

## EDIT SPEAK

QUID hits the xerox less frequently than I had hoped, when I had hoped. This issue appears however in time for CCCP and should clutter the fruitstall there, should prompt miscellaneous outbursts, should rouse the avid to some newer idea of what's what &c. Should it, I'd be pleased as punch. Drew Milne is right to point out in his article on Caroline Bergvall's *Goan Atom* the absence of a proper review culture; QUID hopes to plug what gaps it can, but relies on the willingness of interested persons to hazard their opinion in print. By way of encouraging this, I might stress that of course this is barely "print" anyhow, the distribution rills are hardly turbid, no-one need fear a fall from the company of anonyms. Articles and correspondence should be sent please to Keston Sutherland, Gonville & Caius College, Cambridge CB2 1TA. That our archive-culture might be sustained. Despite all of which, I am very grateful to the present contributors.

KS.

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# GERALDINE MCKENZIE

## **More**

nothing waste what grits the cogent stream  
blade its light and ripen eyes among the wreck  
so near to land or hand and crumbling unzipped  
and cozening a blind one to the sham the feted  
bed this matter of grabbing and taking to yourself  
to thumb me like a book and flits  
that one may smile and smile  
fixed in attitudes of faith  
on your knees again says Krum  
a fine witch fair teaser and behind  
certain voices who could laugh you out  
and into well lost to find but sick  
of paradox its glib and stock to wit  
a restless pen that think and think would never  
stop some sign and red as such  
cheap word and slippery no sweater  
than mastering the clutches would fit  
as fit you hammer home the point  
I count my blessings in lieu of substance  
two more he says for guilt and money  
counterfeit and spoiling for a fight  
who fucked and flicked the body over  
some expectation of delivery and who  
wouldn't be ordinary with freedom  
as an edge a definite border where fell  
and dark the word knife passing between  
us such memories carved up and  
waiting dismemberment by morning  
some breach of music apprehended in the wings  
and beat would come the savage back  
and angry child who will not break for shame  
I don't know you no less than curdling  
a fair reply *how go these severed limbs*  
*tonight and slowly slowly* so deep  
has chaste and measured lack  
come again to whole where rent and  
feigned maintenance of the parts could whet  
that jade to appetite and munch flesh and open  
wound leave off certain facts  
adjusting passion in its noisy crack  
dumb to axes and the slow walk home  
lifts how lately I've loved and lost  
who stars and mouth give over

***On Fracture by Miles Champion***

So much, is / One voice containing the other / So I see the other come in / over to the side / let alone  
returning on itself / older than forward is the way we might go and grow because we do, fat / in his  
mouth / the last person / now into length / that as risk / melted from it / and the / equal limit / creep / If  
you still want to come / If you set your mind to it / by carbide / and the light touch is so quickly / the  
mere & lovely centre / fallen and slanted / hopeless / with us, white ones / the mind fills / there is  
evidence / some weird puritan stringency / & fabulous love of it / no part of this dipping coil shall be  
withheld / from London to the furthest tip / the oblique turned into a great torque / How much we see is  
how far we desire change / and saves its line / the tedium of all this / the false yaps / in echo of stylish  
lines / none of these is / Satisfied in the Kodak gantry / with no choice / as must be said / in the  
prolonged / fantasy of control / with jabs / in the frame / leaving nothing / not absent nor / Visual sonar  
arrhythmia / be fair / Lemon yellow / blurs into locked-on receptor site blockade / and breaking / historic  
matching / is not yet rebuilt / viz it / lustful for relief / gets changed / to the mirror boy and see / cool /  
come / crashes into / the cool inner room / and spills on to his hand / when it is required of /  
depolarization induced by acquisition / Who else can surmount this / to find is so / plain work to / floaters  
/ but the advent / ear is marked / to each hinge / or even the pure form of change / him & he is / dip  
lean / skimming / and will persist in it / it surrounded by little else / to give up and to be given in / the  
ones opposite / is scorched off / and in / motion / down the cancelled line and / and expectance / &  
prolonged action / & after and thus / a line or sequence / and will not let / by the most specific and  
hopeful eye / as an orange-yellow chimney / to make a lozenge / see what he loves, again or before /  
setting the reverse signs of memory and / pure joy at a feeble joke / word for shoes / to bright stop /  
shaking his / pink / flag / In sight of the world / system & the borrowed / packet /

*Repeater*

Well in throttle kept to curve  
casing the proof at sealed slide  
marks from that to this green from  
cherry scorch in edge  
of sparks at rest or set.  
Or flood plain soft ready to sag  
sweet and walk away and fall as in  
water added to the settling tank  
remains distinct from my pace  
alluring motion threads not  
much to a colder height  
blank at cupped face or blown.

*from the Trojan Light*

*How has an institution structured by evanescence and aesthetic fantasy managed to take root in human history?' Gilles Lipovetsky, The Empire of Fashion.*

GROUND TROOPS

the city circled by words  
pillowed softly to digest  
amid their greeting cards  
called wings from thence  
to the vast sea of beauty  
and as it were a capstone  
or safeguard contra study  
each knitted shirt woven  
into the shroud of rubble  
where the books are kept  
nude so fetchingly decked  
in a mascara winging each  
uncut page in felt tip as  
in short rations of fodder  
until the siege is lifted  
and vows destined to fail  
the savage bone-cup held  
square in the midriff can  
quiver for the honour of  
the kill of night veiling  
the glimmering tracer cut  
through to go off message

TOPLESS TOWERS

as shit of soil caught in  
teeth more than gilding to  
make seem gorgeous wherein  
ourselves find parties and  
the dogs are vultures upon  
grey fingers of the dying  
can rest harsh technology  
in the rise for these are  
the prizes of a gathering  
consensus against an early  
shower hands in vain cast  
before the onset of film  
can sever windpipes from  
the dead in no other word  
but spread to purple and  
driven into flat girders  
care of the space agency  
not who heaped on wounds  
but such stunned tresses  
on congeries of fertility  
there plunging to a band  
as frozen in full colours

***A Veritable Dollmine:*****CAROLINE BERGVALL, GOAN ATOM, 1. JETS-  
POUPEE (CAMBRIDGE: REM PRESS, 1999)**

In the absence of a more developed review culture, readers of this recent book by Caroline Bergvall might wonder about the status of its intimacy and public address. This is work which flaunts its poetic affiliations with some panache. The opening epigraph from Duchamp – “Arrhe est ... art ce que merdre est ... merde” – suggests the workings of a cosmopolitan wit, suspicious of the superiority of ‘art’ over other games, and happy with a whiff of eau de toilette from the Dada urinal. The text parenthesises a “Homage to Louise Bourgeois”, and gives succour to impressions that this is a post-Dada, post-surrealist poetics, one that pooh-poohs the boy’s own paper heroics otherwise familiar from various admirers of Bataille and Deleuze. If the epigraph also arouses expectations that the book will play with the poetic, idiomatic and vulgar potential of dropped consonants and arty franglais, then readers are in for a treat. A certain Eurolinguaphilia is needed to appreciate the verbal play: “slip on a slap on a chatte Cat upfront to sleep with broad Loot Outbroads La-Bonkings”. Pleasures from what one might find on the tip of one’s multilingual tongue are much to the fore.

The italicised statement on the book’s second page indicates the exploratory premise of the book: - “Anybod’s body’s a Dollmine”. ‘Bod’ evokes the abbreviations of contemporary sexuality – ‘nice bod’ etc. Tensions between bod, body and “corps” prompt the questions of fantasy and desire suggested by ‘Dollmine’. Asking whose ‘any’? reveals more political dimensions in our collective participation in imaginary dolls:

To take advantage of the interior mechanism  
run through the thoughts retained of little girls  
as a panorama deep in the belly  
revealed by multicoloured electric  
illumination

If this locates illumination as a problem, the poems themselves use puns to illuminate lewd qualities in familiar idioms, for example “Such Heir Hair Air Errs” or “La bour La bour La bour / Wears god on a strap / Shares mickey with all your friends”. The poetic sexuality of nursery rhymes is always close to the surface, but adult retrospection moves deftly between cultural allusions and the double intendres of “fanny face” and “ex / Creme / ental / eaT / ing”.

Future parts of Goan Atom may reveal the relevance of the political geography of Goa and an-atom-y. An imperative – “go on at ‘em” – also lurks in the title’s folds to embrace the helpless pun-lover. Perhaps the text’s ‘Dolly’ alludes to Dolly the sheep, the unfortunate victim of boys with toys let loose on genetic material. “Poupee”, however, confirms that the book is interested in dolls of more than one kind,

within a genealogy that might stretch from Hans Bellmer's dolls to the Cindy dolls and Chapman brothers of contemporary art. The book casts a flirtatious eye towards sapphic chic and the aesthetic imperative to get dolled up.

One response to this kind of work is to doubt its seriousness. A pathology of modernist 'rigour' needs to be written to explain different aversions to radical irony and the artifice of wit. It is as well to note, then, that this book engages the aesthetics of imaginary dolls in contemporary sexual politics through the seriousness of what might be called queer poetics. Whatever the appropriate critical vocabulary, the book challenges dominant reading strategies associated with 'seriousness' and the sexual politics implicit in types of avant-garde textuality with which it is superficially comparable. The book's style and stylish presentation develops a lighter, more playful sense of sexual and textual pleasures than this suggests, in part because of the confidence generated by the elegant typography of the book. One of the intriguing features of this book, then, is the way it opens up the question of implied communities of reading, and the performative status of identity. This echoes a question articulated by Sarah Cooper as to whether reading queer theory can be said to construct queer readers who are not necessarily 'queer-identified'. (See Sarah Cooper, *Relating to Queer Theory: Rereading Sexual Self-Definition with Irigaray, Kristeva, Wittig and Cixous* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2000).) The text's signature makes a difference to the status of 'dolls' for different subject positions and sexual orientations. But the book's affirmatively erotic games also foreground the performative slipperiness of the 'subject'.

Resistances among existing communities of interpretation and avant-garde factions reveal persistent but unspoken judgmental norms. In a culture dominated by heterosexual kitsch it is perhaps unsurprising that puritanical formalism persists in resistances to the poetics of high vulgarity. One might trace the literary formation of such resistances back to the reception of Keats and forwards through the reception of *Finnegans Wake*, Artaud, Genet, Burroughs or Wittig. Resistance to high vulgarity often ascribes infantilism, insanity or immoral nihilism to texts whose playfulness dismays the authoritarianism of unacknowledged legislators. The regularity with which the pleasures of paronamasia are condemned as 'low' or 'unearned' provides one measure of the puritanical work ethic implicit in much critical accountancy. The awkwardness of sexuality provides another. Questions emerge, then, regarding resistances to erotic poetics from different positions and the lack of consensus around what used to be called polymorphic perversity.

In this light, the line "workable pussy" appears to have its erotic cake and eat it too. Readers might be forgiven for wondering how far they are invited to take up such subject positions or invited to watch. Few indications support anything so gauche as a 'first person' voice or experience. There are nevertheless signs of critical reflection on resonances which seem private rather than public, along with signs that imply an analytic inquiry into processes of infantile repression and object relations – "Poking faeces with a stick". Language is foregrounded as one of the objects whose place in the assimilating mouth is allowed to gambol through the filters of adult formalism: "warf warf laffing / (sucking on Lolly) / (swings a melody)". The sense that this is a performance for textual voyeurs is supported by gestures towards an emerging dramatic scenario. Capitalised characters, such as HOST, HEADSTURGEONS and

FISHMONGRELS, enter the textual stage. But the writing never quite loses its formalist dignity to the extent of becoming a naturalist theatre.

The text comes closest to a stable language game in the page-long theme and variation played on the line "Ambiente fish fuckflowers bloom in your mouth will choke your troubles away". This tour de force performs its variations as if to suggest the plenitude from which the rest of the book's more singular moments of text were selected. A note in the colophon material states that this comes from a collaborative text-sound installation. Performative potential is evident. But the "Ambiente fish" page generates a sense of its own parameters which is paradoxically reassuring, precisely because semantic variety obviates the need for interpretative agency to move beyond rehearsal to a more stable and idealized performance. The rest of the text remains labile and yet exacting, generating the appearance of playful indifference to the framing rules of the text while maintaining a cool, formal decorum. One of the risks of this strategy, however, is the way that the text interrupts a particular word-form by wrapping it around the line-ending: "while herl / egs dow / non the ground" or "Sgot uP / elvis". The delayed emergence of conventional words amid staged enjambment comes to seem too arch, as if nervous with more stable sentiments and happier with typographical disjunction than the pleasures of lush textures. These wrap-around spectacles stand in the way of repeated reading, without offering the compensations of a throw-away ephemerality.

The reader's agency comes back to the 'doll' that is or is not 'mine'. The underlying question is the relation between moments of performed transgression and the sense that there are scripts more powerful than dreamt of in the agency of performativity. The difficulty of moving beyond essentialist conceptions of the 'subject' is a familiar problem in queer theory. Just as there are difficulties for any conception of agency without political 'subjects', so poetics in which there is no doer behind the deed have difficulties distinguishing moments of textual subversion from coercive forms of repetitive performativity. Locating strategies of subversive repetition is perhaps less a question for writing than for reading or the performance of interpretation. But what part does writing play in such strategies?

Caroline Bergvall's texts offer themselves as modes of 'performance writing', working both as residues of performance poetics and as scripts for performative interpretation. This generates ambiguities for readers more used to studying texts in order to establish an ideal or finalised close reading. Writing which offers a formalist plenitude of performative potential nevertheless tends to be insufficiently determinate for readers otherwise happy with performative approaches. A mark of this text's interest is that it generates a variety of resistances, not least from those for whom it is all too easily written off because recognisably 'other'. The challenge to the persistent fantasies of discursive impersonality fondly tended by patriarchal poetics highlights conflicting values. These resistances suggest important conflicts of taste among contemporary readers precisely by being positioned between queer theory and poetics, and at the intersection of performance, performativity and sexual politics. For the reader interested in such questions, there is much to enjoy in the playfully erotic inferno of baby-talk, stammered plives and other dollmines. Perhaps, moreover, these forty or so pages of 'jets-poupee' prefigure the throwing away of youthful dolls to be achieved in the purgatory and paradise of future parts of Goan Atom. Even if not, there is more than enough here to generate interest in future developments.



*Toompea Hill*

How visible to seem a moment  
not fought at diplomatic clause  
no despicable return along the ground adversion  
of want for want residing  
of many kinds adorning freely all hands  
the curved reach of prospect;  
that it does not stay or parley  
is a true consent and patience

two ways to a corner  
incessant hope  
three ways to a corner  
hear to close in, lay on right rays  
nearer to that unimagined bereft  
choice of water  
thick lines of black  
implacable to bend through grey  
fatigued living soul will be alone exactly  
know nothing, but forever

much less among unequals  
impart goodness, lowered then with grief  
there purchasing at long last;  
judgement given so parted they this quadrature  
split the skin at the brink  
talking to, speaking of, to serve reward of grace  
                    law can discover land exposed  
shall no end of windows in your day  
call to tower over the city's injuries  
of full age, burden to that fault fading  
all here be saved at no other time  
  heads erect

and springs ranged in figure  
breaking free inside and out

***On Esemplastic Rubbish AKA “Collage Aesthetics”***

“Collage” sounds like something made of coloured tissue paper, or cuttings from colour supplements; a “montage” implies the technical alignment of clean, hard-focused photographs. Kurt Schwitters’ materials all *reek!* ... why he coined a new word for it, *Merz.*’ (Ben Watson, ‘Towards A Critical Madness’ in *Mad Pride: a Celebration of Mad Culture*, London: Spare Change Books, 2000, p. 111).

Walter Benjamin on the child’s hoarded tinfoil that is sheets of hammered silver, on copper pennies that are shields (*One-Way Street*, London: NLB, 1979, p. 74) – poetry relies on the poet’s ability to act on the imaginative capacity of the materials under hand, to hallucinate signifiers as signifieds, except that the material virtues of the particular signifier inform the idea, they are no longer arbitrary (I was a structuralist, now I’m not Saussure).

The DIY-Dada Esemplasticist refuses to allow any single system – letter, colour, shape, formal relation, politics, innovative imagistic congruence, technical difficulty, hedonism, fashion, erotics, landscaping, urban grid, sci-f i/fantasy, randomness, contempt – to dictate elements or their placing, instead rotating each through all possible systems. This allies to both Prynne’s polysemantics (syllabic multivalency) and Marx’s materialism (‘flashes of theoretical insight do not proudly parade about in rank and file as ready-made axioms, but leap sporadically to the surface from the depths of ‘crude’ practical materials’ *Anti-Duhring* p. 298/*AC&C* p. 262). Also, the assessment of note utterances made by musicians engaged in Free Improvisation.

**THE COMMISSAR VANISHES *by David King (picture-research), Michael Nyman (music), Christopher Kondak (multi-video) at the Barbican Centre***

In 1997, David King published *The Commissar Vanishes: the Falsification of Photographs and Art in Stalin’s Russia*. King’s original inspiration – the ‘vanishing commissar’ of the title – was Leon Trotsky. King’s 27-year-long research demonstrated graphically that Stalin’s counter-revolution did not just establish a new ruling class (the party bureaucracy), but needed to falsify history. Trotsky’s leading role in the revolution of 1917 was literally excised from photographs, his empty space disguised with an ‘airbrush’ (which sprays a cloud of ink, giving a grey, smooth appearance). Woodcuts and oil-paintings put Stalin at the centre. Placing the original photos next to Stalin’s forgeries revealed the lengths ruling classes will go to hide the truth about workers revolution.

King was art editor of the *Sunday Times* between 1965 and 1975. He admired Alexander Rodchenko, the designer of *LEF*, a committed, revolutionary art journal of the 1920s. King supported the

Anti-Nazi League in Britain in the 70s: the arrow logo and bold capitals of ANL propaganda were King's contributions, borrowings from Rodchenko. However, as King sadly relates, after the defeat of Trotsky's Left Opposition in 1928, Rodchenko capitulated. By 1934, Rodchenko was designing albums of photo-portraits of Soviet bureaucrats, pompous publications like *Ten Years Of Uzbekistan*. Stalinist new reactionary conformism could no more tolerate avant-garde art than workers power.

In order to stage *The Commissar Vanishes* at the Barbican Centre, King used two collaborators. Composer Michael Nyman is a postmodernist icon. His scores for ad-soundtracks, concerts and films (most famously *The Piano*) draw on a limited range of motifs from the classics of the past. The music for *The Commissar Vanishes* is actually his ballet *The Fall Of Icarus*, topped and tailed for the occasion. In the pre-concert discussion, his boasts about recycling this 'slab of music' seemed deliberately cynical.

Christopher Kondek is a video-artist who has done work for Laurie Anderson. Favouring an 'intuitive' approach, he filmed photos that caught his eye, then montaged them on two video screens. Nyman and Kondek responded most enthusiastically to the images King found in Rodchenko's own copy of *Ten Years Of Uzbekistan*: terrified to be in possession of photo-portraits of bureaucrats 'purged' (imprisoned or shot by Stalin) in 1937, Rodchenko blotted out their faces. These macabre defacings occupied at least two thirds of the video at the Barbican staging – blowing out of proportion what is really a postscript to King's photo-essay. Combined with the heroic mournfulness of Nyman's music (a shameless plundering of parts of Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring*), the flood of anonymous, sepia-toned portraits became a lament about individual mortality and the passage of time. Showing total ignorance of King's argument, Kondek even poignantly faded an image of Joseph Stalin! Cheap profundity – we all die, isn't it sad – replaced historical understanding.

The Barbican staging of *The Commissar Vanishes* didn't bring the truth about 1917 to a wider audience. Rather, it revealed the pitiful ineptitude of the arts establishment when faced with 20th-century history. Nyman and Kondek borrowed the moral *gravitas* from King's images, then expended it on a facile requiem for atrocities now safely in the past, conflating revolution and counter-revolution. Nyman's music implied that musical experience must be morbid, mystifying and politically vapid. Along with Trotsky (barely visible and never named), King's elegant juxtapositions and subversive humour (characteristics shared by worthwhile music and politics alike) had vanished.

Luckily for *Quid* readers, the original book-version of *The Commissar Vanishes* is out soon in paperback.

***Zeroes Galore***

for Douglas Oliver

The zeroes count, much more than you think  
you don't think and say fuck it. So the beaten  
path like an egg beaten is indistinct, what  
parts once defined are, you are now  
shuddering under the steel cry fork swept across  
porcelain you eaten, teeth set on edge of zero.

I feel the world there. Which one mangled  
Arab had co-produced but zeroes  
you see and maniacs, one or the other has to go,  
and fire may yet often be amorous,  
the parts of its illustration used aptly, we have  
the credit to say distinct things (if not

ever to be them). Zeroes also mean jobs.  
To descry in each passing face the one beaten face,  
owns no zeroes except ones seen passionately,  
what could this consciousness rise up  
to annihilate in fatal and glorious sunlight,  
by love bound together, the expugnation of all fire.

And by cubicles kept apart, given a free say-so  
please leave a message, where did the days  
go wrong we tend to ourselves and zero.  
The eidetic cutback is moral: a new car in the first  
place is too fast. Secondly we throw you  
and I ourselves out wildly, drive the night sane.

Where should we go, zeroing in on fire, numb  
faced and by that hated fact so brilliantly outshone,  
so far well, nowhere. There are a few  
odd billion zeroes more, or less autonomous  
men in the Iraqi corpse-oil-and-sand-pit. A zero  
tolerance state inverted in The Arts, that shrinking  
crescendo the light renounces I can't  
touch and wake you up myself flickering in  
and out with my vague face singing a part  
never can be everything, were zero you the one  
beaten face perfectly one part one  
sky returned fireless anything more than

one death for everyone, finally you  
might end, and our requiems then starts reversible and  
lovely and the hope won't also end, I never shall.  
A stupid gun laughs in a woman's face  
fire contorts her, it is a way of letting hope be just  
someday and its cold light stacked up in zeroes.

**R e v i e w s**

***AN ANTHOLOGY OF NEW (AMERICAN) POETS*, ED. LISA JARNOT, LEONARD SCHWARTZ, CHRIS STROFFOLINO (TALISMAN 1999)**

A recent issue of *Stand* magazine, whose first 52 pages are dedicated to 'America goes to the Ball,' celebrates American poetics and its relation to continental (especially English) literary traditions. The featured poems and reviews suggest that, like its writers, American poetry is mobile, cosmopolitan, inquisitive and engaging; and that it benefits from bountiful publishing resources and critical outlets. *An Anthology of New (American) Poets*, which Rod Mengham reviews in this issue of *Stand*, seems exemplary of the scene thus characterised. The 1998 Talisman House anthology edited by Lisa Jarnot, Leonard Schwartz, and Chris Stroffolino is generous, independent and well-produced. According to its own publicity and Mengham's review it is an 'extremely significant collection.'

Mengham says that the significance of this selection lies in its unity. The poems share a common compositional principle: they are 'anthological,' drawing allusive fire from (English and continental) literary history. Mengham associates the poets' 'rejection of cultural amnesia' with their recuperation of modified modernism. He points to Bill Luoma's translations, Rod Smith's 'Elizabethan' tags, and other scattered references that recall 'the origins' of language 'in Shakespeare, or in the contents of the Loeb Library.' The suggestion that this re-turn toward history is particularly fruitful – productive of work of 'the first importance' – is a critical confirmation of claims made on the book's own jacket. That marketing copy praises contemporary American poetry as the most significant in recent literary history. Distinguished members of the *ancien regime* are enlisted to confirm the importance of the new generation. Anne Waldman tells us to 'Read this book if you think nothing's happened in poetry since The Beats, Black Mountain, several generations New York School, San Francisco Renaissance, Language Poetry & followers went historic.' Rosemarie Waldrop assures potential buyers that on this anthology's evidence, 'Our renaissance continues.'

In other words, the anthology claims to inaugurate a new moment in American literary history. It acknowledges its debts to continental history, but at the same time elides the histories of its appropriated forms into an independent and transhistorical achievement – as one editor writes, American poetry 'is conscious of traditions but not beholden to them.' In a sense, this is the American political experiment made literal. The temporal elision is comparable to the geographical or cultural elision which occurs between and around the parentheses of 'American' in the title. Mengham suggests that 'The coyness which has put brackets around the word American in the title may be intended as a recognition of the ethnic diversity of the contributors, but it makes sense much more readily as a signal of the cultural historical reach of these poems which are attaching themselves constantly to European, and especially

English, traditions of writing.’ But to me, this bracketing is more troublesome and ideological. It seems deliberately and dangerously to avoid the crucial problem: that in this anthology, as in political life, we Americans view being American as negligible exactly when it is inescapably relevant.

The parerga to this book set out the accomplishments of its contributors as important nationally. Waldrop: ‘Our renaissance continues...Read. It’s the language of our future.’ Her use of the plural possessive adjective wavers over forms of community before coming to rest in the USA. Who are ‘we’, English speakers? universal readers? or, relying on the metaphor of the ‘renaissance’ (the most obvious incidence of which refers to a historic moment when nationalities rather than vocational estates became intrinsic to subjective identity), citizens of the globalized US? On the back cover, the editors promise ‘representative selections from thirty-five of the most promising young American poets at work today.’ Their comprehensive survey has established a national gallery of promise, constellated like points of light. Even if that constellation is opposed to mainstream evaluations of success – big prizes, big grants or big sales – it operates on the same principle of exclusivity, of the editorial eagerness to predict future productivity of cultural capital. Anne Waldman describes the anthology as ‘a welcome “thinking” compendium of the vital American – bigger than that, planetary – poetry scene. And a boon to the ongoing struggle to keep the world safe for poetry.’ The American scene goes global over the course of a couple of dashes; your anthological travel guide not only contains this scene, but facilitates some kind of messy Wilsonian doctrine for poetry. But the ironic shift into the cliché reiterated by Bush during the Gulf War, the promise ‘to make the world safe for democracy’, is a little unsettling. *Is* it completely ironic? Or is there a sense that, for these editors and reviewers, American poetry *can* recuperate the world with its ‘vitality’? And what is that vitality – could it in part be a kind of ideological power and speed disguised as liveliness? The quick expansion from American to planetary scene is not problematized, since that its ‘Americanness’ is temporarily contained in both its characteristics and in the punctuation of the title, like a Coke bottle labelled in Gujarati characters, or a McDonalds decorated with plaster Hellenic friezes.

But there’s no bracketing the status of this anthology, as Jarnot herself implicitly recognises in her introduction. It is a national cultural product: not simply because the editors chose to limit their invitations to a manageable subset of the world’s poets (US citizens), but because their book codifies and distributes evidence of a national poetry. That poetry is prosperous, nationally similar, internationally significant. Jarnot writes that they ‘attempted to include writers of as diverse a geography as possible,’ avoiding ‘the predictable alignments of writers to institutions of higher learning.’ But this geographical inclusiveness turns out to reveal formal and tactical uniformities. In moving away from the urbanite bias toward New York or the Bay Area, into the provinces, they soon ‘discovered that... poets in their early thirties in the United States were working on similar projects.’ This similarity, Jarnot asserts, is not primarily the product of communal exchange and conversation, or an association via institutions or locales. It is the result of ‘the facts of the world into which they were born’ – a shared national heritage created this literary hyper-community.

The resulting poetry is entangled with the material and ideological conditions critical to US identity and experience. This anthology *is* internationally significant in that these conditions inevitably also concern the world. But Jarnot fails to examine the role of American poetics in international culture, only briefly

identifying it as a laudable counterbalance to the 'xenophobic internal and international policies' of the US. In contrast to failed American idealism, poets possess a 'keen desire for social interaction, an openness to diversity of experiment'. Instead of the 'alienation of commodity culture' they demonstrate 'an earnestness in the intellectual and philosophical pursuits that one might associate with those who call their craft poetry.' America's poets form a model marginal society whose principles are craft and independence. Finding space for such an alternative is of course very difficult, and once won, that alternative does not -- materially or politically -- threaten American hegemony. The problem is, Jamot doesn't engage with the opposite point: that, given the right degree of prosperity, containable political divergence is a hallmark of good polity. A healthy dissident artistic culture can actually support that hegemony. It is disappointing that she and her co-editors fail to observe this dialectic between national poets and national politics, that they ignore their own complicity in the export of America's cultural and ideological products.

Mengham writes that 'the anthology within the anthology...is what makes this extremely significant collection of American poetry parenthesize its own cultural identity'. This insight reflects not just on a few classical tags from a roster of poets that reads like the past few years' CCCP guest list. It also reflects the nature of the anthology itself. Mengham discusses the Greek Anthology as the first to 'propose a new way...of receiving texts' fragmented and elliptical. Its original, Meleager's 'Garland' or *Florilegium*, was compiled in 100 BC of fragments of erotic lyrics and epigrams. The additions to the 'Garland' were mainly made during the centuries between the ancient wars of Greece against Asia and the final fall of the Byzantine Empire to the Turks. One editor describes these as the 'unheroic Hellenic centuries,' referring to the collapse of the ludic cult of individual heroism celebrated in the agonistic poetry, most famously, of Pindar. The individuality celebrated by this new anthological project was that of the compositor -- the Garland supposedly entwined its poetic flowers in a most artistic arrangement. The novelty of the collection was its comprehensive range, drawing on the poetry of the whole Greek empire from Italy to Syria.

However, over time the decorative purpose of the anthology was modified -- so that, by the time of Diogenian in the second century AD, it had avowed a didactic purpose: to improve the morals, enlighten the mind, and hone the literary skills of its readers. From the 'Garland', the anthology became the Garden -- as the bee extracts pollen from every sort of flower to transform into honey, a substance useful to itself and to humans, so the reader extracted the best from a selection of great works to transform into something both literary and edifying to himself and society. J. Barns quotes Plutarch as contrasting the helpful bee to 'women who pluck flowers and sweet-scented leaves and intertwine and plait them, producing something which is pleasant enough, but short lived and fruitless.' (Plutarch, *de recta ratione audiendi* 41FG). Instead of the luxuriating, feminised pastime of plucking lyrics for self-adornment, Plutarch advocates moral and intellectual husbandry (cultivation and propagation) of those texts which embody the best of human endeavour. The *Greek Anthology* itself, as well as countless other compendia, formed the basis of the pedagogy of composition.

In the Renaissance, Erasmian educational principles maintained that such study habits were essential to the formation of a moral society. The intention was not simply to command students to regurgitate memorised material, but to facilitate its absorption into the very idiom of their written



language, and into their moral fibre. Anthological commonplace books included Biblical verses, heads of sermons, classical fragments and popular adages; these were retained not primarily for their literary appeal, but because they supplied the rhetorical foundation of an ethical life. A reader may find these anthologies 'fragmented'; but for their composers, they were sheets of reference to the ongoing production of ethical subjectivity.

This *Anthology* may recall the decorative liberties of the first *Garland*. Some of the classical tropes or 'cadences' seem more like appliques than strands woven deep into the texts – does Lee Ann Brown's poem 'Catullus Couch' with its flirty 'Today I am Catullus | fitful on my couch' count as an anthological absorption of the tradition? And the timing, the decadence of empires, may seem apposite. But structurally, the volume behaves like a traditional anthology. Morally based on a set of conventional values – for what could be less 'alternative' than dismay at the AIDS epidemic and the end of environmental equilibrium – it presents for readers' imitation what it hopes will become the conventions of poetry. Individually, these poems do not necessarily serve the didacticism that they acquire as a group. Although in other settings I admire much of this work, compressed into the cultural product of the *Anthology* the poetry express a civil temperament which should be read critically. The common value reproduced across these pages is the artistic productivity of a successfully capitalist liberty to choose amongst commodities, and therefore amongst words. The presentation is even more dangerous because the editors claim the valour of the 'marginalized', as if suffering exclusion for the sake of even semi-radical political expression united its truth-telling poetic sect. Some of the poems do offer critique, especially of unjust gender relations. But read as a whole, the anthology fails to live up to Jarrot's description as constituted of poems united in dissent.

The scars of industrial production and material inequality on the American landscape – in Beth Anderson's poem, 'Evidence', 'an abandoned smokestack further up / the glimpsed conglomerate' – are sometimes apparent. We hear the driftwood of unpretty reality banging through the sensory field of the underpaid working poet, usually as evidence of a tough urban aesthetic. But it's all atmosphere, not an instance for synthetic or critical thought which forces the sensitised, introverted writer to face up to the realities of global material suffering or local class exploitations. Those writers determined to look into the shadows often see the political and economic apparatus of prosperity as a word-factory, a jungle-gym of brands and commodity types from which playful diction can hang.

Sometimes the politics is explicit, as in Brenda Coultas's poem 'Diorama', for example, where the speaker recalls the violence of the ATF raid on the Branch Davidian compound. But this is subsumed into the history of the 'texas of the mind' she inhabits; and the epigrammatic form of her dream-poem degrades the possibility of criticising these institutions by turning that event into kitsch. Drew Gardner's usually compunctious poetry here compares a lover to a 'war you didn't / want, didn't start / but are'; war is a grand metaphor for the conflict between private self and exterior. I'd suggest that Renee Gladman's sequence on 'Arlem' takes a larger chunk out of social relations as the context of poetry than practically any other contributor. Her race mantra seems determined to elicit a true act of writing – and she dramatizes this 'true act' dialectically, through a writing teacher who accuses her of using 'our colour to get "inside"'.

If, as Jarnot has written, this poetry was selected for its critical capacities, then for many of the selections the reader has to search out that criticism as implicit in the linguistic, syntactic and prosodic features themselves. For example: the impressive linguistic variety of Jordan Davis's poems unfurls a material grandeur. But that grandeur is bought on pure semantic credit. Taking much of their comic vitality from the work of Kenneth Koch, they offer up 'fun' as the hot centre of an urban life apparently free of alienation. But there's no safe landing for readers who puncture the surface, just a plummet through the materiality of the word into the vacuity of word-consumption for its own sake. Yuri (Riq) Hospodar almost describes this mode of writing in his own recollection of the mid-60s when he watched 'the greying of America', an 'institution' 'there to be worshipped, wrestled with, perhaps / rejected, like all other things these days... one more view to choose from the television set.' But, like Davis's own diction, that choice from any number of available views contains no risk. The editorial apparatus of this anthology led me to hope that such an acknowledged privilege would be interrogated, not offered up as an instance of bemused nostalgia.

It is this linguistic supersaturation, combined with an intellectual inertia, where many of the poems' critique of the American humdrum comes to rest. Lisa Jarnot's mesmerising 'Sea Lyrics' causes the reader to drift between her murmured permutations of identity, its heavy and imprecise rhythms probably disarming a credulous reader, coaxing him or her into suggestibility. But their premise, that absolute opportunity can be presented stripped of its functionality or possible local meanings, shut this sceptical reader down. The recent traditions from which that premise is derived seek to teach us that this is how subjectivity is formed – although it could be argued that this is an ancient theme, not an invention which echoes the division of capitalist labour. Here, that formation of subjectivity happens to look like channel-switching, reader and writer in states of constant anaemic distraction, the accidents of language dressed up as mystical liberty. If this is her response to political disillusionment, then apparently the rough structure of poetics – the abasement of verse's metrical discipline, the occlusions of context and the 'freedom of choice' exemplified by lexical meandering – are proof more substantial of dissent than any material referent. Given this state of affairs, it is a pleasure to arrive mid-way through the book at Jennifer Moxley's working over the life of Rosa Luxembour. These poems show circumspection, courage, and the will to interrogate the lassitude and complicities of selfhood in a political and material context - and to expose her contamination by that context. In miniature, to take on the dialectic of guilt.

## **DOUGLAS OLIVER, A SALVO FOR AFRICA (BLOODAXE 2000).**

I'm struck at once by the magisterial contrast between the *Anthology of New (American) Poets* and Douglas Oliver's most recent book. Both these volumes include problematic prefatory material, but where Jarrot expresses a certain representative hubris not complimented by the political objectives of the poetry she precedes, Oliver approaches the task of political direct address with great humility and patience.

In his preface, Oliver explains first his reasons for turning to Africa, coaxing the plangent reader with a terrible litany of abuses, disasters and needs that have beset the continent since its colonisation. Immediately, he signals the need for co-operation between poet and reader in the endeavour of learning about Africa, improving 'our imperfect knowledges'. This co-operation is dramatised in the 'Salvo for Malawi', where the speaker hides his ethical responsibilities behind imperfect knowledge ('I thought that was Marcus Garvey... Marcus who?') uncovered in dialogue with a respondent. The complicity between poet and reader is paralleled by the complicity of European and American citizens in the suffering of the underdeveloped world, a theme most constant throughout the book – a dialectic of potential and responsibility, future and past which is, however, not self-legitimizing. For to his credit Oliver displays his vulnerability as a witness – he has never been to Africa, and yet presumes dangerously to write notes from its history – so often and so plainly as to sometimes enfeeble his poems. In his poem on 'Swaziland', he admits finally 'I know the poem has a weak foundation', the 'coincidence in words' which drew a comparison between the asbestos mining in the tiny African country and his father's Scottish namesakes, and must end 'I am still going, still somewhat a fool'.

This associative process is, however, extremely productive in these forthright poems. Through it, Oliver forms imaginative links between kingdoms, homelands, Montmartre and Zaire, his grandmother and a Lesotho ancestor, General Gordon's nineteenth-century colonial exploits in Sudan and our present colonial invasions through the mechanisms of free trade. A bow or an ivory wand are material passports to alternate identities: and Oliver allows himself to stand in the footprints both of the European militant and the African villager. The compass of his imagination for detail in these unseen locations can be startling, vivid – especially in the 'Unseeing Drum', which reaches for a vision of hope and humour more difficult than the cynicism on which Westerners usually draw when addressing Africa. Imaginative viability solemnises his poem 'The Tapestry' about Rwanda, that ends

Out there, fleeing chiefs leave farms vacant,  
oxen no longer plough for the seasonal crop.  
By stripped roots lie two long canteen tins  
each containing a mummified child  
in cobwebs, leathern flesh stretched from  
eye sockets, bony fetish dolls whose hearts  
bristle with nails. We've made enemies  
of hairless homunculi little in their thunders,  
bugballs created by African wars.

This substantial ending is also notable for being one of the few moments when the desire to communicate information clearly is overtaken by the impulse to frame verses around predominantly lexical pleasures.

And it is this problem, the function of specifically lyric composition upon this specific topic, which most troubles the *Salvo for Africa*.

Strangely enough, it is a problem which seems to plague Oliver more than it does the reader. In addition to the self-criticism about imaginative discursiveness already highlighted, Oliver sometimes interrupts the development of his poems to invalidate their lyricism: in 'The Toe of a Continent' on South Africa, he begins

after the panicky flight of white money,  
the desperate loans welcomed at first  
at over-high interests, never a gift,  
but the banks piling debts on drowning nations;  
then after the closing of banking privileges,  
after it all – the cadences of Auden –  
after slaughter of families –  
we can never imagine the scale of it –

The difficulty in imagining is related to the difficulty of reproducing the escalations of debt and crisis with rhetorical escalation. Oliver seems to find approximations of traditional African songs, lyrics and idioms helpful, allowing him at once to overcome these imaginative barriers (as 'The Toe of a Continent' ends, 'How little the poem can know') and the allegation that 'I go beyond my rights to name such names' as the great ambassadors of Africa. And yet, he is 'a travelling poet-representative / for a people that won't take a dip / in their incomes' ('The Cold Hotel'); some element of force must be employed to turn the reader's imagination toward that catastrophe. He seems moved by a recognition that neither prose recitations of fact, nor poetry, alone suffices as an instrument of force. Each of these poems is preceded by a preface, usually composed mainly of facts or historical episodes; again, a link of imagination and complicity is formed between two parts of the book's structure. It is as if the poem itself cannot be trusted to communicate facts which the reader might work on; and as if the prose itself cannot vitalise the facts available everywhere and met with common indifference. This interdependence may allegorise the interdependence of the American-European conglomeration and the African nations, but it also sometimes destabilises the book, checks the escalation of emotion and significance that passes through the poems as they pass across the continent.

This is, however, a minor perplexity in an important, courageous, terribly generous book. If the stultification of the 'avant-garde' within its own ontological premises (defined negatively) is as pervasive as the British Poets List indicates, Douglas Oliver has offered a powerful form of relief. It is the extension of the imagination as a form of love which poetry can accomplish meaningfully; it is a profoundly justified humanism relaunched; it is, perhaps, the fact of relevance we crave quietly. The greatness of our loss this Easter weekend is matched only by the intensity of our unpreparedness and our need.

**R e v i e w : M I L E S C H A M P I O N , *THREE BELL ZERO (ROOF BOOKS)*.**

Each page of this young English poet's first stateside collection (*Compositional Bonbons Placate* was published by Carcanet in 1996) is brimming with the conflicts of intentionality and chance, design and improvisation, or perhaps simply work and fun, but not in drawn-out meditations so much as by well-honed linguistic breaks, taking the project of the Surrealist explosion of the veils of reality to the level of the word. Champion takes his lead from the American Language poets, and his poems sometimes resemble, page for page, works by Bernstein, Di Palma, Andrews and Coolidge, but his attention to this heritage – for him an overseas import rather than “native” – operates as an engaged criticism of the slumberingly conservative nature of English poetry in the century of modernism. But rather than take “innovation” as his guiding principle, Champion creates an entire culture or sensibility that, for all of its completeness and, at times, lyrical coherence (the metrical regularities of the quasi-narrative “Clovis,” for example, greet aesthetic closure at every step), strikes always in the other direction, or as many “other” directions as can be contained in these careful, spare poems:

Signs the ever  
 Water & wine to form an oblong cut-off  
 Or baffle at social what's  
 That is, in Hegelian terms, the scarf cigar  
 A man is than made  
 I think ex-Parisian liver suit or difference  
 Perfumes the harder focus  
 Road or dog brains rise  
 Light is eat  
 You is in pellet-type pole  
 The clearing colour sort of adding the twig  
 & I found a kind of digital dried dill  
 Stick [...]

(untitled, 15)

Champion's rigorousness, adeptness with staccato meters, and learnedness measure up against any in the Language camp, especially during their “heroic” phase, but because he doesn't cling to the principle of author as originator, or even copyrighter, of his words or works – such that a Romantic or individualistic strain creeps in (this has affected a number of second-generation Language poets) – he is able to focus on the central, universal concern, which is to make readers see and hear words. His near-utopic faith in this project can bring on a Symbolistic, quasi-religious undercurrent:

The nod  
 dis-  
 members the  
 tactile  
 echo of  
 a solipsistic  
 gesture. Diffuse  
 summa-. I  
 mean, to  
 provide you

with layers. (Target  
fit  
mists.) I  
was in  
the twenty-  
four-hour  
metaphor, laundering  
an intense  
& crystalline  
hush.

("Finishing Touches," 45)

However, for all of his graceful manoeuvring among the most difficult post-modern practices, the spirit of community always peeps through in the generous imagery and the sheer pleasure in performing language: "Candour disposes the lustre / tinctures for what chance / the person's mount or invisible tailpiece / free brochures impressing the indefinite fold [...]" ("Poem," 66). Though a slender 68-pages long, the poems in *Three Bell Zero* will remind everyone of what it felt like to read poems for the first time, with excitement and a sense of belonging and purpose.

### **Review: STEPHEN RODEFER, *MON CANARD* (HARD PRESS).**

Author of books as diverse as a celebrated, idiosyncratic translation of Villon (under the pseudonym of Jean Calais, Pick Pocket Books, 1968) to the spellbinding *Four Lectures* (1982), recognised by many as a distinctive masterpiece of Language writing, Rodefer has never been one to fit easily into a method or recognised "voice" – indeed, into a stable reputation. His most typical form of writing, as exhibited in several small-press books, has been the quick, elegant improvised lyric inspired by the writing of everyone from Olson to O'Hara, Baudelaire to Stein, Verlaine to Patti Smith, which is why this new selection of longer, more cumulative poems is especially welcome. In *Mon Canard*, Rodefer returns again to the large canvas of *Four Lectures*, as each of the book's six poems explore exhaustively a distinctive style: the short, linked prose poems (à la Rimbaud's *Illuminations*) of "Daydreams of Frascati"; the Williamsesque three-step in "Erasers" (which even sounds like "Asphodel" at moments) and the more acrobatic "Arabesque at Bar"; the projective, satiric apostrophe in "Answer to Dr. Agathon"; the high-flown erotic pun-machine in "Mon Canard"; and – in a sort of wicked inversion, signifying his embattled relationship to Language poetry itself – the quasi-constructivist stanza of Barrett Watten in "Stewed and Fraught with Birds." This isn't to say that Rodefer is derivative; on the contrary, he needs these forms to reign in the various tones of address (mostly ecstatic, but often meditative and conversational) that he exhibits and which, one senses, society will never be entirely pleased with:

The ligaments  
of your phraseology  
will eventually get  
put to some truth test or other

and you'll be lucky  
if anyone reads  
it with a big guffaw

or sneezes

("Stewed," p. 114).

This poet, like the modernists he most admires, and as distinct from the determinations of postmodernist gesture, is railing for a concept of value when the old, stable ones have vanished, mating duende with the suave anarchic undercurrents of parataxis. As a result, his use of reference resounds with the need to shore up history and knowledge against personal dissolution: "I am come to your cartop Ajax, waxing toward an invitation to an opening in some hedgerow. Our Leninist principles have toppled, to become fabulous and Sylvan once again. We are the last metaphysical activists in American nihilism. We demand a Pope from the Bronx." ("Daydreams," 10) Rodefer presents something of the classic, Kafkaian "description of a struggle" that is rarely seen anymore since the paranoid has overwhelmed avant-garde writing and deleted the agonic persona, it seems, entirely. While some of the poems, like "Mon Canard," broken into 14-line "sonnets" but without their closures, can be faulted for a metrical repetitiveness and lack of progression, the gesture of the effort can be appreciated for erecting particular reading challenges when least expected – i.e. in the course of libidinous play and rhetorical directness. Mon Canard presents in large strokes the depths to language and, most importantly, the range of human feeling – from the dark to the bright, the indulgent to the ascetic – that only a poet-as-dedicated-free-radical can provide.

## **Review : LEE ANN BROWN, *POLYVERSE*.**

Chosen for the New American Poetry Series by Charles Bernstein, *Polyverse* is an exciting first collection by a poet who has been too long known only to the poetry communities of the Lower East Side and San Francisco. In this mammoth volume, Brown explores - with an engaging, *faux* innocent but candidly libidinal energy - a wide variety of forms and subject matters, ranging from "Sestina Aylene," a buoyant love poem that is also mediation on the writing of verse, through the "Two By Fours" written in collaboration with the poet Jack Collom (reminiscent of the famous "Pull My Daisy" of Kerouac and Ginsburg) to the long unpunctuated prose meditation "A Long Sentence Distance," a tour-de-force of grammatical hijinks and tonal shifts which excessively catalogues Brown's loves of life. "Write the most beautiful sentence in the world and fill the whole page with its sinuous references to longhand inquisitive beauty despite always remembering you girlfriend suicided and world may not give you everything you ever wanted asking yourself should I grow up..." starts "A Long Sentence," and with at a pace and candour not seen since O'Hara continues for six pages in a breathless romp. Play is the order of the day, here, and even the shortest poems combine humour and thoughtful insight with a need to keep afloat, such as "Poetry": "a condensed form / of food & time." "Dreams Listing" is a light exploration into surrealist autonomy: "A small purple bird is on its androgynous animal shelf. I ask it to step out onto my wet finger. It does and turns into a tiny man dressed in a grey suit, " while "To Jennifer M." is a girl-power anthem, one of many quasi-erotic poems in the collection:

Let's make out in the girl's room  
Let me write you a wild heart[...] / But it couldn't surpass yours  
beating so multivariably

in your left aligned margin.

Split into three parts which are sometimes divided into sub-sections, Polyverse is an encyclopedic argument for poetry at every interstitial moment of life, not to mention for "free love" with a sincerity and child-like greed that is addictive. The first part, "Her Hearsay Book," has sections titled "a museme" - process poems that use their titles as the pools of letters from which its words are formed - and "CoLabs", poems written in collaboration with other authors, ranging from the well-known (Bernadette Mayer) to the up-and-coming (Jennifer Moxley, Lisa Jarnot) - both "experimental" sections that don't fail to invite the reader in for the fun. The second part "Velocity City," contains poems written in homage to popular singers, capturing both the sexual energy and immediate satisfaction of rock music, and strongly contributes to the portrait of an ephemeral social scene that the book portrays. Like many of the most vital cultural products of its generation, Polyverse combines optimism, a collage "pop" sensibility, shameless narcissism and yet a tremendous Whitmanic generosity and gregarious social sensibility in a way rare in books of poetry today.