of the poetry in the book that is closest to my heart depended on getting a table of contents approved in the first place and then seeing that the book had at least the chance to be picked up and read. We expected that the listing of omissions would remain the dominant convention of the anthology review, just as we anticipated that the choice of the youngest poet in the book would encourage a few reviewers to take up the poems of Helen Macdonald. Insofar as an anthology does some of its work via the

reviews it receives, an editor's intentions often backfire; he or she will help produce a counter-anthology of recommendations. This is a reality I can live with if it is also the case that the anthology produces conversation about the poems included in the book. With a few exceptions—John Wilkinson and Stephen Burt among them—this has not yet happened, not to the extent one might hope for. A few American reviewers have expressed general support for our having introduced work previously unknown while in some cases British reviewers have seized the occasion to revisit or reimagine polemics now nearly a century old.

David Harsent apparently takes the anthology for a kind of sneak attack; he finds its title and appearance deceiving. It is a big slab of a book complete with a landscape we did not choose for its cover. That landscape might be read as alluding to or constituting an idea of Englishness the book itself complicates. Harsent must think that I was somehow obliged to be comprehensive or anyway fair and failed miserably at the job. The problem is the premise such thinking begins with: the idea that the Norton or other anthologies like ours could be fair. Fair to what? To the canon, of course, or to some arguably shared judgment or established opinion. But here's the bad news, or the good news, depending on where one stands: there is no canon of modern British and Irish poetry in the United States, unless it amounts to maybe six or eight poets who count as the poets one used to be expected to know something about if one set up to work in the field. This is professionalism; this is how the field has narrowed. The other side: the field is wide open.

The book does have claims for authority on view; no use in denying that. It includes a scholarly apparatus, for instance, Dorward's fine footnotes as these resulted from research and scholarly communication, much of that via email, and my own headnotes, with their necessary reduction of vast bodies of poetry to brief paragraphs of crushing generalization. But such apparatus by itself does not elevate any poet to canonical status: no one book can pretend to do that for any poem. I was careful to say in the preface that the reader will have to figure out her own history of British and Irish poetry. That was one way of explaining my lack of interest in too vigorously defending judgments of value. Peter Riley's suggestion in an interview that we might be entering an era wherein the very idea of "importance" as attached to writers and writing is changing is another. We made a book that looks like it wants to be a monument, but we were and remain profoundly skeptical of monuments.

This was a long time ago that I was making these decisions, or so it seems. What to say now except that I hope that other anthologies might result from or be improved by criticism of ours, assuming that anthologies are sometimes tools, prods to further engagement with the materials that they are made from. We had to barter with Tony English and his bosses to secure world rights for the anthology, so it is disappointing to know that, while our book has apparently begun to enter British critical discourse about poetry, it has not made its way into many British bookstores. The fact of few copies flowing from OUP NY to OUP UK is one of those material limits this book has once again made real for me, the limit of copyright laws and international commerce in books.

I switch on the television and take out my pencil:

Firing at the peace gang—in Ramallah
Uproot the infrastructure
Make sacrifices
Mobilize the reserve
Irrelevant and also enemy
Make the point
Defend herself
Trash bin of history
Rounding up definition
Downright humiliating
A total of killed
Untrained youngsters
Can't have it both ways
Normal and pleasant occupation
Potentially destabilizing
A broader conflict

What am I doing here? Arguing about an anthology, my own no less? Lawyers and literary critics argue, a post-Heideggerian philosopher once told me; others do better to imagine possible worlds. But I find it hard to think of such worlds, of better worlds, now. I had sometimes hoped that the work I was doing with British and Irish poetry involved a kind of imagining—let's call it a pedagogical hope, or hope for pedagogy, this assembling of materials that might model a more active transatlantic engagement. We wanted to enable or accelerate transatlantic circulation of poetry and conversation about poetry, and this seemed both easy and necessary in the wake of the Assembling Alternatives conference in New Hampshire and following the acceleration of correspondence that email has enabled. Ours is very much an email anthology, and of

that period of internet euphoria which now does seem past. Other events have rushed in, and borders of all sorts might be closing. Not far from the house in Berkeley where Lyn Hejinian wrote *A Border Comedy* the software engineers in Silicon Valley will have little to say about liminal Ovidian spaces now that they are painfully aware how their software is used against them. Slavoj Žižek writes in the latest LRB that distinctions between a “state of emergency” and “a state of peace” have been blurred: “The problem is that America is, precisely, not in a state of war, at least not in the conventional sense of the term (for the large majority, daily life goes on, and war remains the exclusive business of state agencies)” (LRB 23 May 2002). Yes but the war hovers over the engineers, as also the poets one hears have written little since 9/11. A paradigm shift, managed or imposed or reactive or all of the above, might appear total—no matter how many times the Europeans count the dead of other wars, of terror and plague elsewhere. *O Brother Where Art Thou?* was the big winner at this year’s Grammy Awards, suggesting that at the very moment Americans might be expected to look outward newly conscious of the responsibilities of American power what we are seeing instead, or seeing too much among too many, is something closer to what used to be called soul searching, a shrinking into solidarity as our jets are packed with daisycutters. A sense of vulnerability and ambivalence about American power mixed with pride and baser emotions to shore up national identity, the more frail for the chest-thumping. If we had gotten used to the propaganda lasso of Ted Turner’s CNN we now had no choice but to accept the aggressive cynicism of Roger Ailes’s Fox News (“fair and balanced”) defining our public sphere (or spear). Perpetual war was a phrase used by intellectuals; now it’s hit the pop charts. One can’t escape it but only be sick at the way you’re asked to accept it. I’m speaking as if I could represent the average American. That’s a mistake. But the “wrench” (Mina Loy) is remarkable, unprecedented in my experience; we are all caught up. Just a few days ago I was reading that some of the French call what was ushered in with the euro “modernity,” and that a few of them speak of that as an American-led globalist initiative. Amid the “emergency” and the new secrecy a blast from the past.

I am not sure that poets have had all that much to say yet about any paradigm shift, real or imagined, imposed or otherwise, but there is evidence that some of the younger generation feel that one is upon us. I peek in one day at the Buffalo poetics

listserv and read Jeffrey Jullich arguing that the legacy of modernist and experimental poetry has little to offer as a means of responding to new conditions:

Which brings us to the more serious and foreboding [*sic*] omission on-List and in our poetries right now: the failure of our movements' modes not only to incorporate incumbent issues of concern such as class struggle—a bit of a red herring at the moment—but the more critical pressures that being at war and recession and anthrax insanity, etc. exerts on us. “Poets are the antennae of the race”—in which case at least the heated letter-writing dialogue on List betrays the massive avoidance that the collective psyche is exerting, a virtually schizoid shut-down denial and foreclosure of the most obvious challenge poetry is now facing: war, and whether our mode is elastic enough to in any way confront these devastations. The “denial” is glaring . . . More humiliating, too, that poetries which our sophistication (indoctrination, education) considers too risibly unmentionable, such as the “hackneyed,” “trite” poem that the 14 year old and 6 year old sons of the Twin Towers casualty read this morning at the six month memorial at “Ground Zero,” are succeeding in consummating the national focus. (March 11, 2002)

This won't be the last time we hear such thoughts. We are ripe for a phrase as fragrant as the one about World War I uttered by Virginia Woolf. I cite the remark by Jullich not only for its demand that poetry console the nation—hardly what the avantgarde has been asking of poetry in recent decades—but also in order to be able to relate that the only serious response to this impassioned statement was the following note from Language Writer Nick Piombino:

I've read these well-written and interesting messages a number of times, Jeffrey . . .and while I agree that you've specified an important issue—namely the “problem” of representation for those who practice non-representational art forms—the underlying *schadenfreude* in the crocodile tears shed about this issue, for me, abets the value in whatever points you are making. One of the things I most enjoy about abstract art is that by avoiding concreteness and literality it is sometimes able to avoid reflecting, and thereby directly participating in and reproducing, the overshadowing sadomasochism of this period and age. This, of course, does not stop anyone from rediscovering and reproducing it by means of critical response—since in this medium what you see—and what you don't see—is what you get. (March 15)

In Piombino's careful if predictable answer the possibilities of response to our current crisis appear limited to negativity. We were bequeathed that a long time ago, and we do have a right to wonder whether that is adequate anymore, whether it will

suffice now. As an aside I might ask for instance how Piombino's vision relates to the "effort to grasp the Whole" of "objective conditions" Ben Watson finds in Prynne's recent pamphlets as discussed in a talk in this same series. Watson chastises me for a retrograde belief in the agency of the poet and in what he calls bourgeois political discourse—my pedagogical hopes described in his archaic vocabulary. Thinking about Watson's criticism I have been obliged to wonder if the paralysis I might have recently felt myself struggling to overcome has something to do with these beliefs in agency and discourse being forcibly pushed down, but if I decide to throw out the idea that some agency is possible via the modes of discourse I have worked with and within—well then the anthology goes with it. But I am not convinced that Piombino or Watson's Marxist Prynne have anything to offer our "emergency" either.

Let me come at this from another perhaps no less personal angle. In his editorial for the current *Quid* [9], Keston Sutherland writes that he finds himself "drifting apart," worrying that "there is no wind in the vacuum to piss against." It might be something like that vacuum that I feel now, but if so I fear that there is no wind only because we are in the eye of a hurricane. Cataloging existing and arguably obsolete rationales for experimental poetic practice or for that matter any other poetic practice is one way to keep talking, and Sutherland does that with a passion evident for me partly in the way his prose performs futility, emptying its most pointed criticism of Ron Silliman and bigfoot US unilateralism of critical force, leaving sarcastic residues and a final signature: Keston Sutherland, Gonville and Caius. Like Sutherland I worry about Ron Silliman's remarks in the wake of 9/11 urging the Left to beware of ignoring popular sentiments and falling into knee-jerk opposition, but I fear Sutherland's response as well, to the point that I found myself on a first reading of his editorial waffling about how to take specific ironies. Silliman might be too willing to sacrifice principle to sentiment, Sutherland too neglectful of tactics in the name of criticality. But Sutherland does offer us a glimpse at a condition of so-called advanced poetry that one might as well call crisis, if not confusion. Perhaps without recognition of this crisis, this condition of poetry attending the "emergency," there will be no way forward for poetry. Sutherland's alienation is manifest in an eloquence that eats itself, in his swerve if not verve. Perhaps he would be the wound itself, though we might wonder about that. He is certainly sat upon by the bankruptcy of the rationales uttered on behalf of those existing poetic modes:

[T]he question trembles and flashes: what's the pass concept to get out of the ultra-left margin to which poetry is categorically resigned? Is the concept: poetry's materiality as the last blockade against the wholesale (rather than dialectical) complicity of consciousness with imperialism? Is it: the valiant hermeneutic runaround once again fobbed off with a mere *aura*, this time by Agamben, that art is the unconcealing of humanity's essential rhythm on 'the earth?' . . . Perhaps the pass-concept is something to do with poetry and the body. If the body is cognitive, if our habits and flinches are metaphysical and themselves a kind of knowledge, what is it exactly that we know? Or could know, if the body's unconscious were plumbed? . . . Knowledge within the vacuum has vagueness as its essential predicate. Has the body, as now the fantastic vacuum is upsized, become vaguer still? Since *September 11th* I've found that I'm able to come only intermittently . . . Is this prophecy? These and other questions in the street now firming up for the mass traipse toward enlightenment in its most innovative phase. And of course linguistic innovation is the reconnaissance it has always been, setting exam questions of the dream-world to come, scribbling out a brand new, fully-hope-fitted aeon. But what particularly should poetry do, what schedule of leap/bound? Is the ultra-left margin a kind of tugboat jettisoned into outer space? The reintegration of high and low art forms, the convalescence dreamt by Adorno, might be key. A return to the whole of culture, no longer (*dixit* Debord) "the meaning of an insufficiently meaningful world," but (*qua* Language Poetics) the anti-meaning of/as an always already sufficiently unmeaningful world-system.

I have cut this passage so you will have to read the whole of the editorial to appreciate its virtuoso spin. Resignation and anger pushed to the point of explosion? There is a sick, unfair parallel one could outrageously venture: the use of homicidal suicide for political purposes. But I should ask if there's a sign of hope in the remark about Adorno and the torn halves of culture being reintegrated. If so, I can hardly believe that! Are we still within the tunneling ironies of the rest of this editorial in that passage? Would Keston Sutherland believe for a second that poetry can be made relevant again by a new or newly imagined mode of poetic practice? Would he have us remember the sign Walter Benjamin found around the toy donkey at Brecht's home? "He must understand it too," it read. Sixty odd years later the donkey has hung the same sign around Brecht's neck.

Look, I don't have answers. Whether the anthology can offer models for thinking ahead—I can't say that either. I hardly look at it these days. It's not my book anymore. As they say, you can have it.

ALLEN FISHER: UNDERBELLY JUMP

1.

Shook the stalkover batter in stark derange transgressed
in a freezed crate.

This gets etched as another unique moment-series when
a new spacetime has been
burnt each now moves into each
metal fibre each fruit skin
another party another rail grip outed
in stench-pain reflection-stasis
vapid waters in their passage burn
Oh Happiness! not for individual pain
indifferent existents fetched as other.

Haste well now penetrate vociferation connect corporeal home
squeeze-controlled out-emitted trappiece
mobile joined nerve-like artful tongue
shaped labours project brought forth in process of forming
to this place imply absence not a long while from one room to the other
without question to get utterance in search necessary truths also in person
distinctly listens to separate distinctly
maintained which says that the process of shaping maintains form
and difference in true conditions amid the action of placing in room sited at a
distance to make level air along much confounded truths necessity
and disorder heard together for the duration fly across air in motion.
In consequence traps the sound against the capacity to perceive uneven
remote to recognise difference in speech affected by in search sited limit in spacetime
arrived in confused manner trapped voice inquires into your gravity.

Such ancient text
Tiber echoed to Yangtze
an truth and intake poised in a clenched head
to decipher an engineer's ground plans
read in etched ice.

2.

Merits of a work, indeed, its level
of form, its inner coherence, love a
duck, recognised when outdated
layered sections, articulated fields
illogical poems, syntax loosened
precisely
in a responsibility to pay for the insurance
of boneherence conjunctions of coordinated
particles in a jammed sandwich
stuffed against logical ripening.

In motion by offset all-seen potential without spread
the optical tropai single focused red-detuned laser
beam propagated axial direction for radial confinement
a separated pair of cylinders focused blue-detuned
end caps propagated radial plane for axial trap,
the lability of disruption memory pinched
in consolidation synthesised proteins in neurons,
in lateral and basal nuclei of amygdala,
a stored fear learning.

A gap between introduction of action and
the effect in the form of action, freedom
of the will proposed as evolutionary advantage
until application to global heat sink
subsequent to energy bursts for action
or coherence of attention in complicity
with dialectic encouragement of dysfunction
a busy rationality engenders violence
an anticipatory skill with strategy as a base
for dynamic generation of narrative syntax.

Whiskers and sinus hairs on the snout
receptor-dense zones on paws represented
as thalamacortical afferent terminals
and doped fullerenes with organic
charge-transfer salts
rush light in the free lawn, burn bank
into the oval into the sheened missile sites
onto the badge counter onto the beer bar
give us another give us another
come on then, simulation of death
as syncopated political gesture
at the level of aesthetics tuned
toward openings increased absence
of saturations encounter another frozen animal
another repressed poet on an edge of weakness
pulls us into real art value as political substance
marketed in sentimental identities support for repression
countered by mutual relationship independent give, receive
and return without damage friend to yourself emotions
and inconsistencies which do not consciously intend or desire.

A fried root ash correscoped
with fasces wobbles in applied
attraction renders unstable to collapse
stabilised by confinement
in atom trap
bright soliton in a quasi-one-dimensional
optical grab by magnetically tuned
interactions.

3.

Animals towards the hominid edge
of an evolutionary shuttle resort
to inflicts injury and death other species
and their own. Predatory behaviour
of sustenance complicit in a war machine
or choose to eat locally
instead of oil burn
signs a global footprint
with laser electronics
compact discs and web access
the necessary components of
complicity in the meat
killed for me in the daily
delivery from another's starvation
the agreement to bandage each
torturer's legalised welt
each aestheticised wound
irrespective of social life.

So it opens as if out
into intersubjectivity, history, utopia
whatever the parson calls for
give him his nose back
in abandoned self to not self
another schnapps anticipates
the next history the petrification and silence of
work mute emblematic sludge coded
by some stuffed idea shoved as subjectivity
well shove it into another dialectical fog
liquidised in the spin of a manufactured garden
represented as beaten unconscious.

4.

Evolution of the human neocortex
complicity in usurped dialectic
in desire in embrace
with leisure the idea of truth
as a simple correspondence
a progression from a reptilian limbic
system to protect civilians by abandonment
language cohered into subjective
intent, you can feel the satisfaction,
direct harm to particular combatants
in a tripartite structure, the amygdala
control of aggression response
initiated by endocrine poetics
a physical rhetoricity or
shock easy interchange
of tools and weapons where

every artifact contains within it
an explosive potential where
the battlefield junk heaps objects
and weapons that deploy themselves.

Another fervent of illusion trapped in what is pushed
on him grasped through completed experience reflected
named quasi-sensuous quasi-this that drastic
against the epistemological refusal to allow
anger phials without radioactive glow or fork tubes
there to rake your brain cells another bed of
beans and buses
homicide and genocide between
person each individual beyond individual and
what number does genocide begin or its metonym
we ask who and get ripped get reburnt rewelted repicturesqued.

Another estimate of socioeconomic treads
over the coarse necessity
uncertain highly subjected
decadal-mean data are smoothed
scaling factors estimated used
standard optimal fingerprinting
modified to account sampling noise
model-simulate signals intra-ensembled
differences used to define optimisation
control run into your civilian death strategy
on a diplomatic sheet used
for uncertainty analysis
sourced in future nature
a distribution of possible forecasts of natural
climate change prang-generated by human war.

SCOTT THURSTON: RESPONSE TO ANDREA BRADY²

Andrea

Your paper was extremely fine, and still reads as very urgent. Your question about whether the poetics of Language Poetry replaces the power-relations of grammar with 'chaos, and a refutation of historicity' reminds me of Gilbert Adair's letter to Robert Sheppard in *Pages* (65-72, March 1988, 68) that warns of the risk of 'mimesis of actual informational chaos' in poetic practices attempting a response to Language Poetry. I still think, however, that Bernstein's poetics offers, in the quoted segment, a resistance to the absolute that you elsewhere appear to advocate, and that this doesn't exclude encountering death. I don't think Language Poetry ever really stood for a 'fetishizing of the endless deferral of meaning'. I also think that there's a danger in reading the poetics of poets without relating it to the poetry they produce, poetry which I think persists as a much richer and more complex set of engagements than the poetics seek to describe/delimit. The poetics are the imaginary solutions which spur the creative work towards successful failure. Geoff Ward in *Language Poetry and the American Avant-Garde* (Keele: British Association for American Studies, 1993) 16, attacks the same passage of McCaffery's as you do, arguing that McCaffery shows an 'unwillingness to concede the element of rhetoricity of his project'; fine, but when McCaffery (in 'Writing as a General Economy' 1980, in *North of Intention: Critical Writings 1973-1986* (New York: Roof Books & Toronto: Nightwood Editions, 1986), pp. 201-221, 216-18) argues that the appearance of 'oh' in one of Wordsworth's Lucy Poems constitutes an eruption of Bataille's general economy into the restricted economy of the poem, I think he's playing a far subtler game with his audience's expectations, as well as generating creative heat. As much as this may sound like letting poetics off the hook and permitting it to make mistakes which go unquestioned, I don't believe that. But I do feel that I would be far happier with an argument that sought to take on the poetry as well as the poetics, and

² The text here is an excerpt from an e-mail to Andrea, in response to the essay 'Grief Work in a War Economy' that appeared in *QUID* 9. That essay is a revised version of a paper given at Birkbeck with the title '100 Days, Pathos and Political Apathy.' Scott wrote the e-mail before seeing the printed version. Nothing in his response is relevant only to the earlier draft.

consider both as separate entities, rather than straightforwardly identifying one with the other.

Scott