

STILL WET EDIT

Chronic relativism is a thing of the past. But acute relativism is still up and about and able, depending on the looseness of your joints, to make sense of things and thus to compact and box-up and scar them; and still likely, depending on your degreasing agent (e.g. cyclic ether), to make that sense of things glow faintly black like a star. Poetry in its relation to politically effective action—you know, *action*, what acts are—is at a dreadful ebb. Structuralist theories of reading are underwritten by the Western ideology of consumer rights, the prerogative of the indignant shopper to pick and choose what she buys.¹ Acetic tunnel-visionaries don't want to buy very much thankyou. What to do instead: proclaim the existence of a free hermeneutic capacity, cross-matching the chips and parings of significance that matter (materially), whip these up into whatever beautiful half-impression of a resistant attitude you feel most comfortable with, and be thankful that this wasn't *bought* but that you *produced it yourself*. The half-life for sex elimination is 59 min (plasma) or 48 min (urine), nurseth hir whelps. Arrange to meet this relation in a dark corridor.

There must be, the locution is a good one, more to it. *Quid 12* has been a long time coming, here it is (this). On its pages full of natural flavourings some ideas try to sort out some of this. Because it's high time that we had a low opinion of the aesthetics of consumer rights: denial of this aesthetics streams in through Bush-rebutted cochleae, Bush-eaten gums; and flushes out through the Blair-syrupy kidney into verse that merits the root of that word. More of this is by this sentence solicited: send it to the address below.

A new commitment of *Quid* is to publish translations of Frankfurt School, Situationist, COBRA, lettrist etc. material alongside contemporary British in-and-outbursts. *Quid 12* includes two new translations, more will appear in the next issue. I'd be grateful for any proposals for this series from people willing to contribute. Dirty hands wanted. Free grease.

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¹ Would you like to read more? Check out my article 'Junk Subjectivity' at www.metamute.com, forthcoming June 2004.

John Wilkinson ▫ The Failure of Conservatism in Andrew Duncan's Criticism

Andrew Duncan, *The Failure of Conservatism in Modern British Poetry*, Salt Publishing 2003. 344pp. £16.95pb, £40.00hb. (See www.saltpublishing.com for pricing in other currencies.)

Andrew Duncan's is the first book of criticism to appear from Salt Publishing and might seem to be a gauge or gauntlet thrown down in defence of its poetry list; and before long, as things go, most of the living writers Duncan discusses will have fallen into Salt's embrace. Salt is a remarkable operation. After an incoherent early list reflecting the diversity of tastes and obligations of its editors, it has developed Britain's most ambitious poetry publishing programme – and the most editorially adventurous – since the days of T.S. Eliot at Faber. Even more notable is that Chris Emery, with his background in the publishing industry, has changed the conditions of production for poetry in a way that already makes other poetry publishing look quaint and has entirely dissolved the major publisher/small press division. His embrace of print-on-demand when the technology was still a little clunky in execution and unrespectable in the literary world, was decisive and prescient. Others will have no choice but to follow.

Salt's list has not been beyond criticism for its uniform format and for the occasional dud; but the often-heard criticism that Salt publishes too much is ill-conceived. Leave aside a business model requiring a high volume of titles, this criticism recalls all that was worst about small-press publishing: the enthusiasm for production and the indifference to distribution; the many hidden gardens, each of a tiny poetic monoculture; interminable decision-making and delay. Salt produces books with unnerving speed and distributes them efficiently. Their number now makes it as inconceivable to be a Salt aficionado as to be a Microsoft aficionado. What is required in response is a process of first-line appraisal closer to that of other media such as film or music; and here Jacket has been an example for such websites as Terrible Work, Stride and Shearsman, to mention only the British critical mills. And on these websites Andrew Duncan has been the hack of choice, the Julie Burchill of poetry criticism if not so funny, opinionated on every poet, and finding in every poem a jumping-off point for opinions on the welfare state, class sociology, the nation state, minority languages, feminism and so forth – all the major issues of the day.

The Failure of Conservatism in Modern British Poetry had long been anticipated and long deferred. Other publishers had proved leery or unreliable – and no wonder. At last available, the book demonstrates the limitations both of Salt as an operation and of Andrew Duncan as a critic. For Salt, it shows it is one thing to possess both an instinct which has built a list notable for new work, and a judgment reflected in that list's impressive acts of retrieval; it is another to publish

critical work edited to an acceptable standard. The editing problems with this book are not those of misprints and the carelessness which can make reading a Routledge book an engaging experience (do they deliberately employ editorial saboteurs for their sociology list?): they are those applying to a basic shaping of the text. At the very least this book needed the literary equivalent of a continuity girl. The original articles of which it consists have been updated haphazardly and conjoined crazily. Given the delays in the work's appearance, surely Duncan and Salt together could have done better?

The lack of any acknowledgments except to the little magazines where the original articles appeared, points to Andrew Duncan's institutional isolation – and perhaps personal too. Couldn't he have thanked his friends? His sparring partners? Academics call on each other as critical readers exactly to identify those structural faults easily missed through obsessively close focus. Lavish thanks to a spouse or partner may be embarrassing to read, especially where reflecting gender divisions of labour, but they acknowledge an important aspect of editing. Not for Andrew Duncan. Like Julie Burchill, Duncan is the journalist as lone gunslinger, while similarly apt to berate others for their betrayal of communal values.

This lone position isn't necessarily unattractive, particularly when contemplating its antipodes in the US academy, where the social construction of knowledge expounded so brilliantly by Bruno Latour is caricatured in routines of aggrandisement. No sooner had Duncan thrown down his gauge than an even heavier challenge weighed in from Barrett Watten in the shape of *The Constructivist Moment: From Material Text to Cultural Politics* (Wesleyan UP, 2003), also a rehash of articles but a fully-packaged product of the US academic industry from its preposterous title, a melange of buzz-words, to its acknowledgments and its exemplary endnotes, bibliography and index (no-one could accuse Duncan's index of being exemplary: it is a joke, a tease). Duncan's one and a half lines of acknowledgments are crushed by Watten's six densely-packed pages, which I recommend to the sociologist of academia. The networks of mutual boosterism are impressive. Watten's text shows him extremely sensitive to critiques of the institutional recuperation of the avant-garde, and he has every reason to be.

Watten's meticulously reconstructed collection, complete with historical retrospects on the circumstances of the original papers, addresses work of great interest and range including the poetry of Clark Coolidge, the visual art of El Lissitzky and Detroit techno; and Watten's erudition and, where they can be disentangled, his insights could have been energising. Unfortunately they are immersed in the techno-language of US university omni-theory. Presumably, since there is evidence elsewhere that Watten can be a writer, he finds it necessary to extrude this stuff for career reasons (or, as he would compulsively write, *precisely* for career reasons). The feature which contrasts most symptomatically with Duncan is that Watten intervenes in debates about the positions adopted by other critics about works of art which are regarded as formed in the matrix of debates about the positions adopted...etc. – and this pattern of mutual position-refining is

definitive of the academic world in the US. One of the more ghoulishly amusing features of Watten's book is the serious regard he shows for the artworks and interventions and theoretical contributions of Watten; 'Watten' mk 1 has now been critiqued by 'Watten' mk 2 and no doubt we can look forward to 'Watten' mk 3 on Bernstein's response to McCaffery's critique of 'Watten' mk 2. This is life by citation; I think Watten will only know the rapture if he should ever be cited by Zizek.

How could the lone Duncan compete with this massive corporation? Opening random pages in these two books reveals an interesting visual contrast: the prose of the Watten page will be relieved by a visual image, usually the page of a book under discussion ('material text', that is) whereas Duncan's prose will be relieved by a list or a set of bullet points. Sometimes Duncan will quote a stanza or two of poetry where Watten's quotes are almost always reproduced as a page of the original publication; this expresses differing attitudes to history - Duncan strives to recapture the lost, while Watten intends always to move on a debate with the aid of material evidence.

Duncan's lists reflect his well-known taxonomic ambitions, exemplified in his pioneering survey of 'Cambridge' poetry in 'The blood-soaked Royston perimeter' (*Angel Exhaust* 8). In the pursuit of uncatalogued species he has fought into thickets of verse where no-one has penetrated for decades, and has a special partiality for recondite Scottish and Welsh writers (Irish doesn't come into his national frame). For such perseverance some readers will feel gratitude, although it is odd how little he seems to bring back from his expeditions other than titles in lists - I found only one recommendation to pursue, in George MacBeth's poem 'The World of the Oboe' and am reluctant to trust it. Nonetheless, the summary surveys of Scottish and Welsh (English language) poetry will probably be found useful as well as provocative, and Duncan's knowledge of Welsh equips him unusually well to discuss Anglo-Welsh modernist writing in its full context.

In more extended treatments of individual poets Duncan has a tic of introducing him or her with extravagant praise, then undercutting this assessment in a page or two of gradually demeaning discussion, or else contradicting himself entirely. An egregious instance is his discussion of Penelope Shuttle who on one page is 'difficult and worthwhile' and on the next is scorned for poems which 'recycle the evening class'. Duncan cannot resist vituperation because when he writes directly about poetry, his prose relies for impetus on a stream of one-liners rather than sustained argument (this is less the case with his excursions into more general cultural-historical commentary). Or he deploys shockingly abrupt judgment in the manner of a right-wing columnist, introducing a poet by stating that his or her book contains four or five good poems, the rest falling beneath consideration. The confidence to do this requires that the poetry under consideration lends itself to ready evaluation on the level of content.

Although nominally Duncan is writing against conservatism, his taste stops short of both that American avant-garde for which 'language poetry' is shorthand and which populates Watten's book, and the particular British avant-garde he typifies glancingly by pot-shots at Drew Milne and

this reviewer – both standing in, I think, for the later Prynne. These avant-gardes could be characterised broadly and in turn as a practice where the text demands a work of ‘completion’ by the reader, specifically as a metatext which identifies the theoretical debate in which the poem intervenes, assessing its ‘strategy’ in that context; and a practice of over-completion, wrapping up a counterfactual universe whose principles of organisation the reader must discern in some measure so as to enter and participate in its restructurings of consciousness through language. These descriptions refer to tendencies rather than to specific works and reproduce questionable national categories; an even bolder sketch might distinguish between works having no inside and works having no outside. More theoretically, following Niklas Luhmann one might say that ‘language poetry’ is concerned with coding and therefore requires the reader to supply its reference, while ‘Cambridge poetry’ is concerned with reference (occurring only within a system of self-referentiality and autopoiesis) and exacts an observer’s evaluation – always acknowledging such second-order reflexive practices as lyrically seductive language poetry and politically interventionist Cambridge poetry.

Duncan can’t be doing with any such poetic extremism; he finds it at all points unthinkable. In referring either to ‘language’-influenced British poetry or to ‘Cambridge’ poetry, he resorts to sniping rather than analysis. He decides that Tom Raworth belongs in the sixties with Yoko Ono and other pranksters, which allows him to disregard the greatness of Raworth’s recent writing. What he seeks from poetry as from any other writing is curious information and political astuteness; whilst the peculiar domain of poetry permits also (much like a zoo) the thrills of a roaming Id, or of an impossible stylishness and beauty. So what poets does he like? After reading Duncan I cannot refrain from a list:

Ted Hughes

Peter Redgrove

J.H. Prynne in ‘The White Stones’ only

Roy Fisher

Early Jeremy Reed

John James

Allen Fisher

Maggie O’Sullivan

Ulli Freer

Of this list, Hughes, Redgrove, O’Sullivan and Freer have been genetically engineered in Duncan’s zoo to form a composite Jungian brute, roaring and speaking in tongues. The poems Duncan most enjoys from these writers are the noisiest, most violent and most smelly. Reed and James provide the urbane contrast, and along with Roy Fisher (and others such as Edwin Morgan) an anti-

parochial, internationalist literary orientation. With Prynne and Allen Fisher, Duncan is obliged to tread warily so as to avoid extremism (Fisher is commended for 'unbearably evocative patterns' which seems eccentric indeed, given the heritage and luxury advertising connotations of 'evocative'). What is most striking however is that all this writing dates from roughly the same period of the late sixties and early seventies; and the irony is rich that Duncan indulges in finger-wagging at poets whose middle-aged conservatism is such that they remain preoccupied by the poets of their youth rather than opening up to the challenge of new writing.

Here Duncan traduces himself since his reviews of contemporary poetry, often by young and little-known writers, continue to be an enlivening feature of web-zines and have brought a pleasingly intemperate note even into the critical pages of *Poetry Review*. It seems pointless to complain about his irrepressible offensiveness; this is why, like Julie Burchill, he is hard to resist reading. That public and personal response to Duncan's criticism has usually been spurred by personal injury, has inhibited discussion of the inadequacy of writing so loaded with information, aperçus and interesting digressions that its limitations when it comes to analysing and thinking about poetry pass unnoticed.

The historical formation of Duncan's taste in the late sixties and early seventies suffuses *The Failure of Conservatism in Modern British Poetry*. Politically Duncan continues to stand at Saltley Gates in defence of the miners against Thatcherism, filling his notebook with signs of the creeping embourgeoisement about him but with no idea of a political analysis or response. He opposes an authenticity founded in the body to post-industrial consumerism, showing little understanding of the body's thoroughgoing commodification. His conception of poetry and its value is anachronistic, fraught with nostalgia for lost forms of solidarity. Craft values predominate, but there is little close reading to support their continuing effectiveness – although Veronica Forrest-Thompson showed some time ago how craft values could enter into a dialectic with theory, a demonstration perhaps significant for the subsequent history of Cambridge poetry. Duncan's idiom constantly evokes the possibility of having the final word, as though such authority were imaginable now, where Watten's idiom is engaged in a continuous cartography.

Alas, against Watten's hegemonic, globally-progressivist lingo, Duncan's book will reinforce the perception of British poetry, in the English-speaking world outside the British Isles, as a backwater. Watten's book emerges from a public and continuing engagement of poets and academics in a range of mutually implicated debates whose stringent entrance requirements in a familiarity with the terms of theory, enforce a level of conceptual competence against which Duncan's book looks amateur and antiquarian. For all its institutional deformations (which probably signal its entropy) and despite its cultural studies hash, Watten's links to the network which the next generation of poets writing in English must work to warp, divert and mutate, challenging its unconscious imperialism but reckoning with its power. National bunkers nurture

toxic moulds. Duncan's book can wait on the sacristy shelf to prompt the disinterment of our British contemporaries by some future grave-robber.

Footnote

This short response was written in summer 2003 in response to an invitation from John Tranter to contribute a notice to *Jacket* – an invitation widely distributed. I was silly enough to think that a quick turnaround would be appreciated, only to be informed that my piece couldn't possibly be published unless 'balanced' by more than one unalloyed appreciation of Andrew Duncan's book. As it happens I now concur with some correspondents' criticism that it is less than generous to Duncan's undertaking – which enjoyed no institutional support and whose follies appertain to its swashbuckling courage – although I still think its follies and courage better suited to journalist forays than to a work ambitious to promote a coherent interpretation of an historical period. I'm the more inclined to acknowledge the book's virtues after reading the chapters on poetry in Randall Stevenson's *The Last of England?* (The Oxford English Literary History vol. 12). After the hoopla in the national press – obscure Cambridge don judged more historically important than Larkin shock – it has been surprising to find Stevenson conducting a dismally workaday division of the poetry of 1960-2000 into sheep and goats, dull dogs and postmoderns. Talking of sheep, goats and dogs, he does seem to share with Andrew Duncan a taste for Ted Hughes, very gamey, and I suppose that time may compel me to check out my sometime Dartmoor neighbour's work again. But top marks go to poets who are accessibly postmodern. Prynne's poetry indeed is discussed as symptomatic of this, that and the other, reasonably enough in a literary history; but Stevenson feels no compunction in pointing confidently to the wave of the future as surfed by...Glyn Maxwell.

Marianne Morris □ two poems

SQUEEZE

Lingerie lingering for ripped treacles off the thigh has
done gave up menstruation fuck. Stretch out loving
arm to hurt under blankest caress the face you wanted

so split bleep cache deciding screw your intentions into
sorrow lines cusp of the cold effect skin and nature
makes on you love. Kept the shavings to his blunt-up

re-treatment of old themes rucked and lace. Fuck
this. Perpendicular to his particularity of thinking
I lie bloody along the lines of insolence, all I wanted

I quote you nestled into the fabric that separates. Big
deal with it won't. Why is it your heart speaking in a
fat tongue cups falleth to the floor. Yours is a chorus

of denied and you screwing the ring shut, cried at tv
it told you what you already knew 24 hours of news

Courage lobbies and I surpass, milking the memory
of seconds polished wrist packs in wraith, winding and
bitten anything you can do. In my mouth. Selfless

retreats into cellar rose whine. Either I give and you.
Her mouth explains. The dark gets irritated and flashes
out colourless. More often than not it is just the way.

ENLISTED.

Pink or blue mouth screams. But just to live in a cave as it.
Words talk girls out their mouth and. The normality blooming.
Feathers grafted on military bodices. Aren't we wanting flight.
The measure of indecency of possibly choices. Eggs in basket.
Filigree paper fantasy. The boat rips drowning is offered her.
Offended by the banality of choice. Never get a day's work on.
Insults in the form of multiple offers. Scratch the skin card.
Flesh and hurt dreaming. The body has memory to make fiery.
Pointless indices of traffic and bodies, numbers. Count me out.
Covered as soon as she steps out. So long now everyone watch.
Helpless borderline navy official. Raking in jelly, sea-cake and.
As if the chain was the pavement equally. Innocent breathing.
Methods of care to avoid ultimately. Crashing crashing gut-
wrenching alcohol. Accidents and lonesome pitfalls to moons
and moon lits basking fierce knife me dropped bored worst.
Flit sky paper fashion watched. Dream stuff coming waiting.
Perpendicular eye gaze boredom teeth artificial reclusive cold.
Frenetic. She come back melt. With me all alone all the time.

Sean Bonney ▫ Notes on Commitment

A position paper addressed to the Cambridge Poetry Summit, January 11th 2004

Last year I produced a collection of what might also be called agit-prop poems. They were produced out of disgust and rage, and if they have any power, then that comes from them being written *out* of a social situation, rather than being a comment *on* it. I don't see how I could have done any differently. What last year's war did was to reveal the mendacity that has always existed in public life; "the state of emergency in which we live is not the exception but the rule".² To not act, to accept, however cynically, is to approve.

The privileged west is not the centre. The site of its barbarity is. The manifestations are various; cattle incinerated in the countryside, Bush and Blair communing with the spirit of finance at Camp David, Baghdad. "These infernal places illuminate the whole".³ In the face of this, can poetry be more than an "asocial twilight phenomena in the margins of the system . . . pathetic attempts to squint through the chinks in the walls, while revealing nothing of what is outside".⁴ Is there anything outside?

*

The poetry written by Barry MacSweeney in the late seventies and early eighties is exemplary. It is best read in the famous Paladin non-book *The Tempers of Hazard*, where these poems are collected as *Work 1978 - 86*. MacSweeney doesn't offer a critique or analysis of the violence of the early Thatcher era, but writes from within it.

Work is a great title, ensuring that the poems are read as public, social speech. The ironies and movements of the word are acknowledged. *Work* is a curse – appropriate for these violent poems – but it is sold to us as dignity. As the site of the extraction of surplus-value, it is the central node of the capitalist system. But MacSweeney is writing from the north, where unemployment rose to staggering proportions at the time of the writing of the poems.

The poems "Colonel B" and "Wild Knitting" are both presented as "State of the Nation Bulletins". Its a major claim for a poem, the most that it can be expected to do. As a bulletin, it

² Walter Benjamin, 'Theses on the Philosophy of History', 1939, *Illuminations*, 1970, trans. Harry Zorn, London: Pimlico, p. 248.

³ Herbert Marcuse, 'Political Preface 1966', *Eros and Civilisation*, London: Sphere Books, 1969, p. 12.

⁴ Theodor Adorno, 'Theses Against Occultism', 1946, *Minima Moralia*, trans. E. F. N. Jephcott, London: Verso, 1974, pp. 239 - 40.

makes no claim to a definitive moral stance, or even a political one. It is relentless, and grimacing :

to scrawl erotica. Blind
men crawl. White
sticks click, venom. Walking
men see too many politics. Commons
pin-time Shredding machines
hot with use. Dogs
shit on the earth and bark . . . ⁵

For MacSweeney the landscape is a horrorshow. This is the speech that doesn't get into the newspapers – or even into the major publishing houses for long – but is a snapshot of the effects of a mendacious system on the actuality it claims to represent, what happens when a town or region has been closed down but people still have to live there. The only rhythm is the clacking of blind men's sticks. If people can see then false politics scratch their eyes. There are no social details. Time has been pinned – is of no value. Pinned – everyone is on smack. Shredded – everyone has been fucked to death. Shredded. The poet sits amongst all this shit, and barks.

These poems are not liberal handwringing about how horrible everything is. Perversely, MacSweeney may even be relishing it. But the point is that the poem is as unreasonable as a barking dog. It could be read as the articulation of a yell of grief, frustration and fury. An investigation of what is really being communicated. If a riot could be transposed into language.

Towards the end of "Colonel B" the enemy is located, and predictably it is Margaret Thatcher. An easy target, perhaps. But an accurate one, in that for MacSweeney Thatcher does not appear as a bourgeois woman from Grantham, or even as a holder of the office of Prime Minister, but as a festering sore within the population:

while private practice thrives. Weep in drizzle
of raincoat doubled majorities. THE MAGGIES
BEATS. THE MAGGIE BOEAST.

*The Maggie Beast*⁶

Thatcher today is in danger of becoming a kitsch icon, a process that began in the mid 1990s when she was recruited as an honorary member of the Spice Girls. McSweeney's poem reminds us, if we needed it, of the devastation, class contempt and crass triumphalism that were characteristic of her era. The Maggie-Beats that appear in the poem – the tune that the whole

⁵ Barry MacSweeney, 'Colonel B', 1979, *Wolf Tongue*, Tarsset : Bloodaxe, 2003, p. 88.

⁶ *ibid.* , p. 93.

population are stepping to – come directly from the “majorities”, voters or not. The word – itself a contentious issue in a parliamentary system that means a minority can, and did, vote in the victorious party – is twisted till it becomes Maggies Beats (which turns the “majorities” into majorettes, twirling their batons in glitzy approval of the monetarist dawn). Beats twists into BOEAST – a word frozen into a state of metamorphosis that will twist the mouth when voiced – and finally beast. *The Maggie Beast*.

This is a representation of Thatcher far more accurate than anything that featured in satire. Her personality is irrelevant here, whether as featured in the Daily Mail or Spitting Image. Instead she is seen in her effect on the people; as a force of devastation. The name Maggie is changed by its proximity to beast. It stops being the affectionate shorthand for Margaret, but sounds instead like the name of something appalling from medieval folk tales. Something that appears in the hearth smoke, and carries off your new-born in its claws.

*

In 1947, looking back at Dada, Tristan Tzara wrote that “we proclaimed our disgust”.⁷ Earlier, he claimed that “Dada was not the beginnings of an art, but those of a disgust”.⁸ Is this disgust any different from the prurient squeamishness of official society. Thatcher, in her day, made herself into an emblem of disgust par excellence. Disgust for any activity not obvious in its utility, anything not cleansed by cash hygiene. Since her days things have got worse; the commercialisation of sexuality is another nail in the coffin for dirty, animal humanity.

MacSweeney noted this process in his *Jury Vet Odes*, also included in the selection *Work in The Tempers of Hazard*. They use imagery of fashion consumerism and, to a lesser extent, fetishism, to create a robot pornography fired by social and personal disgust that may be MacSweeney’s harshest, most hysterical critique of the Thatcher era :

Silkstraps falling, cloud bint, talcum breastpuffs,
lavender ignition valentine. HEELS SLIT FUN

Milkflake honeymoon scissors shred fat suits. Nimbus stank

TUNGSTEN LEGS SUSPENDED. Braless pants
hose women
shitting squatlove brix

⁷ Tristan Tzara, *Chanson Dada*, trans. Lee Harwood, Toronto : Coach House, 1987, p. 118.

⁸ Tristan Tzara, ‘Lecture on Dada’, 1922, *Seven Dada Manifestos and Lampisteries*, trans. Barbara Wright, London : Calder, 1977, p. 112.

Pistil sucking lemon sky DO IT NOW NOW.⁹

Or they may be simply the fantasies of the self-loathing misogynist as he drives his Ford Capri off to the local red-light zone. There is something creepy about them; do we need yet another text where the heroic male directs his social frustration against a generalised, objectified female other.

But the *Jury Vet Odes* are primarily a critique of the sexual positivism of the 1960s American counter-culture; a punk sneer of disdain for the failures of the hippy revolution. This is made quite explicit by the names of various feminist punk bands scattered through the text – The Slits, The Raincoats (though what the Go-gos are doing there is anybody's guess). Most of all, they can be read as a violent response to the erotic poems of Michael McClure collected in *Dark Brown*.

McClure's poem may have seemed necessary in late 1950s America, when the anxiety produced by sexual repression was used to ensure conformity, if we believe Wilhelm Reich. Then, lines such as

. . . This is our touching. This
is the vast hall that we inhabit. Coiling,
standing. Cock into rose black meat. Tongue
into rose meat¹⁰

may have appeared revolutionary. But in the face of a society that has sublimated quasi-erotic imagery to perpetuate an anxiety that could possibly have been overcome by a successful counterculture, they look ridiculous. But MacSweeney's *Jury Vet Odes* perhaps show a limit to the use of disgust as a poetic tendency. In lines like "groin me with a blade", what exactly is happening. Is the anger of the revolutionary fizzling out into that of the wife beater. Will we ever have a revolutionary porn. How viable is disgust, and at what point does it become impotence.

*

After the appearance of The Maggie Beast in "Colonel B", we read "fire amalgam, mercury poisoning". The northern English landscape becomes the site of alchemical operations, as the language engages negatively with the contents of the landscape. The mercury amalgam is combined with fire. "All things are an equal exchange for fire and fire for all things, as goods are for gold and gold for goods" (Heraclitus). Mercury, to the alchemist Eiraneous Philalethes (1667), has "the power to enter metallic bodies, and to manifest their hidden depths". What are the

⁹ Barry MacSweeney, 'Pink Militant Jayne', *ibid.*, p. 123.

¹⁰ Michael McClure, 'Fuck Ode', 1960, *Dark Brown*, San Francisco : Dace Haslewood, 1967, np.

hidden depths of the dead industrial zones of the north of England. The symptoms of mercury poisoning include coughing, fever, nausea, vomiting and diarrhoea. Chronic poisoning results in damage to the nervous system and can cause psychosis.

No need for those notes on alchemy. The philosopher's stone is now a brick thrown through an army recruitment office's window. Psychosis is an occupational hazard. The only rational response to life under capitalism, with its "capability to overkill and overburn". Marcuse in 1955 said "the affluent society has now demonstrated that it is a society at war; if its citizens have not noticed it, its victims certainly have".¹¹ This is the realisation we are faced with, if we enter the metallic body of western civilisation, and manifest its hidden depths. An investigation of physical reality that does not preclude the cosmos, yet knows that all awareness is social and minute. And that all language now is filtered through advertising.

*

Valentine of Alexandria spoke about the problems of creation; "the fear of the shaped work seized the angels when it produced sounds which were beyond its condition as a modelled work".¹² The things that we make don't behave themselves. People speak. Dogs shit on the earth and bark. There is something outside the text. Flames from the Futures Exchange City of London June 19th 1999.¹³

*

The most radical investigations of poetry as speech that I know of were made by Bob Cobbing, who published MacSweeney's poem *Far Cliff Babylon* in 1978. Cobbing remained unassimilated into the traditions of British poetry, continued as an irritant to official culture till the end of his life. Which was a position he enjoyed; when a late gig with his band Birdyak ended with an infuriated audience trashes the place, Cobbing had a twinkle in his eye. When he sold some manuscripts to the Buffalo Library, they complained that he had only sent them photocopies. Nothing existed but the photocopies.

¹¹ Marcuse, *ibid*, p. 15.

¹² cited Andre Breton, 'On Magic Art', 1957, *What Is Surrealism?*, trans. Franklin Rosemont, New York: Pathfinder, 1978, p. 388.

¹³ The first wave of post-Soviet anti-capitalist protest / riots hit London on June 19th 1999. While limited – everyone went home to watch themselves on TV – it certainly shut up the liberal commentators who had smugly proclaimed that there was nothing to rebel against through the 1990s. The tactics for the next phase are still being debated.

Sound poetry is an investigation into the word itself, to see what “sounds which were beyond its condition” that it could produce. To manifest the hidden depths of the word, not as meaning, as a physical thing. It is an expression of crisis, a response to words that, as Adorno and Horkheimer had said in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, have become “petrified and alien...the violence done to words is no longer audible in them”.¹⁴ Sound poetry makes this violence explicit. When Cobbing performed, what was being said?

Certain utopian statements made in the mid to late twentieth century still haunt poets who are beginning to fail to see the distinction between poetic work and revolutionary activism. If it sounds ridiculous to talk of revolution, we should remember Guy Debord in 1964, saying that “revolution is not on the agenda”.¹⁵ What are we to make of the sound poet Henri Chopin’s 1969 statement ; “get rid of all those bits of paper, whole, torn, folded, or not. It is the human body that is poetry, and the streets”.¹⁶ Or the Situationist International, in 1963 : “poetry is becoming more and more clearly the empty space, the antimatter, of consumer society, since it is not consumable . . . poetry, whenever it appears, frightens (counterrevolutionaries); they do their best to get rid of it by means of every kind of exorcism”.¹⁷

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Cobbing’s 1971 piece *15 Shakespeare Kaku* was one of his first where the visual arrangement of words on the page transformed into the visual distortion of the word. Letters are sliced open, are overlaid. They are illegible, but they are still recognisable as words, and so when looked at, they still sound.¹⁸

The problem put forward by Cobbing – especially in his late work – was that he continued to insist that his productions, which looked more and more like pieces of abstract art, were poems. Everything that he produced, he read. Its true; in performance, you could see Cobbing’s eyes move across his page as he sounded it. He was reading. Once this is known, then when an abstract Cobbing piece is looked at, you begin to hear sounds, just as when you look at a word, you involuntarily hear it in your mind.

Unlike Henri Chopin, Cobbing never explicitly abandoned the word. Insisting that his texts are texts, Cobbing created a kind of word feedback. When asking what these texts signify, we are

¹⁴ Max Horkheimer & Theodor Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 1947, trans. Edmund Jephcott, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002, p. 135.

¹⁵ I’ve not been able to find this reference, though I read it in Len Bracken’s crappy biography of Debord, or perhaps Anselm Jappe’s slightly better one. Maybe I dreamt it. Anyone who can supply me with the correct reference will win a prize.

¹⁶ cited in Bob Cobbing and Peter Mayer (eds.), *Concerning Concrete Poetry*, London : Writers Forum, 1978, np.

¹⁷ Guy Debord *et al* , ‘All The Kings Men’ : the best archive of Situationist International materials can be found at www.cddc.vt.edu/sionline/index.html

¹⁸ Bob Cobbing, ‘15 Shakespeare Kaku’, 1971, *Shrieks and Hisses*, Buckfastleigh : Etruscan, 1999, np.

also asking what the advertising bulletins provided by the Culture Industry signify. Cobbing's use of the extremities of language put all utterance under the microscope. Literally, in fact; Cobbing would take a text, photocopy and magnify it till it disintegrated, and then read the detritus. What is contained within an advertising slogan. Capitalist language is sealed. Cobbing's work was playful and humorous, the antithesis of the cold laugh of the advertising executive. *15 Shakespeare Kaku* explains itself in its title. From the point of view of consumer economy, all art – including Shakespeare – is kak. It is cuckoo; psychotic. It is also an investigation of what the "shock of the unintelligible can communicate".

But in its psychosis, it is the only response to the bland language of official culture. On the 16th February 2003, I took a razor to the words that Blair had spoken the previous day, in response to the biggest demonstration in British history. Once his words were broken open, they said, among other things : "I am anemical : ath moneygents wi't tongue lict f vice ho : pril : pitch a ming spa . . . Ye vict go I am y rules f war me er bile". That is the closest Blair has ever come to explaining his crimes.

*

In his 1962 essay on Commitment, Adorno spoke of the danger whereby "works of art merely assimilate themselves sedulously to the brute existence against which they protest, in forms so ephemeral that from their first day they belong to the seminars in which they inevitably end".¹⁹

MacSweeney's Selected Poems have now been published by Bloodaxe, and he has therefore taken his place as one of the objects of distraction that are available within capitalism. The blurb of *Wolf Tongue* emphasises MacSweeney's struggles with alcoholism, and so reinstates the romantic myth of the doomed poet which MacSweeney's poetry had actually critiqued. His *Book of Demons* is more than a record of a struggle with alcohol, its an investigation and indictment of a system of social and economic relations that can make you ill, can drive you mad, or drive you to drink.

But its important that we can walk into Waterstones and get a copy of MacSweeney's poems. Its great that we can get pissed and stand on the Tube, reading "Colonel B" aloud to the passengers. They need it. Persephone is a gas that kills. MacSweeney's poems – especially those of the late seventies, early eighties – are an analysis of the rage that comes from political helplessness. A definition of that rage, rather than a reaction; a still livid scar of sarcasm and defiance.

¹⁹ Theodor Adorno, 'Commitment', 1962, *Aesthetics and Politics*, London : Verso, 1977, pp. 177 -8.

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“The infernal places illuminate the whole”. The work of a poet, particularly at its most hermetic, is a social practice. Ideally, it is a negation of the privatisation of language made obvious by advertising (which includes all official public discourse); a negation of the thuggish linguistic hygiene of capitalism. Maybe there is no longer a distinction between poetic and political work. This is not a call for writing to revert to protest. The imagination of possibility needs a boost. Our state of the nation bulletins need to be sprayed on the walls. It is necessary to be unreasonable. We need to know what it was about Marx that produced Stalin. We need to know what it was about L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E writing that produced the latest wave of smug academic classicism. The poetic work is a counter value that doesn’t exist yet.

Writing in 1960, Asger Jorn: “The Anglo-Saxons say that time is money. But only time which has been inscribed within a social ambience can be measured by money. Outside such time, money has absolutely no value. Money is the means of imposing the same speed on a given space, i.e. that of society. From the moment when society has spread right across the planet, there is no longer any possibility of distinguishing between time and space, and history is no longer possible”.²⁰

Despite what postmodernists tell us, history is not over, however impossible it may have become. There may not be anything outside, but we can still produce sounds that are beyond our condition. Everyday, bam-a-lam-a-lam. The key point is that time is not money.

²⁰ Asger Jorn, 'The Critique of Economic Policy', 1960, trans. Fabian Tompsett, *Transgressions : A Journal of Urban Exploration*, 4, ed. Alastair Bonnett, Newcastle, p. 28.

Peter Manson □ two poems

Between Cup and Lip

Nothing, meniscus, virginity grown back into, traverse
what hope refers to nothing but the cupidity
so slowly knocked, with the candle, upside down: this one a troop
of sirens on the ceiling could not awaken drowns in blood liquor.

My diverse means of alienating friends, suppose we navigate
to the root with me/my blood already on the poop-sample at thirty-four.
I deck you with surplus fat to constitute the prowess I don't confess.
That cuts the crap to fit its cloth, wave-crested, lightning-literal.

I'm buttonholed by strategic drunkenness
that doesn't even hurt, fear only the swelling breasts
I bring to bear upon art, should rightly acclaim this benison:

Solitude kills real people, a reefer is just for now, a star
turns on to any trick that validates self, my image, cast down on
your canvas, my motive, seamlessly opaque.

Nothing, meniscus, virgin verse
refers to nothing but the cup
so slowly upside down a troop
of sirens on the ceiling drowns

My diverse friends, we navigate
with me already on the poop-
deck you to constitute the prow
That cuts the wave-crest , lightning-lit

I'm buttonholed by drunkenness
that doesn't even fear the swell
to bear up right this benison:

Solitude , a reef , a star
to any trick that validates
our canvas, seamlessly opaque.

after Mallarmé

The problem of healthy synthesis is therefore the problem of appropriate *situatedness* – a successor to the obsolete ideal of objectivity. Contexts must be found within which utterances are *necessary*, and therefore *sincere* in their orientations towards definite ends. The description of this sincerity may, for example, coincide with one of the espoused objectives of modern mainstream poetry - lyric beauty, emotional insightfulness, the oft-thought well-expressed. But for Wilkinson, utterances must also recognise that the contexts conferring necessity are not sealed-off autonomous units. Properly-situated speech colludes in generating secondary contexts in which it may become obsolete or even dangerous.

In English poetry, such situatedness has arguably been the big prize on offer since the epoch-aspirant poetics of the *Lyrical Ballads* disseminated this form of the distinction:

. . . spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings . . .²⁴

. . . perceiving the influence of such language, and desirous of producing the same effect, without having the same animating passion, set themselves to a mechanical adoption of those figures of speech, and made use of them . . .²⁵

2

By the terms *ironic* and *sincere* I hope to prong a series of dualities which run, like a pair of starving bookworms, through the shallow pile of existing Wilkinson criticism. In 'Wilkinson Framed' Rod Mengham finds Wilkinson combining two artistic reactions to art's cultural marginalisation:

a strain of almost hysterical knowingness by a theatricalism of manner . . .
. [and] a form of 'cul-de-sac communication' . . . which arises in situations where there is a radical disesteem for the value of communicative rationality with a corresponding overemphasis on the need for a form of silence or secret communication with what are called 'subjective objects' . . .²⁶

We may strip a layer off the 'subjective object' parcel, which Mengham passes to Wilkinson, from D. W. Winnicott via Donald Kuspit, and concede that the psychoanalytic formulation rests on descriptions of agents (primarily infants) who are innocent of objects which exist in society and are partly mobile through language. Sincerity is presupposed in all relations because there is no room to say one thing and mean another, but only because these relations are defined as pre- or extra-societal, and at most pseudo-linguistic. Some elaborate conceptual apparatus is needed to

²⁴ Wordsworth (1800), p. 246.

²⁵ Ibid. (1802), p. 317.

²⁶ *Archeus* #6 (1989)

connect this with any achieved sincerity within Wilkinson's sophisticated linguistic 'knowingness.' Otherwise the compensatory 'theatricalism of manner' at best adroitly incorporates its own inanity, whilst fidgety behaviours alert us to an indecipherable inner life of sincere impulses, though the nature of the latter, and their relations to the former, are irretrievable. It is as if throughout a flamboyant operatic spectacle a performer shook eerily with autistic self-obsession.

Drew Milne frames Wilkinson for a slightly different set of crimes. Important dualities within 'Flex & Go'²⁷ adopt different positions on a spectrum of readerly attention, and make different claims on metaphysicality. I will return to Milne's essay briefly, although most of the distinctions it involves ('impetus and representation'²⁸ among others) are too evocative to treat here except obliquely. A caricature: Milne's oppositions rung a ladder out of Mengham's cul-de-sac only into a condition of rhythmic or topographical connexions between the ironic and the sincere. Milne brings attention to incompatibilities sited in the conditions of possibility which arise in Wilkinson's poetry: 'Contradictions run deeper than the persistence of the surface can articulate or acknowledge.'²⁹

It should be noted that Mengham writes about *Proud Flesh* (1986) and Milne about *Sarn Helen* (1997). Their short essays moreover intend suggestiveness not evangelism. The best hope for a rough-fit dialogue with these positions, like *Afrikaans in Amsterdam*, is to note my own position's peculiarities. The book which this essay chiefly addresses, *Reverses* (1999), pokes out an accessible dorsal vegetation of lyric inventiveness and updated Orwellian spleen, inhabited by dexterously mobile aesthetic and otherwise epistemological statements. In an almost compulsively flexible oeuvre, *Reverses* is a comparatively tender, sociable and, I am successfully tempted to say, accessible episode. It prompts the contention that the ironic and the sincere need not, quite, always miss each other by just a few moments, but may be found together as an integrated, if somewhat overvalued, experience. The contention will be developed through close readings.

²⁷ *Jacket #3* (1998).

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ *Ibid.*

The Star's Predicament

Start from the outcome's first desire, 30
 now about-face. Go where the jugular 31
 diced like a worm in effective pieces,
 places your finger just so:

how faintly felt, how ³² nervous capsule
 bleeps like ³³ a star ought to exist, 34
 then sequences like fungus 35
 choir through my valley unrestrained.

Break their gang ³⁶ up to return in hope.
 Once an ordeal, now catastrophe
 strips away filaments, dogear sex
 probes under the bedding plants, wryly

stacks up numbered boxes. ³⁷ These ones,
 over here. They imprison the mnememe 38
 all tied up, like pigeons
 each one quivers for broken flight: 39

Date of starting? Likely extension?
 Even the stars are become extravagant, 40
 made to go further, synoptic
 crabmeat stuffed into their ramekins. 41

³⁰ MCWFML: JHP, p. 420 'Select an object with no predecessors'

³¹ MCWFML: 'where' instead of 'for'

³² MCWFML: This is where the word has escaped or been silenced. The word could be 'that' or 'a' – it is an article.

³³ MCWFML: What does 'like' mean here?

³⁴ MCWFML: Echo of 'wrought to exist'

³⁵ MCWFML: The opposite of sincerus. . .

³⁶ MCWFML: They are (1) unrestrained (2) a chain gang

³⁷ MCWFML: Imagine doing this wryly.

³⁸ MCWFML: mnememe is to mnemonics as grapheme is to graphics. Is it (a) good, or (b) bad that it is imprisoned. Both.

³⁹ MCWFML: 'your finger just so:' 'broken flight:' echo: break free (now broken)

⁴⁰ MCWFML: archaic use of 'are' as auxiliary verb in place of 'have': why?

⁴¹ Wilkinson, *Reverses* (1997), in *Effigies Against the Light* (2001), p. 136.

One readily accessible tid-bit is the delicate and quite conventional lyricism of 'pigeons / each one quivers for broken flight'. Not far off is the disruptive glee of 'Date of starting? Likely extension?', entering a more recent tradition, of the sentimental traveller's final smug push towards pathos entangling a finishing line of bureaucratic red tape.⁴² The crude prosodic slapstick of 'These ones / over here' lets the run-on line run across the "room" (when we imagine an Italian setting, *attraverso la "stanza"*). Tabloids testify, puns prefer titles: solar stars and pop-stars share the signifier here, entailing a predicament that is partly an identity crisis.

The critical lasso snags items with pricklier boundaries, and sometimes falls limply into a mist – as into the word 'mnememe', not corporeal enough to remain in the OED's gut (though seeming to combine *mneme*, a theorised Braille-like concretisation in brain matter of conditioned behaviour, with *meme*, a particle acting within human culture analogously to a gene within an organism population).

Noticing (poised, with the slurred or mutated cry of "me!me!me!" in one hand, in the other, the library's complaint concerning an overdue Mneumaic Theory textbook) the poem's obsessively-interlocked containment imagery, we may suddenly hesitate to identify this wild word's use-value, lest we also become the 'They' who 'imprison' it. If it is too late, if these supplies leap from our parenthetical arms, then their catch - a process by which new behaviours literally embody themselves, but in which even these "*homo sapien 1.1*"s, riddled with viruses and energised with patches, are immediately recycled into the acquisitive individualist capitalist culture – confirms we too occupy a booby-trap.

It is easy to dip almost arbitrarily into *Reverses* and discover some comparable structure, one which problematises the positivist's clean field of subject-object relations. These pervasive formulae, epistemological cautionary tales, are tight-lipped enough to serve a range of philosophers: Donna Haraway, as she posits the metaphor of Coyote for reality, Nietzsche's dualism-duelling genealogies, a toddler who seriously queries the value of colouring between the lines – or Wilkinson's own doubts about his work as Head of Mental Health for East London Health Authority.⁴³ In the poem before 'The Star's Predicament', 'Prototypes they tack, whose novelty is wear-tested' and 'Prototypes or stand-ins whose gab elides with memory'⁴⁴ plausibly a reference to the risk that an innovation's processes are generalised as banal "Progress" or recuperated by society in the maintenance of the same old power structures (we may think of the transgressive punk ethos available as pre-ripped jeans from GAP™). In the poem before, we have 'The receivers

⁴² Cf. eg. Prynne (1999), p. 338, 'These petals, crimson and pink, / are cheque stubs, spilling chalk in a mist / of soft azure. At the last we want / unit costs plus VAT, patient grading . . .'

⁴³ Cf. Wilkinson, 'Mouthing Off' in *Quiddich Now! 7c* (2001).

⁴⁴ *Effigies*, p. 134.

are ill with their own literalism'.⁴⁵ Before that, there is 'blinker a promiscuous eye' and 'The Thing Is, set in concrete,'⁴⁶ to which we might compare *Chalone's* splenetic 'gagged with How Things Are in a fierce / passivity.'⁴⁷ Having counted down to the book's first page, we find 'Steam haunts its lowest ebb & clouds clusters at the highest'⁴⁸ - whatever this shrouded 'it' is, it is an object of deconstruction, tapering off uncertainly at either end.

On this uncertain height a figure stands:

Here is brick, double-baked.
Here is amber, here is pitch to smear your arms, salve lips,
tallow to stuff resounding ears. You stand like a flypaper.
You hold a trowel & with it you daub every lost saying.
Sun blinks, a river below skips, solitary you'll slap the rink.⁴⁹

Climactic forces, ushered in by shamanist and messianic associations, and the associations of the Romantic ecological sublime, negotiate with a grotesque domestic vocabulary ('flypaper'). Suppose the painting ceremony which the agent undergoes transforms its body into a fantasy, enacting transcendence through alienation, simultaneously implementing a programme of sensory deprivation to provoke spiritual experience.⁵⁰ If so, then in the pathetic fallacy of 'Sun blinks', the agent conflates this sacred Telos with its localised version, grotesquely overwriting universal rhythms with the events of a personal physiology, as though universal structures of attention and inattention could be discovered in the way it blinks away pitch melted into eyes by the sun.

When this figure is also '[t]he critic [who] is kitted out in protective gear which stops her senses'⁵¹, the notion of the dauber as a global creator becomes spattered by a struggle between divine decree and kit-form creation. The indexical phrases vocalise both the holy immediacy of a syntactically-secure object not denigrated by any obvious contingency in a relational space (unlike eg. "the brick went through the widow"), and the sing-song nannying of a manual ("here is component 11.3c"). By founding her essay in this way, Brady showcases a reaction appropriate at many points in Wilkinson's poetry: a semantic value is reused as a condition of possibility for further semantic values.

The commensurability between formal features and the variables processed within forms⁵² is anticipated by Wilkinson in the phrase 'double-baked.' Brick-making industries requires kilns made out of bricks. The solution to this egg-and-chicken problem, one of a series in recent work

⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 133.

⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 132.

⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 10.

⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 131.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ MCWFML: E.g. a Shamanic ritual, in which the Shaman would prepare his own ointments and decorations and never be given them with an instruction booklet, as here . . .

⁵¹ Brady, 'Brief notes on *Reverses*' (1999)

⁵² MCWFML: clarity.

by Wilkinson, is that a slightly less efficient kiln may be constructed from unbaked bricks. This raw outer structure receives a light grilling during the first firing, but the bricks should later be re-baked in a kiln's centre. A double-baked brick may be like a condition of possibility which – unlike Kant's synthetic *a priori* categories – may be recycled as an experiential content, presupposing a new set of conditions of possibility, in a kind of dialectic transformation. The new paradigm reveals previous boundaries as "half-baked."

4

The mobility of these epistemological rebukes, across the surface of the text and in and out of status as conditions of possibility, is one good reason why in *Reverses* they often embody in a set of mobile animals (cf. 'These are knowledge's creatures'⁵³). In 'The Star's Predicament' the myth that an earthworm properly-severed survives twice-over is at play in the first stanza's finger-pointing. This creepy-crawly exactitude compares instructively with 'Belstone's' 'Carelessness will cost them lives, already does with millipede / precision.' The precision is probably the repugnant co-ordination of thousands of flowing limbs. This precision is perhaps desired by the many-legged organism of 'The Star's Predicament', the chain gang suggested by 'gang' shortly after 'unrestrained'. Yet the awkwardly-trundling 'gang', alert to its restraints to and the sorts of negotiation which such restraints oblige, is perhaps better off than the brittle militant millipede. The injuries suffered in *Reverses* by starfish, worms and crabs alerts us to the precision of the careless footfall - from the perspective of the beastie beneath. 'Belstone' is discovered to be preoccupied with the capacity for institutions to get rich by mathematically manipulating units with unquantifiably tragic interiors. The tweaking of the commonplace 'carelessness costs lives' is characteristic of *Reverses*.⁵⁴ The effect here is to corrupt the admonishment, designed to foreclose any possibility of its verification, by a corporate subtext: it is now something which will happen, which, come to think of it, already does happen. Though the newly-isolated word 'cost' is successfully manhandled into its financial significance, the cliché of the anonymous and invincible Consortium's arithmetic of incommensurable items is belied by a recognition of the mutual impoverishment of the relation: 'a malarial / fever stirs the agent of a prudent reckoning'⁵⁵, and the agent's achieved luxuries are facile ('velvet actuarial bag'⁵⁶).

This is the precision of "the finger on the pulse", a platitude about tracking trends in satisfactions which "the public" gleans from a cast of demigods inhabiting other worlds like "the world of media" or "the world of fashion" - literalised in 'The Star's Predicament' as a paw

⁵³ *Effigies*, p. 141.

⁵⁴ Cf. eg. 'The Star's Predicament', *Effigies* p. 136, 'Go . . . [for] the jugular'

⁵⁵ *Effigies*, p. 133.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

seeking for life on a celebrity neck. The finger is propelled by misinformation about the capacity for the celebrity life-form to sustain wounds and renew and multiply itself, though from the perspective of the commentators who whimsically construct celebrity ('Start from the outcome's first desire / now about-face'), should the finger jab right through the vein, twice as much hype would blossom from the scandalous wound.⁵⁷ A line break transforms 'probes', perhaps shrub-shrouded cameras, into a verb - 'dogear sex / probes under the bedding plants, wryly' - and now pubic hair is like a bedding plant, prettified, fragile, put on show at appointed times, as though celebrity is resigned to intermittent full tans under the paparazzi flash ('Once an ordeal, now catastrophe / strips away filaments'). The handsome 'how faintly felt, how nervous capsule / bleeps like a star ought to exist' indicates unfeasibly tender empathy between these two parties. That is, when the gang who worship and construct celebrity search after consciousness in their target, they do so according to the blend of geekish naivety and touching optimism subsisting in the metaphor of the Search for Extra-Terrestrial Intelligence, one of the US government's more popular public programmes. The regular pulse they feel is conflated with "a standard star sequence", the model data set of how 'a star ought to exist', which SETI researchers use as a background against which to monitor for the peculiar ordered data ('sequences like fungus') of hypothetical sentient broadcasters.

5

The simple pun of 'The Star's Predicament' corresponds with the tussle between faddish obsession and sacred yearning, indicating the possibility of divinity experienced precisely *as* its most impoverished substitute, celebrity. The setting of 'Belstone', a tiny town near a stone cairn, with a small body of history almost vanished beneath the varicose veins of hill-walker's trails and military training routes, indicates a similar concern with history experienced *as* tourism. We might also consider the imprisoned pigeons - carrier pigeons? - that constitute memory *as* mnemonic, as experience only sustainable through artificial cadence.

Such fusions map onto the problem of synthesised ironic-sincere poetic utterances generally. We begin with a private impulse (eg., the desire to preserve a sense of history) which we wish to sincerely identify as universally important. To do this we must commit it to the most appropriate rhetorical form (eg., a tourist attraction), to give our experience a chance of reproducing itself in another person. So we contaminate the impulse's sincerity with all the

⁵⁷ P.S. 09/03/04, Wilkinson writing about a long skinny poem: 'Where ordinarily a quotation is adduced to support an argument, the contention may be refuted by pointing out ellipsis in quotation or a studied suppression of context. The difficulty with *Ace* is that any excerpt wriggles free of the grasp; what it appears to say (or supports) will be compromised by what precedes and follows regardless of where the incisions are made. But this has its compensations, since like a cut worm any section of the poem achieves independent life.' John Wilkinson,

potential sources (eg. the profitability of cartoonish prehistoric chic) for the specific language or other social convention we use. Irony is the dangerous practice of trying to include those alternative sources within our original project. The process is directly convertible into the terms of commodity fetishism: there, my material desires are necessarily contaminated by the social practise necessary to sincerely pursue them.

The answer which Wilkinson offers to this multiply-stated conundrum is the bathetic 'fungus'. More precisely, Wilkinson seems, with a measure of self-satire, to treat the unsocietal but patterned behaviour of organic matter as a separate channel by which impulse can lay claims of sincerity on its signifier. Embodying this position in the biblical rhetoric of the SETI epiphany acknowledges its sanguinity. '[S]equences like fungus / choir through my valley unrestrained', the only liberated image in the poem, describes a form of order that can be shared even by the cultures of different life-forms, perhaps different forms of sentience.

. . . what can give me a sense of pleasurable achievement is the emergence of that sense of something's arriving from that biological substrate in despite of the . . . range of alienations . . . in the culture we inhabit . . . I recognize at once the risk of seeming to embrace a kind of essentialism which says, however we may see our thoughtful and emotional lives as contingent and determined, nevertheless there remains at the biological level something which is unique and essential.⁵⁸

It is not clear how such biological impulses would manifest in the poetry, except that by definition it would not be on the level of content. Wilkinson responds, 'choir.' More exactly,

Our nature is my greatest privacy, and this is the sustaining and silly paradox, that the most idiosyncratic and inadmissible is the most deeply shared. What is projected from the break-points through cadence, is recognised and answered by ourselves while however incongruous.⁵⁹

The proposition is likeable. There is certainly correlation in *Reverses* between apparent emotional and conceptual clinching-points and honed prosodic eventfulness ('Sun blinks, a river below skips, solitary you'll slap the rink'). Cadence may grant inclusive as well as discriminatory effects. Wilkinson describes recent writing: 'The period of swarming vacancy which commuting to work affords, ravel on my Psion a scroll of observations, erotic musing, and shreds and tags of language.'⁶⁰ The immediate compositional context is a prosthetic memory, organized by an office-space metaphor. Emerging first within these low-risk conditions, the ideologically-

'Tripping the Light Fantastic: Tom Raworth's *Ace*' in *Removed for Further Study: The Poetry of Tom Raworth*, The Gig 13/14, ed. Nate Dorward (Ontario: May 2003), p. 147.

⁵⁸ Wilkinson in Duncan, 'How Many Voices Have You Got?' pt. 2 (1992).

⁵⁹ Wilkinson, 'Cadence' (1987).

⁶⁰ Wilkinson, 'Mouthing Off' (2001).

impoverished items are shelved, with the objective of later rehabilitation through torture. Demanding fields of knowledge, and highly-elaborated metaphoric chains, eventually glue some of these 'received materials'⁶¹ into incontinent utopias. The reader may become frustrated that Wilkinson, ensconced in glue fumes, does not properly make his connective processes available for audit, but one always-observable encompassing principle is that of cadence; thus, Simon Jarvis' off-hand but on-target imagining of 'a study of Wilkinson in which it could be understood how the most helpless scraps of print or chatter are made prosodically animated yet with no apparent force other than their own abject loss, in a kind of unfree verse.'⁶²

Significant problems remain. Can we isolate cadential supports? How does the formulation translate into an antidote to the alienation of labour under capitalism? – "Whistle while you work"? In concluding I wish to problematise the pretensions of cadence, and of biological emissaries generally, towards a respectably pure endorsement of the sincerity of rhetorically-crafted speech. Taking a cue from Jarvis' cunningly broken hyperlink - appearing in an essay that does not elsewhere mention Wilkinson - I would like to propose labour supplied as parody-of-labour as an alternative model to describe the ironic-sincere synthesis.

7

Wilkinson presents an *alliance* in this poem - amongst readily-recognisable payoffs, detritus with a capacity for striking redemption, and compulsively elaborated schemes of thinking (the murkiest 'glue' which in its diffuse secrecy resists most of the high-energy, including all of the angriest, assimilating attentions).

In much the same way prosody imagines a disembodied vocabulary for the always-embodied sonic structure of a poem⁶³, we can try to 'imagine out' a biological subject-position which might endorse its poem's rhetorical manipulations. The difficult poem 'Means/End Readiness' addresses this project:

. . . hands reset his hunched shoulders . . .
one egg will suck, & grinning the mouth's
sweet cascade down like chrisom oil, will whiten his clothes.⁶⁴
. . . visionary wraparound;
. . . none care for what they don't want,
they're hoping for the sun's disc to wipe,⁶⁵ that is to be settled.⁶⁶

⁶¹ . . . ?

⁶² Jarvis, 'Prosody as Cognition' (1998).

⁶³ See eg. Ibid.

⁶⁴ MCWFML: appeal to a housewife.

Wordsworth's 'The Idiot Boy'⁶⁷ is a compelling forebear to the drooling institutionalised ('whiten his clothes') figure whose imbecility combines indications of jollity with hints of the divine (the second baptism of 'chrisom oil'). In the interim, J. H. Prynne has thoroughly processed these concerns.⁶⁸ What is perhaps new in Wilkinson is fellatio. Social intervention ('hands reset') occurs partly because nominally "infantile" behaviour retrieves, through a sexually mature body, a set of new non-infantile significances, appalling in polite society.

The same sort of drool may rouse an indulgent smile or a censorious tissue. By selecting what is common between social care of the infant, and of the infantile adult - by deleting social responses insofar as they are determined by cultural categories like 'the infant' or 'the adult male' - we might narrow down which conditions of possibility are potentially biological, and not merely social.

Milne catches Wilkinson in a similar act:

'ripped between currents, proud & foaming. Flimsy
as I am I burrow the fallopian waste of my making.
Throat like sandpaper spasms on the manrope knot
but it was what I have to excess . . .'

This spermatozoic persona seems to imagine tracing its representations back into the chicken and egg origins of the double helix of deoxyribonucleic acids fondly known as DNA . . . There is . . . a significant grasp on the way the sensibilities of language which seize the perceptual body - 'the manrope knot' - are both sociopolitical and personal.⁶⁹

The venue of the 'sociopolitical and personal' is an abundant, masculine, knotted rope - a sperm - the biological guarantor of the irony-sincerity synthesis, here, failing. The target-site intelligence is badly out of date; biological process enters the field of cultural meaningfulness at the wrong place, yet surrounded by echoes of the location where its latency could have richly unfolded. This failure is not an important one for the poet who has such impulses 'in excess', though we should spare compassion for the choking throat ('sandpaper spasms'), and consider the capacity for the empowered lyric voice to disseminate biological warrants at high volume and arbitrarily. Cadential ventriloquism may erase opportunities of subjects to speak as they would desire by smoothing over the heaps of linguistic surplus, which could have achieved expressions unfortold by the lyric voice. Wilkinson confirms that his '[i]ntroduction of any speaking subject into the

⁶⁵ MCWFML: (The sun is wiped in O'Hara's 'To Hell with it').

⁶⁶ *Effigies* p. 147.

⁶⁷ Wordsworth, p. 86.

⁶⁸ Cf. Prynne, p. 216, 'Treatment in the Field', p. 230, 'Again in the Black Cloud.'

⁶⁹ Milne, 'Flex & Go', *Jacket* #3.

writing always sounds uncannily like the surrounding material.⁷⁰ The poet who shoots his or her load too quickly risks assigning musicality to the *wrong* sincerity, making a gagged and tragic protégé of a piece of language better left to develop itself within intensely ironic readings.

This is the practise of those who impose 'visionary wraparound': masking and protecting sunglasses, but also a hyped term indicating a paradigm for the provision of social care. Wraparound approaches emphasise the casually perceived "strengths" of the subject of care, and the involvement of different types of healthcare professionals as well as non-professionals – family members, classmates, authority figures like sports coaches or religious advisers. Predictably, instead of addressing the figure-outside-society as an extreme form of social critic, integrated at a biological level, society wants to use Iridium satellite technology - which functions no matter where the caller is situated - to order in smothering clean-up crews: 'the desiring hit his iridium earpiece, unimaginably / a vacuum-cleaner cleans up the original point & no guilt'.⁷¹ The infantile figure is probably already without speech; when he is snapped into snazzy sunglasses, carers needn't look him in the eye as they reformat the co-ordinating centre of all organic impulse like a computer disc, leaving only the adult body that remains within acceptable limits, 'settled'.

In a poetic context, the *implausibility* of such a failure - however sweet the affronting cadence, linguistic surplus is never out of the reach of the committed hermeneuticist - jabs towards the model's chief flaw. The stability and autonomy of biological mechanisms earmark them as the budding nemeses of intertextual relativism. Yet apart from a very few simple knee-jerk events, even biological impulses are discovered, counter-intuitively, to be released in a manner that is environmentally and even culturally meaningful. Molar behaviour is *not* the sum of many molecular stimulus-response mechanisms, not, anyway, according to any available arithmetic. E C Tolman's term "means-end readiness" is interchangeable with "sign-gestalt readiness": it is the equivalent of a "judgement" (though without the implied *qualia* of that term) that an object exists in such a way that it makes particular types of commerce available, to reach particular "conceptual" ends. A rat may swim swiftly through a flooded maze, only memorized when dry; the different muscle motions are subordinated to the needs of the maze as a meaningful gestalt. Like those muscle motions, cadence is weak - supple, varied across individual interpretations – more 'my greatest privacy' than 'our nature'. In terms of commodity fetishism, we may apply the Tom Sawyer's fence principle⁷² - tasks exciting similar muscles and capacities in the brain are experienced very differently depending on whether they are categorised as "work" or "play." The presuppositions of wage labour are strong enough to reroute any fragile claims of the biological body on the social status of its labour.

⁷⁰ 'How Many Voices Have You Got?' pt. 2.

⁷¹ *Effigies* p. 147.

Yet are they as strong as that? Tom's fence gets painted painlessly, though an ugly trick is the prerequisite. The dialectic consciousness roaming Wilkinson's work might fine-tune itself so as to be more receptive for a duping.

. . . scatters light before it, wipes a slate
shimmering where lamps design the crossing places, grit
counts you in a sling that feathers above the waterfall . . .⁷³

. . . an ill-detected
threesome shifts & wrinkles, blinker a promiscuous eye,
the faceless semidetached, The Thing Is, set in concrete.

Once scuttled underneath its surface quick & occlusive,
within the tapetum opaque . . .

. . . catseyes dazzle like
an asphalt inland sea, as most rill like water on a steep
industrial road, once the lightning plays to no effect.

. . . crazy dots
admonishing to highlight their stiff cloak of watery ruin.⁷⁴

Consider this specimen of metaphoric chain: a rainbow posited above the 'waterfall,' accounts for the light effects, but leaves the ambient noise of enumerative 'grit.' That is refashioned biblically ('I will surely bless you and make your descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and as the sand on the seashore.'⁷⁵) The rainbow is the emblem of an early covenant with a management which, in subsequent agreements, has effectively traded immanence for transcendence. The divine was once available in every thunderclap; now 'lighting plays to no effect.' The 'star' of 'The Star's Predicament', carrying a conceptual gear of sassy inane cutting-edginess and longing spiritual woundedness, might, urged on by 'The Truth Table's' 'ill-detected' Trinitarian image, connect with its 'crazy dots', also the rainbow-making drops of rain. The rainbow, a circle disguised as an arc, connects with the circular catseyes, which arc in the rain-sleek humps of a 'steep industrial road.' Each catseye is the 'blinker promiscuous' eye 'varnished / with the day's embrace' of the tarred religious figure of 'Slip Generatives', and also a cat's eyes, in which tapetum, a reflected pigmented material in the cat's eye's choroid coat, conducts its punnery with the confidence of any difficult term likely to be anatomised by the reader's dictionary. Tapetum is also a layer within the arc between the two hemispheres of the human brain, another bridge completing another circle, and here encompassing an injured and

⁷² Twain (1876)

⁷³ Ibid. p. 131.

⁷⁴ Ibid. p. 132.

⁷⁵ NIV, EX 22:17

estranged subject in a single perfect circle of consciousness, with spiritual action implied in the very mechanisms by which elements of that consciousness co-ordinate their needs and abilities.

Intermittently during the processing of the poetry's figurative reserves, the dialectical consciousness achieves temporary satisfactions. Specific, embodied knowledge, always implicated in other unanticipated discourses, oversupplies the conceptual needs, the surplus providing impetus for the consciousness' next movement. At these transitional stations, irony made obsolete by obsolete conditions of possibility may locate a brief afterlife within the new opportunities for sincerity in the new field. An illustrative crutch would be to think of spiritual craving being experienced as both ironic and sincere, the former deriving from the 'star' image, in which the reader had elaborated an ideological scheme at the expense of the image's urgency, the latter deriving from the just-noticed 'catseye' image, the risks of which have not yet been elaborated.

The powers fomenting such moments include those of bewildering lyric opulence and irritatingly reticent conceptual suggestiveness. *Reverses'* itinerant invectives against delusions of impartiality are a more buoyant practice, but these mental behaviours themselves chant their resistance to reformulation as managerial "transferable skills." They remain compulsions, unaccountable and potentially antisocial habits of mind. Yet Wilkinson's claim to their emergence is as much the claim of a manager to his sales performance as the claim of a shaman to his spirits. Wilkinson sets up well-lit, well-resourced interpretive environments, in which the probability of such moments of synthesis occurring is maximised.

This formulation of the ironic-sincere synthesis is therefore largely unhelpful for situatedness - for the project of researching a systematic but multiform substitute to replace objectivity's fraudulent utopianism. It does successfully translate into the terms of commodity fetishism. Though there is no actual tight relation between the specific nature of labour and the specific nature of material reward, because the former is disintegrated through money's infinite exchangeability *en route* to the latter, to sustain the fantasy of that tight relation is a verifiable way in which labour may remain unalienated. This is labour supplied as parody-of-labour, because the worker adopts the pretence of not recognising that his material rewards will not be contoured to the minutiae of the labour he disburses (just the same as the critic who knowingly "does not realise" that John Wilkinson could not possibly have intended the details of the critic's exegetical effort). The worker's illogical attentive adjustments creatively renew his experience of labour, as a fantasy of actions meaningfully related to rewards, thereby fending off the manifestation of labour as 'the . . . indubitable expression of . . . [his] *self-loss* and . . . [his] *powerlessness*.'⁷⁶

⁷⁶ Marx (1844), p.281-2.

unsinkable then extinct it turns
the organ inward or it shrouds in black
the lanterneye seems to blink befell
my image recognition wetware &
I came down into the morning

*roll up the sleeve of his long-sleeve t-shirt
several new cuts this is how we fucking
talk to each other when the music's too loud*

interrupted cadence trauma intercept
cloak of night ransacked parietal
bone for liquor Olympiad recess
storage facility down to the wire I
sleepstalk loss Jeff Buckley dead at
30 spurious lossless format
vivisect crowd scene seed in the palm of the
fist little distorted Churchill
gremlin crept in colonise the foetal
breathing pathways roadmap kept
with the water locked in the glovebox sleepyhead

*two more surrogates: cardboard & fabric:
two fake mothers on fluoxetine payroll
one is swinging & the other is still*

regular disruption to the landscape here's a
message from the Taikong Corporation
bloodshot and snot-streaked city lights sideways
bled Jeff Buckley dead at 24
Hollywood dream of night pearl life cut
Philip Morris NPD gets firebombed
no sex check on the signal components
beagles on ice after lights-out eerie
calm on the milk-white sea
Jeff Buckley dead at 22 which
bewept to the grave did not go

*a bonnet macaque slips out to the cinema
advertises for zoomzoom & auto-fellatio
lights up in the toilets where the usherettes aren't*

rain band vivisect fortune brought
an electric son to pick up & hug
& tight hold dear Trieste submersible
miracle pre-emptive forgiveness deep
encoded sleepstalk courtship failure
flash-train distant we are experiencing
problems with sound somebody spells out
M-U-M with carnations vivisect
lossless sucking on cloth for nutrients
'Dracula in Memphis' wound is bleeding
day & night no commercial use

*silent drizzle on the incubator plane I'm
breeding a sheer pre-Christian syndrome
wake up at midnight desperate for water*

less like the womb a nation of cold-seep
tubeworms we watched Tremors II: Aftershocks
(S.S. Wilson, 1995)
Big worm horror starring Michael Gross
city never sleeps its aposematic
son et lumière we don't even know we're
born Jeff Buckley dead at 15
gang-raped by soldiers vivisect the anomal-
opidae is that Intel inside?
remedial intervention an exploratory
surgical procedure wasted on you

*say how will you then Mark Laudenslager
know when your children struggle and tear?
the duck stops dancing when the candle goes out*

the real-mother apparatus rendered in foxfire
a spurious kiss dead air down the spurious
waveband shredded on spurious methyl-
amphetamine babysit detriment blast
one's name is the least of it one in a thousand
succumbs it says here suddenly withdrawn
into soundless nightlessness great unlearning
vivisect the splitfin flashlight fish
determine its smokeless fuel no word
from the beagle rewired cat on the sleepstalk
scared child moonless asleep at the wheel

Josh Robinson · from work in progress

confessional organisations assist
jussive entirety recognise evolving global
response required levels updated deterioration
disruptive concern
directs anonymous deferral
personal emergency
utterances advised support behaviour
substantial abuse inappropriate
response complicate training
valued establishment symptomatic
active contact minimise allowance
expected guarantee

psychological and social imperative
supervise obligation rapid
response implementation abusive
virtually ignored take
liver metabolise aims develop appointment
critical information sensitive
programmes available registers
support unfeasible policy
verbal response continuing status
promised appointment benefit
proper obligation immediate
response voluntary premises fundamental
needs information advice
exercise social involvement

competent knowledge produces
statistics integral impact
donation complying dignity incident
computation orients appearance recognise
abusive mood rent
projected necessary spiritual
response forced practical diverse
consent integrity equal expected prompt
severely coded precautions
contribute local reason
ability confident crucial prejudice
understanding discharge

Keston Sutherland ▫ Four Theses on Speed (from an ongoing series)

1.

If there is anything radical, which is to say, anything preliminary to a new assault on capitalist alienation in the concept “speed,” that concept must first of all be distinguished as a *life-concept* from the *commodity-concept* by which it is now so tediously eclipsed. Audiences of cinematic and political routines have for a long time been herded into an ideological enclosure in which it’s declared that speed is nothing but emergency reactions, the bluff or brawny refusal of the angst implicit in liberal speculation, confined typically in the dictum “_____ first, ask questions later.” This “speed” belongs to the man-of-action: seine Eigentum. The reward for his quick-unthinking is of course that the questions “asked later” are not really questions at all, but a set of superficially negative justifications for precipitous action. The mandatory appearance of these *questions asked later* functions as a kind of epilogue: it is the ornamental dialectics of afterthought, it comes with a guarantee that hindsight never looks back except with absolute inertia. Epilogous questioning is the true vocation of politicians, media analysts and of the majority of conscientious poets: the antennae of all these interest-groups point into the future only as a place in which they can go on being too late.

2.

This kind of speed is not velocity but sequence; its invariant *obbligato* is the need to come first. Its state-made rationale is obvious: we grab hold of the honorarium of economic, scientific and military primacy. The denial of epistemological primacy in post-modern anti-foundational philosophy is by comparison fairly obscure, but nonetheless utile in supplying the state-made rationale with its subservient negation: there is no “first” thought and no “first” way to think or to secure truth under the guise of permanent (or “apodictic”) cognition, and so thought has to opt out of the traditional rat-race of Western philosophy and go into the rabbit-dispersal of systems of difference, or perpetual dialectic without so much as a secularized chiliasm to speed it along. The problem with this anti-foundational negation is precisely its limited negative character. It frees thought from its historical dependence on the concept of apriorism, claiming variously that this can only have been an ideologically motivated dependence; but in doing so it conforms to the tradition which it claims to surmount, by insisting pseudo-aprioristically that all thought must first of all recognize its own anti-aprioristic nature. Instead of getting there first, or getting to what

comes first, we're the first to exclaim that there must be no "there" to get to, no "what" to come. This is still a matter of sequence and not velocity. In perfect and reassuring conformity with the falseness of our times, sequence-making is not eradicated but, on the contrary, extended: pseudo-apriorism now comes before apriorism. Pseudo-apriorism comes first, precisely because—as consciousness now expects of its putative truth-concepts—it declares that it will not come at all.

3.

The attractiveness of sequence is made possible ("is brought to you...") in part by the idea that we live "in the here and now." One twentieth century first-philosopher helped, in his own small way limited by the extreme division of intellectual labour, to give this theoretical "here and now" a bit of sex-appeal. Edmund Husserl wrote in his *Zur Phänomenologie des inneren Zeitbewusstseins*, "A now is always and essentially the edge-point [*Randpunkt*] of an interval of time."⁷⁷ J.H. Prynne was smart enough in 1968 to insist that this succession of intervals is a "social cohesion," that we live within it and that it is "where we / are licensed to expect;" but 'Bronze : Fish' was written before Prynne's final break with Olson and the latter's American extension of the ontophantic franchise, and so the poem adds, in sequence, that "we are / now at the edge" of that "human city."⁷⁸ The word "now" starts the line following "we are:" it is the edge-point (pretty much the *Randpunkt*) conscripted prosodically to the left-margin. The here and now is still the place from which to begin, still the essential setting of the political imperative, however much it might also be the broken non-place whose utopian counter-image waits at the end of the line like a primal sex scene. It tells us that we are at the *edge of history*, which is to slide into place a draft-list of inevitable echoes: we are *on a knife's edge*; we are *on edge*; we should be *edgy*; we are in danger of being *tipped over the edge*; and more conservatively, we should perhaps *edge out* of where we are. The belief in an edge—of time, of thought, of a *cutting edge* in art—is fixed blindly and erotically in this mess-network of colloquial idioms. It is a kind of lexically conditioned belief, as are all beliefs; but more than with other beliefs, the overtness of lexical mediation and conditioning seems in the case of this particular belief not only to have been a kind of unnoticed sustenance, keeping the belief alive through echoes used to articulate some basic moods, but also to have prevented any direct, critical reflection on the credibility of the belief itself. Is there *now* such a thing as an "edge" in art? Is there now an "edge-point" in time, a kind of temporal outpost at which internal consciousness is definitively stationed? Does this depend, like the

⁷⁷ Husserl, Edmund, *Zur Phänomenologie des inneren Zeitbewusstseins*. Ed. Rudolf Boehm. *Gesammelte Werke*. Vol.X. Haag: Martinus Nijhoff, 1966. This sentence translated by James S. Churchill, *The Phenomenology of Internal Time-Consciousness*. Bloomington: Indian UP, 1964. 95.

⁷⁸ Prynne, J.H., *Poems*. Newcastle: Bloodaxe, 1999. 57.

possible definitions of "time" itself, on the present *history* of "edge" as a component of both impulsive and instrumental articulation? That is, on the history of "edge" as a life-concept and as a commodity-concept. Unfortunately, and so predictably, the commodity-concept "edge" now occludes the potential life-concept. The commodity edge is everywhere.

All this is perhaps a question of *victorism*, the reactionary opposite of defeatism. In reality there is no edge. To say that "the now" is "the edge-point of an interval of time" is just as meaningless (and just as meaningfully arbitrary) as to say that it is 63% through an interval. The life-concept "now" itself attests to this: it is not any longer, not *now*, credible (in either the ethical or the erotic mode) to say that "now" is the edge of time. The echoes are too much corrupted by capitalist pith. The true location of expectancy and of "now" is not the edge of who we are, or the edge of time. True expectancy is now possible only in a state of suicidal boredom. In a true *res publica* everyone (including "the women of Mozambique") would be fully *in medias res*, just as in a true *time* everyone would be in the middle of life and never at its beginning or end. Fanciful proclamations of this familiar sort are perfectly and, what's more, deathly boring.

4.

Speed-reading is anti-philological. It is the avoidance, and perhaps even the refutation, of the "hermeneutic circle" that philology sought to overcome through patient and repeated study of its texts. The hermeneutic circle is as follows: in order fully to understand any single part of a text, we must first understand the text (and the authorship) as a whole; but we can understand the text as a whole only if we have first understood all of its parts. For Heidegger, whose extension of hermeneutics beyond textual criticism and into ontology was openly anti-philological, the problem is not how to exit the circle or how to break it, but on the contrary, how best to remain within it and at what point to enter it. Heidegger is perhaps the slowest philosopher ever to have written. Procrastination is raised to an art-form with him, and the "false start" is in his works for the first time construed rhetorically as the fundamental error from which all truthful thinking must continually (and not just initially) retreat. There are false starts, for Heidegger, at every stage on the way to truth: each forward step reveals the necessity of a position for thought anterior to the one first adopted as a starting-point, such that thinking is enabled perpetually to disavow its own initiation. Two steps back, one step, uh, further back. We do not emerge from the circle of hermeneutic inquiry; we reverse around it like a pair of tweezers on a malfunctioning merry-go-round. Speed-reading is the lived-experience of this problem's actual nullity. I mean by speed-reading a new and particular kind of hermeneutics, made for the first time truly voluntary and valuable by some new poetry now being written in English. This poetry demands to be read at speed. It self-falsifies in the circle of hermeneutic patience: the more slowly and hesitantly it is read, the less of itself is really there for the reader. The anticipated objections—that such poetry

ceases to be interesting as soon as we scrutinise it attentively, and that it masquerades beneath the blur of its unfixed syntax as a kind of intelligence that can't actually be demonstrated through patient exposition—are both valid and obtuse. In a few recent poems, the potential reality of speed as a life-concept has become manifest. This is a new development in language and in history. It is not simply that these poems are faster than anything previously written, though that is true; crucially, they are the first real irruption of speed as a life-concept, and not simply as a concept recuperated into commodity or knowledge form, in the modern history of language-culture. They do not care whether their truth arrives first or last, at the head of a swarm of meanings or anywhere else in it: it must only arrive with the apodictic quickness of blood. They are not at the edge of consciousness or any art-trend, decorating its perimeter fence: these are commodity edges with a different speed. They radicalise what it means to be quick rather than dead.

(The next string of theses will appear in *Quid 13*)

Stuart Calton □ from *The Bench Graft*

I address stand memo of
locked glucose and the rail
can catch and follow chin
height bluster dredged on
swollen teak open claret
Galapagos undersea bar
relish today. Pulled through
assembled knuckles twinning

for can't make it come on
for crawl like school interruption
benches gutted pushed back
in or cartilage wiped out I
can't make it. Brilliantly come
off it or open up a fat lot of
the rail barbers to a point. Sit
glaring on Atlantis recall

wage poll. It can't forestall
this for within, watch the
rail wrought mono-loop pinch
through the temples, it can
hold its own on both sides, clip
the unwarranted ears or to
resign from folly, and stand
mounding on this, what

lathe privilege frames this
asymmetric response mount
this I have my thigh-rail I have
my pushed through meat
twist of battered sheen. And
which bursts through sponge
malar balustrade hammered fast
into sutures press-bench I

underestimate out loud don't
shout this coupling the zygomatic
arch can emit shrill coving
bundled through the marrow.
Bridled crescent jeer feel
floor-polish baton to ameliorated
Brasso ride on see you the
Mall broken, no-one always

fails to remember a new
face blasted into penitent
waters to break on the lip of
squeegee minimum take-
home net forecast take
away, first, me crippled on boot-boy
radar served up to ventilate mace-crust
secretary for gas requiem. The greatest

sacrifice is cracked up to be a
cheap shot costed against poll
levitation co-ordinates spread
out on the cranial floor. Once
upon five-yuan they French-
polish hammered-in tufts of bald
catgut twine across a brass
pan rigged to the I.V. Tory

dying. A tie vote defeats an
affirmative motion, nerve-bundles
shredded divert to civil balcony
ringworm tax on the "unearned
increment" units comprising not
battered gore, freedom of
association snapped mop along the
bone by a two-thirds adverse vote.

Theodor W. Adorno □ A final statement on the ideological implications of the Unconscious, from 'The Concept of the Unconscious in the Transcendental Doctrine of the Soul', his (rejected) habilitation thesis (1927). Translated by Matt fytche

In closing, it only remains for us to cast a quick glance at the *purpose* of this dissertation. Admittedly, in resolving the epistemological tasks which it posed for itself, it has already fulfilled its purpose as a scholarly investigation. But that it was precisely these epistemological tasks which we posed, and not others, is of course no accident. We consider the problem of the unconscious to be of particular importance. Not simply because the discourse of an unconscious has become as widespread as it is confused, and ought to be eradicated as the unfortunate remainder of a bygone metaphysic. But rather because we believe that the popularity of precisely this concept, and its confusion, stems at the same time from a deeper contemporary need. The discourse of the unconscious is of course not just confined vaguely to conversation, but plays a major role in the sciences of knowledge. I'm thinking here not so much of psychoanalysis, whose popular success is admittedly due less to its more rigorous grasp of the concept of the unconscious than other motives. I mean above all the reigning currents of 'characterology' and the psychology of the person, as well as certain efforts in phenomenology, and finally I'd also include certain kinds of approach that are not so distant from Gestalt theory: taken together, all those movements that operate primarily with the concept of the *organic*, and which think they have found in this concept an effective means with which to fight every 'rationalism'...The reason why we've undertaken to set up a scientifically delimited theory of the unconscious against those other theories, is because we don't view them in isolation, but in the context of the times. Because we believe that they don't just spring from the imaginative whim of their creators, but fulfill a precisely fixed function in social reality – and a dangerous one, which it is essential to be aware of and which, it seemed to us, was necessary to demolish. It's not hard to describe this function. Of course, one shouldn't look for it in the isolated structure of particular theories, and certainly not in the psychology of the authors who have coined such theories. The function of a theory in social reality is always itself social. As a social function it is also grounded in social relationships. It is in fact unmistakable that the positive meaning of the concept of the unconscious in current philosophy contradicts with social reality itself. For the prevailing economic structure operates under the sign of the rational, and is nothing less than the kind of organism that the theories of the unconscious propagate as a norm and standard. Nonetheless, if it's in precisely this social order that the theories of the unconscious gain recognition, and achieve a broad intellectual sway, then one can't ignore the suspicion that the contradiction between the philosophies of the

unconscious and the reigning economic structure form a complementary arrangement – that the theory is meant to complete a lack in reality, and at the same time transfigure this deficiency. It gets exploited as ideology, in other words. Now the ideological role played by theories of the unconscious can be understood from more than one angle. In the first place, these theories aim to divert attention altogether from the prevailing commercial trend and the supremacy of the economic, in that they furnish proof of other, no less effective powers, lying outside the realm of the economic, which are independent of consciousness in every sense, and therefore released from the economic tendency towards rationalisation. That is to say, that there remain islands onto which the individual can withdraw from the tide of economic competition. The unconscious forces of the soul come to be regarded in just this way – as realities which are independent of the economic process of production, into which one only needs to retire, in contemplation or leisured enjoyment, to indulge in a restorative break from the irresistible economic urge – like consciousness on vacation. What has been forgotten here is that the unconscious facts, in so far as it is meaningful to talk of them, are not confined to a particular sphere independent of consciousness. Rather, it is precisely the waking life of consciousness that they determine as a general law, including, to be sure, the life of commerce. On the other hand, if one wants to withdraw into the unconscious as a kind of nature reserve, one must assume a certain minimum level of independence from the world of economic necessity, and a certain amount of free time. That is to say, the supposed freedom from the economy is nothing more than an economic freedom, and remains confined to a small circle of people as their private luxury: though it goes without saying that the facts emphasised here can by no means be identified as the unconscious ones. The ideological function of the theories of the unconscious is manifested in the way that the valorisation of these unconscious forces throws the individual back on his own resources and deflects from social relationships, from which the individual believes itself to be independent, and from which it withdraws into private existence instead of getting too far involved with the possibility of transforming them. However, this by no means exhausts the ideological significance of the theories of the unconscious. They culminate in extremely dangerous consequences. The glorification of the life forces – those which mock the credentials of consciousness – not only aims at distracting from social reality, but underwrites society when the operations of the economy exceed the measures of sensible regulation and orient themselves blindly as forces and drives. It's precisely here that the power of the unconscious reveals itself: the notion of natural irruptions of unconscious, vital powers of the soul, provides ideological cover not just for unbridled, self-seeking exploitation, but also for the most pernicious imperialist agenda. These occurrences, in which the existing economic system comes into conflict with itself, and which get assigned economically to the concept of a market crisis, supply the deepest rationale for making out that these are unconscious and fateful necessities: because reason is not able to justify them, and there remains no alternative path for the reigning economic system, other than the one that leads

to precisely such consequences. In order to withdraw from rational critique once and for all, the imperialist tendencies – most clearly in fascist ideology – are returning to ontological, supra-conscious, transcendent and in some ways holy essences, which allow the blind consummation of self-destruction in the reigning economic system to appear as god-given and necessary. But always with the understanding that, as catastrophe engulfs us, not everyone will be losers, in fact many will be winners. That the theory of the unconscious originates in Nietzsche's philosophy of power, is a dreadful confirmation of the predicament. The interconnection between the metaphysics of the unconscious, the philosophy of power and fate, the critical condition of society and political actuality finds its exemplary expression in the later philosophy of Spengler's. In contrast to this, we are concerned, in every sense, with a *disenchantment* of the unconscious. By approaching the unconscious as a conceptual form, which always and only has its grounds in the conscious and has to prove itself in the conscious, all talk of the unconscious powers of the soul – which are either freed from the power of consciousness, or provide a foundation for it – becomes invalid. In grasping the unconscious as a transcendental, general and necessary law, it loses its value-laden, normative character, and presents itself no longer as a privilege of men of higher natures, but rather as a simple condition of psychical coherence, applicable to anyone. Admittedly, it thus loses its healing power, but also its mythical superiority. One can't escape into the unconscious; it's not qualitatively separate from consciousness, but part and parcel of the coherence of the known. Insofar as obscure drives and pretensions to power lurk behind unconscious facts, it's not only a question of the disenchantment of the *concept* of the unconscious – which we hope we have now adequately established – but also of the cognition of unconscious facts themselves. That's why we find psychoanalysis so significant – because it grants an insight into the unconscious without burdening it with any metaphysical pathos that it doesn't deserve, and because its discoveries are themselves directed at the dissolution of unconscious facts. They thus provide a useful weapon against every metaphysics of the drive or the apotheosis of such bare, inexpressive, organic life. It's not for nothing that psychoanalysis stirred up the outrage and indignation of all those who saw that the unconscious – their ideological refuge and private estate – was threatened by psychoanalytic enlightenment. Freud showed that the resistance to psychoanalysis actually confirmed its core theses; in a similar way we could say that psychoanalysis meets with opposition wherever the power of unconscious contexts – and more so of the interests which hide behind the ideological mantle of unconsciousness – are stronger than the tendency towards insight. It can't be denied that psychoanalysis is not unambiguously devoted to the elucidation of the unconscious. We have had to criticise the discipline of psychoanalysis in many places – for instance, for assuming the unconscious naturalistically, which again threatens to turn it into a form of transcendence. At the same time, the broader impact of psychoanalysis not only facilitates the demand for the cognition of unconscious facts, and rightly so, but is also liable to make that same appeal to unconscious relations as forces of destiny, to which we are

critically opposed. But it can't be ignored that psychoanalysis, in its fundamental intentions, as we see them emerge in *Freud's* theory, is after all able and willing to enforce the primacy of cognition over the unconscious. If psychoanalysis nevertheless remains, at many points, stuck within dogmatic assumptions concerning an unconscious, this has its basis not just in theoretical shortcomings – which we have indicated in a number of ways – but in a social one: namely that the uncovering of many a crucial unconscious meaning has as its prerequisite the transformation of current social conditions. And in any case, nothing can be achieved with the insight into unconscious facts alone, so long as the continued existence of social reality remains undisturbed. After all that we have demonstrated concerning the transcendental-ideal possibility of a law-governed connection between the material and the psychical world, it can't surprise us if not only the cognition of unconscious facts, but their very constitution, is dependent on the material world and with it the social. Freud himself pronounced this connection with great simplicity, with respect to the central concept of the psychoanalytic dynamic of the unconscious – the concept of repression: "The motivation of human society is in the last instance an economic one; as there is not enough food to maintain its members without their labour, it must limit the number of its members and displace their energies from sexual activity onto labour. Hence the eternal, primeval, exigencies of life, which have carried on up to the present day." (*Introductory Lectures*, 324) With this the limit to the elucidation of the unconscious through cognition is in all cases conclusively prescribed, in that the formation of unconscious laws is also conditioned through the circumstances of the material world, which can't be altered through an analysis of the contexts of consciousness alone. Freud stumbles upon the same limitation when he explains that analytical therapy has to come to a halt in cases where the illness manifests the patient's flight from social conditions, which therapy has no power to ameliorate. In cases such as these, one has to let the illness persist, as the lesser evil. The limit alluded to here is the limit of every explanation, and likewise of our investigation. We don't flatter ourselves with the hope that we have seriously damaged the standing of the reigning doctrines of the unconscious. The interests at stake, which secure those theories in public opinion, are too powerful. But all the same, we believe that the explanation pursued here hasn't been wholly in vain. The practical repercussions of false doctrines can't be overcome wholly through theoretical means, but the latter at least prioritize an insight into the falsehood of a doctrine, and replace this, more correctly, with its constitution. If, within the narrow frame of the critique of knowledge, we've managed to determine the concept of the unconscious and the manner of its disenchantment, we consider that to be enough.

Herbert Marcuse □ 'Disappointment.' Translated by Keston Sutherland⁷⁹

Being and Time appeared during the decline of the Weimar Republic: the coming catastrophe, the nearness of the Nazi Regime, was perceptible everywhere. But the main stream of philosophy at that time in no way reflected this situation. Heidegger's work seemed to me and my friends to be a new beginning. We experienced his book (and his lectures, from which we took notes) finally as a *concrete* philosophy: here was the discourse of existence, of our existence, of anxiety and care and boredom etc. And we experienced yet another, this time an "academic" liberation: Heidegger's interpretation of Greek philosophy and German idealism, which gave us a new insight into texts long since ossified.

Only gradually did we recognise that the concreteness of Heideggerian philosophising was to a high degree illusory, that we were dealing once again with a transcendental philosophy (albeit one with an enlarged hierarchy), in which the existential categories had lost their sharpness, become neutralised and finally lost themselves in ever loftier abstractions. That was still the case when the "question of technology" took over from the "question of being:" yet another apparently threatening concretion which sank rapidly into the abstraction process—bad abstraction, in which the concrete was not sublated [*aufgehoben*] but merely disappeared.

I left Freiburg in January 1933. Neither I nor my friends had noticed or known anything about Heidegger's involvement with Nazism before 1933. It was not until later that we attempted to establish an affinity between his philosophy and his politics. Today it seems to me shameless to dismiss Heidegger's declaration of belief in Hitler's regime as a (short) false step or a mistake: I believe that a philosopher cannot make such a "mistake" without exposing and disavowing his own *authentic* philosophy.

⁷⁹ 'Enttäuschung,' *Erinnerung an Martin Heidegger*. Pfullingen: Verlag Günther Neske, 1977. 162-3.