

## Quid 6. The Edited Speaks:

Necessarily it would coincide with events massed over the planet fit to sicken us, but QUID this time harmonizes with several keynotes of the destroyed vox populi, of which the combined thin air is worth a chew: the meeting of the reps at Prague, the rise of the people of Serbia in Belgrade and the drivelling into zero of the U.S. franchise. To these and other things some of the following work might be thought to respond, directly or by direct, paradoxless echo. It might alternately be thought not to. These alternatives for thinking are themselves discussed with hopeful abandon, within these very pages.

Attentive readers may have spotted the crossword on the front cover, obscured by the ministrations of freedom, sanity and security symbolized in one of our two mascots. Look slightly beyond him, and to the right or left. There it is. Now, the clues to this puzzle are scattered throughout the issue: the first reader to complete the crossword and send it back to us wins a copy of *Vipers in the Storm* by Keith Rosencranz (McGraw-Hill Publishing Company; ISBN: 0071346708), in which the F-16 "Viper" pilot ace recounts his adventures over Iraq, during the last week of which he scored 10 Maverick missile kills on what was known as the "highway of death." With a foreword by Dick Cheney, former U.S. Secretary of Defence and possible next U.S. vice-President (hint: one of the words is "*scriptible*").

Bathos would now seem hardly to exist anyhow, given the universal and everywhere epic mediation of Capital; one thing leads to the fuck-up of another, even if the one thing is absurdly unneedful. Imagine being *wry*. So that these introductory remarks are just as miserable and showy as they seem. Pass from them, friends. And by way of effective counteraction send letters, poems, rants, raves, chocolates and flowers to:

Keston Sutherland, Gonville & Caius, Cambridge, CB2 1TA  
Or: kms20@hermes.cam.ac.uk

I hope you are all well.

& Love, KS

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## Tom Jones. Two Poems (1)

Now that I've found I was unelectable  
Dresden slips back on the pink tan  
of this archest temporary acquaintance  
and only the missing grout remains as

refugee havens sincerity tested  
by the European outcrops of a  
military family prefer deshelled  
prawns on the barbecue and it's easy

to feel about to do good overseas when  
the heart tendering crisis dropped me ten  
points in the poll because I forgot to ask  
how my unobserved cremated grandad

died: it bears upon who I love now that the  
second chamber is about to pack up  
for the close of long term. Yes, the critical  
moment passed before I could prevent the

valves closing, opinion reoxidising  
and a parliamentary career  
misrepresenting who she was or how there  
could be immunity in an agreed hereditary

flight. Reputation borders suffering if  
only life aortae could be pricked out  
by the belly (ever read that e-mail joke  
has Plutarch punched onto the card of one

corporate arse-hole?) on time, making it a  
petite mort, as speciously an act of  
general will another ending of pleasure  
no need to wait for your predecessor

it is you glazing a resistance against  
the self same coupons themselves the issue  
when all the sentiments declared fugitive  
in one washed terracotta spot untouched

by the sun the slow plutonium of our  
friendship hollowed a bypass to keep us  
confederate with nothing to go nowhere  
please just how could this be a kind of pain?

## Tom Jones. Two Poems (2)

I have decided that ostracism should be  
sought after so that we do not displace but  
buy into suffering along the lines of deep fault  
durably secured by Constantine and yet

this occasion does not bear the right history  
to legitimate the transfer although some  
of them share our beliefs. For example: that it's  
good for the stone rim to have such a turn out

of your body though its soft and calcinous grime  
is only a derivative of the main  
holiday resorts and the capital. At that  
barbecue in Manor House when my neighbour

abandoned the aniseed spirit which had gone  
cloudy upon dilution to prevent the  
two Cypriots from getting too close, none of the  
mortar wailed not to be part of the house but

dry off polemical spit still in full mouths  
instead and how could clay aspire to such things  
when the application of electrodes cannot  
be quantified in Euros but must look back

to natural disasters like the dollar? Crowns,  
heels, goatherds, difficult questions about a  
little purse for a time in the hills like I did at  
Christmas when they hadn't paid the paper bills,

why it should matter to them two minutes before  
my alarm and the red cross were called off by  
the government as if suddenly awoke the  
whole community of ruin to stretch its

limbs. An industry quickly emerges out of  
the heaviest tolls, even the changes of the  
Cambridge surprise make the armpit sinews hang with  
denunciation. Lilly should be here to

place questions in the margins and beyond  
the page and invite them back to the urn,  
hissing, buried three days to make the best Armenian  
coffee for Nadezhda. The odour was marked

in most of the respectable newspapers, the  
tourist industry was hardly affected  
by the potentially erotic nature of  
the expulsion. They turned up the intercom

in baby's room but could not make out the objects  
beneath her breath and were irritated that  
not even the most intense analogical ear  
could make forms of care for people have to do.

## Drew Milne. Review: Louis Althusser, *The Spectre of Hegel: Early Writings*

ed. François Matheron, trans. G.M. Goshgarian (London: Verso, 1997), pp. 264

This elegantly produced book translates Althusser's published and unpublished texts from 1945-51. The book concludes with an essay 'On Marxism' (1953) which marks Althusser's break with Hegel along with pious recommendations for Stalin's 'profoundly scientific conception of history' (p. 247). The longest and most significant of these earlier texts is Althusser's graduate thesis 'On Content in the Thought of G.W.F. Hegel' (pp. 36-169), completed in 1947 but published only after Althusser's death. François Matheron's introduction indicates that he kept his thesis secreted away, 'but felt the need to declare in 1963 that Merleau-Ponty had wanted to publish it.' (p. 1) The thesis is remarkable in many ways and is necessary reading for anyone interested in Althusser and/or the Marxist struggle with Hegel.

The other essays in this book are decidedly minor. Remarks such as 'Hegelian Spirit, that mysterious third term, is nothing other than the triumphant kingdom of humanity joined in a circle...' (p. 170) make little sense without reference to Althusser's graduate thesis. The essays do provide indications absent from the thesis, however, notably a note on Heidegger's influence, via Kojève, on Althusser's reading of Hegel. A 1950 essay even suggests that the revisionist return to Hegel is 'revisionism of a fascist type' (p. 183). These minor essays provide insights into the peculiarities of the French, while Althusser's move from Catholicism to Communism provokes reflections on the relation of Church to Party within Marxism. In a 1949 Althusser wrote that: '*Although the objective conditions for a social emancipation of the Church through the proletarian struggle already exist, the conditions for a collective reconquest of religious life have not been created.* To create them, the Church as a whole would have to be capable of undertaking its self-criticism; but it is subject to the law of structures which defend themselves, and will not tolerate being questioned.' (p. 195) This suggests a pattern for Althusser's involvement with the Communist Party. But what are we to make of Althusser's remark that Loyola's *Spiritual Exercises* provide 'an historical dialectic, that is in no wise inferior to Marx's, or even Hegel's' (p. 184)? Matheron suggests that Althusser's shift from the Catholic Church to Stalinism was unsurprising, but Althusser's unimpressive remarks on show trials and Trotskyism remind us that men make their own history.

This book reveals how Althusser's intellectual development retraced the movement from Hegel's early theological writings, through the *Phenomenology of Spirit* into the early Marx. Althusser's explicit reflections on faith and knowledge rarely rise to Hegel's level and remain interesting primarily because of Althusser's later repudiation of Hegel. During the 1970s many British intellectuals embraced Marxism through Althusser, only to abandon faith in Althusserianism and the rest of Marxism, retaining merely a tone of dogmatic theoretical belief in the face of more awkward historical arguments. The speed of these transformations revealed an emptiness in the rhetorical Marxism of the 1970s which has marked subsequent developments in critical and literary theory. In short, the acceptance or rejection of Althusser's work was less significant than the ideological formation represented by Althusser's prominence. Given the implosion of Althusser and Althusserianism it hardly seems necessary to deconstruct this already tottering edifice. For those who have never worshipped at the church of Althusser, these minor essays offer few incentives to begin confirmation classes. The use, however, of 'spectre' for the book's English title suggests more than a superficial marketing analogy with Derrida's *Specters of Marx*. Althusser's early engagement with Hegel poses significant questions for the repression of Hegel and philosophy within the supposedly scientific strains of Marxism.

'On Content in the Thought of G.F.W. Hegel' bears comparison with works suppressed by the Third International, such as Georg Lukacs' *History and Class Consciousness* and Karl Korsch's *Marxism and Philosophy*, and with Herbert Marcuse's early works on Hegel and Marx. The key questions involve the attempt to retrace the 'end' of philosophy in Hegel and the actualisation of philosophy argued for by Marx and Marxism. Althusser sees Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* as offering radical resources for contemporary Marxism within a distinctive reading of Hegel's historical significance. Althusser provides some striking expositions of Hegel's work, but it is unlikely that these expositions will have much retrospective impact on Hegel scholarship. Rather, Althusser's thesis needs to be read historically as a symptomatic text in the ideological genesis of French Marxism, a text to be set against the readings of Hegel suggested by Kojève, Hyppolite, Merleau-Ponty and Sartre.

Althusser's thesis divides into three parts. The first part, 'Origins of the Concept', offers an account of Hegel's early writings and critical relation to Kant. Althusser reads the development of the concept of content in Hegel's thought as the destruction of the given (*donné*). This involves Althusser in a tendentious and idiosyncratic account of the void (*le vide*) in Hegel's thought: 'In taking cognizance of Kant, Hegel simply appropriated and explained the historical moment in which, by thinking the void, human thought had already become the desire for a plenitude it could not conceive, yet longed for.' (p. 60). This gulf between the historical moment and alienated longing recurs in Althusser's critique of Hegel's *Philosophy of Right*.

The second part, 'Cognition of the Concept', offers an immanent philosophical exposition of the *Phenomenology of Spirit*. Althusser tries to show how the destruction of the given in Hegel's phenomenology is restored in the cognition of the concept: 'the very act by which I destroy what is given in the content is the initial moment of a dialectic at the end of which the content I aimed at will be restored to cognition - not, this time, as an original given, but as a mediated result.' (p. 66). For Althusser, the *Phenomenology of Spirit* can be defended against attempts to reduce the historical content revealed to a logical formalism or ontology. He provides useful criticisms of the imposition of dialectical schema onto the content of Hegel's system: 'Hegel's absolute is not the restitution of a transcendent in-itself which, whether in the form of the Word, Nature, or Spirit, produces and presides over the world; it is the concrete, immanent totality in which the content of its moments attains its truth; it is the absolute content born and brought to fulfilment in its own history.' (p. 93) The second part, then, provides an immanent reconstruction of the thought of history as the content of the Absolute in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*.

The third part, 'Miscognition of the Concept', argues that Hegel's position cannot be sustained historically. Hegel's thought, according to Althusser, falters in response to historical events after the *Phenomenology*, a faltering exemplified by the *Philosophy of Right*. This part, then, offers a critique of 'the error' and necessity of error in Hegel's conception of the Prussian state through an exposition of Marx's critique of Hegel. This needs to be read as a reflection on how Hegel became the 'last' philosopher. Althusser's structural account of circularity in Hegel's thinking provides the figurative terms for his exposition: 'The whole paradox of the Berlin philosophy of the state is contained, then, in the following problem: how is one to transform a pyramid into a circle, bend the Prussian back-and-forth into the circularity of universality, or, in a word, invest a given content with a meaning it lacks?' (p. 119) Althusser argues that Hegel was forced either to abandon claims for the truth of history in order to criticise the present, or to abandon contemporary content so as to save his system of absolute truth.

This incompatibility between the truth of Hegel's philosophical thought and the false reality of the Prussian state reveals a historical contradiction between 'is' and 'ought' familiar from subsequent Marxist critiques of utopian thinking. Marx, accordingly, was no more able than Hegel to leap over his time. This gives rise to some of Althusser's most striking formulations of the way Marx remained imprisoned within Hegel's thought:

Hegel takes his most spectacular revenge, by silently reconquering Marx from within. Not only does Hegel take back what is his by Marx's definition of him; Hegel is the one who inspires it,

and who thus inspires Marx's truth. If Marx brings the necessity of error to light in Hegel, it is only by virtue of the presence of Hegel himself, who has become, in Marx, the necessity of truth. (p. 133).

Marx, then, is thoroughly informed by Hegelian truth, such that the central insight of Marx's thought is that 'Capitalism is man become nature: capitalism is a hidden humanity (Spirit) that must reappropriate itself.' (p. 139). The attempt to actualise philosophy in the existing historical world is condemned to a dualistic conception of truth and reality. History becomes the concrete historical totality for which Marx's *Capital* is 'our transcendental analytic' (p. 154).

This conception of history is thoroughly indebted to Hegel, but in a movement in which: 'The disintegration of Hegelianism thrusts us back into transcendentalism.' (p. 154) Prefiguring incompatibility with his later work, Althusser concludes that: 'the Marxist movement is a materialism, arguing as it does, the domination of matter; but also a humanism, since this matter is human matter, struggling against inhuman forms.' (p. 156) Conceptions of history, science, research and structure emerge against the grain of the vocabulary of humanism and alienation which Althusser later rejected. Perhaps the most important opposition is between historical relativism and historical determinism, between pragmatics and scientific conceptions of theory and research. Althusser rethinks the relation of freedom and necessity within Marxism as a tension between the historically achieved truth of Hegel's thought and the philosophical regress of actual history. That there ought to be a proletarian revolution while conditions may not (yet) be ripe has been a traditional reason for developing class consciousness through the revolutionary party. But there are severe historical and ultimately philosophical difficulties in relating faith in the future of socialism to knowledge of actually existing capitalism.

These difficulties specify Hegel's continuing relevance for Marxism. Althusser does not make the tension between Hegel's philosophical achievement and his historical conditions thematic in his reading of the *Phenomenology of Spirit*. Althusser, however, is not the first to have found the speculative identity of logic and history in Hegel's system difficult to contextualise and criticise. Analogously, the concrete and historically specific developments of capitalism cannot be identified speculatively with a pure logic of capital. The class struggles and contradictions of capitalism live off the non-identity of material conditions and the logic of capital. The speculative identity of logic and history as spirit is one way of understanding this non-identity, but few Marxists are comfortable with the debt to Hegel in such conceptions.

Althusser's reading emphasises Hegel's relevance within the development of Marx's thought and for understanding contemporary ideology: 'Ideologically speaking, then, we are dominated by Hegel, who comes back into his own in modern philosophical endeavour; and this dependence is genuine, since it does not break free of the decay of Hegel, i.e., the transformation of Hegelian truth into ideology. Modern *ideologies* are reappropriated by Hegelian *ideology* – right down to their deliberate ingratitude – as if by their mother-truth.' (p. 151) Althusser's later work becomes subject to such an Oedipal ingratitude. His account of the misrecognition of Hegel's truth can be redescribed as an aporia in the overcoming or end of philosophy. Classical Marxism, notably in Lenin's formulation, has long noted the combination of German idealism, French socialism and English political economy in Marxism. But it has proved difficult for Marxism to sustain Marx's critique of Hegel. The ideological decay of Marxism can be understood as a refusal to recognise the philosophical aporetics involved in Marx's critical appropriation of Hegel. Dogmatic resistance to Marx's Hegelianism has all too often determined the philosophical polemics of Marxism, whether in the name of social science or within strategic polemics against bourgeois philosophy. But Hegel remains aporetic for Marxism because the overcoming of Hegelian thought is torn between theory and practice, between theoretical appropriation of its intellectual origins and the historical actualisation of possibilities revealed by its theory. The choice between socialism and barbarism remains a question whose theoretical dimensions emerge from and return to questions of practice.

Dogmatic resistance to Hegelianism merely confirms Marxism within the decay of Hegelianism. What is needed, then, is the renewal of the critique of Hegel developed by Marx, not

just as a difficult exercise in philosophical reconstruction, but by developing Marx's critique of the conditions of the possibility of modern thought as more than a new brand of philosophy. This difficulty can be gauged by the contradictions of so-called 'Marxist philosophy'. Michel Henry's remarkable book *Marx: A Philosophy of Human Reality* (1983) suggests the difficulty of sustaining a philosophical reconstruction of Marx's thought, while Derrida's *Specters of Marx* suggests the potential absurdities of reading the spirits of Marx without recognising the truth claims of Marxism. The torn halves of philosophical reconstruction and deconstructive practice are exemplified by Etienne Balibar's formulation in *The Philosophy of Marx* that: '*there is no Marxist philosophy and there never will be*; on the other hand, *Marx is more important for philosophy than ever before.*' The desire to mark an epistemological break with Hegel's significance for Marxism is part of the ideological misrecognition of these dynamics. Thus Althusser's reading of Hegel bears witness to significant historical and philosophical contradictions within the genesis of Marxism, just as the ultimate failure of Althusser's subsequent attempts to rethink what it means to read Marx are important and revealing.

'On Content in the Thought of G.W.F. Hegel' is then a significant contribution to rethinking Marxism's relation to Hegel. It highlights a dogmatic inversion in Althusser's later denunciations of Hegelian Marxism, while the questions it poses are not merely philosophical but profoundly historical. Althusser suggests that the aberrations of Hegel's *Philosophy of Right* reflect the way in which Hegel: 'did not re-appropriate, in reality, the distance he took from the world, but rather withdrew into a feigned maturity without reclaiming his origins. His childhood regained was mere childishness. If he exalted truth, he did so the way a prisoner sang in the camps: in a condition of servitude that was not himself.' (p. 130). There are many cruel ironies in the life and work of Althusser, but this suggests something of Althusser's awkward relation to the different camps of Stalinism. His repression of the Hegelian phase of his Marxism constituted an intellectual servitude which imprisoned the more penetrating insights of his philosophical restlessness, a servitude whose necessity remains open to question.

A few remarks on the translation are perhaps appropriate. Without checking the translation systematically I have found some surprises. A sentence in the French text reads: 'En un sens qui n'est pas étranger à Marx, notre monde est devenu philosophie, ou plus précisément Hegel devenu est devant nous, c'est-à-dire notre monde: le monde est devenu hégélien dans la mesure où Hegel était une vérité capable de devenir monde.' This is translated as: 'In a sense that is not un-Marxist, our world has become philosophy, or, more precisely, Hegel come to maturity now stands before us – is, indeed, our world: the world has become Hegelian to the extent that Hegel was a truth capable of becoming a world.' (p. 36) The peculiar double negative 'not un-Marxist' is awkward, and obscures the critical difference between Marx and Marxism, but perhaps less evident is the difficulty of grasping what Althusser means by 'monde' or 'world', which has philosophical connotations more evident in the French text. Several key terms involve translations between German, French and English, notably in Althusser's criticism of the translation of Hegel's *Begriff* as 'notion'. The translator deals elegantly with many such problems, even suggesting that some of Althusser's own translations are inaccurate, but important philosophical connotations are lost in translation. This is made trickier by occasional notes on puns and etymological ambiguities, a translation practice which seems to have spread like a virus from Derridean literalism. These notes can give a false sense of the arbitrariness of the highlighted allusiveness. The translator, for example, suggests that Althusser's French phrasing 'Il n'y a pas de nature hereuse' echoes Aragon's poem, *Il n'y a pas d'amour heureux*, but the echo of Hegel's reflections on the unhappy consciousness is just as significant. These, however, are minor blemishes in a translation which is illuminating and readable. Althusser's own notes provide many intriguing cross-references: an interesting footnote on Freud; a note on Sherlock Holmes and the *Iliad*; the claim that Rimbaud's images often clarify Hegel's intuitions; and, perhaps most startling of all, the suggestion that Hegel's merit has no equivalent except 'the capture of depth in Cézanne's paintings.' (p. 161)



## Jennifer Moxley. The Just Real

Behind these words, might I find honesty,  
or the hollow framework animate hung  
with embodied longing that I have come,  
notwithstanding the years, to claim is my  
own, though it be a WEDGE, rare, abstracted  
and sensuous, anchored in reflected  
in-betweens of what I meant to do yet  
failed to do, as well as everything that  
I have done yet did not even wish for?

If inevitably I must believe  
love dwells within quelled senses, the remote  
contention of a faithless "I," who cannot  
speak one loving word except in grief,  
and yet still *loves*, how easy has it grown  
to say, without conviction: "light will mourn  
light" and the necessary dark redeem,  
though on its way the longed-for life grow dim,  
and ill-defined as all neglected things.

I did not ask for rhyme, but there it came,  
I did not wish to speak of grief but grief  
refused my silence, in art I sought strife,  
in love, passion, but found instead a strange  
event of artifice and comfort. I'm  
not averse to "bolder truths," but the time  
has turned our talk to justice, and we in  
the dominant world affrighted have been  
indignant of its demand and failure both.

Unrecompensed we pass it through our lips.  
Close to the frustrated life, we proceed,  
housed in disdain of what's difficult. Need  
we an old country, or a new system  
of unity. Need we tell the truth? Pleasure  
is never adequate, nor music simple, both  
will blame necessity (mine to love you)  
for their lack, having so soundly booted  
our will from out the existent world.

## Jennifer Moxley. Little Brick Walk

There will be no simple  
way to avoid what  
confronts me.

—Robert Creeley

"Not since Paris" he said,  
as he pulled my offered hand  
and thus my cheek to his, for a kiss.  
Earth-worn face, close-grown beard  
upon a plane not prone  
to bearding. "And you" I said,  
"are well?"  
What words to give an old man.

You'd sooner have heaven come home,  
I thought, in the bustle of  
an occupied skirt, now that  
you've conceded  
there is no anger  
worth your expression.

Trapped in the cracks  
of a little brick walk, shored  
by a spring lawn of fresh kelly  
green, in a quaint house  
in spirit, he is keenly attended.

"Ah, the sublime pleasure of long un-  
spoken gratitude." The old kid-consciousness  
craving a fix. The unattainable cozy-  
ness. I, too, have too long wished  
to be ensconced, and in my house I will need  
no upkeep.

My affection does not admit  
of these inorganic  
friendships. This is  
my failing. Crane, yes, Robinson,  
yes, in each new interest  
I've found  
his unassuming hand  
already pressed on their fond registers.

Soft-coarse beard, my face abraded.  
We stood by the institutional  
door, to be gradually flooded  
by casual acquaintances. He said:  
"it would be nice if you could *survive*"  
which I took to mean  
I still risk  
not finishing.

That afternoon I grew ill, eventually  
went feverish  
in an inert room. How I envied him.  
Freed from impatience  
by ample time, no longer admonished by  
desire. But most of all  
I envied him  
those many husbanded years,  
perplexed to rhyme  
by her alien life. "I have  
no wife," I spoke to the dust  
and at last I drew  
adjacent sleep.

## Peter Riley. Two Letters to British Poets (1<sup>st</sup> Letter)

[These letters are extracted from a longer series developed on the British Poets e-mail listserv. Peter was one among a number of participants in what became a discussion of the concept 'totality'. It would be impossible to reprint the whole discussion in these pages, but interested readers can access the list's archives (including the letters by Keston Sutherland to which these pages refer) through [www.mailbase.ac.uk](http://www.mailbase.ac.uk), without having beforehand to subscribe to the list itself. Other participants in the discussion include Chris Emery, Chris Goode, Matthew Furse-Roberts, Paul Hill et al.]

### [I. to Keston Sutherland via Br-P 20.6.2000]

>I mean, does *anyone* here agree with me (K.S.)?

I certainly do, in some level of principle—Of course we want poetry to reach to the Zodiac, of course it is futile to devote such a developed art to the delineation of the little life, such as the self-surface display which dominates British success-poetry at present, the poet-consciousness which views the world from its own elected centre, the fetish of the "good poem" only knowable by instinct or promotional response.

But it immediately gets so exclusive, anti-democratic, ecclesiastical etc., that I sadly find myself disaffected and mystified—not to mention the hidden agenda concerning "difficulty".

The allegiance you demand is altogether too cut-and-dried. It is simply not necessary to despise the individual in order to reach the largest sense, these are not alternatives. If you go around shouting Down with (Boojwah) Individualism like some 1930s Communist what you're promoting can only be some kind of conformism, such as is already intensely promoted by the bureaucracy of this society and increasingly. Naturally people are worried that you're setting up a programme for poetry based on extra-poetical and reactive criteria with all attached mechanisms of promotion and suppression.

I mean what on earth makes you think that people other than a certain line of poets don't "think about the totality of relations"? Surely most people deploy the self as a thinking medium onto the worlds and most modern poetry evinces that process and its immense variety, in versions from feeble and useless to dazzling? To impute a self-centrality onto the most open and honest account of experience from a singular viewpoint begs a lot of questions about the alternatives. If you read such a book as *The View from Nowhere* by Thomas Nagel you see what a complex and fraught thing the quest for an extensive objectivity is, and how it cannot be gained by simply casting aside, or seeming to step out of, the subjective.

For what is irritating about most personal poetry is not that it is subjective, but that it projects the self in ready-mades, and parades it in the trappings of endorsed structures, actually diverting emotion from the real self. The I is a complex and dynamic thing which includes the view from outside in its very substance. Solipsism isn't an error so much as a fantasy. After all what am I? As TN puts it: I am a somebody, I am a person among persons, in and of a world, that's all. How can anyone true to a realism fail to demonstrate the entire structure in the most casual aside?

Most people are virtuous, and one of the quests of art is to locate that virtue and raise it as a true décor. Against this, the claims of a little band of "poets" that they have gained special access to the totality and thus a special transcendence of a common egocentricity has to be treated with contempt. Especially when they show nil desire to communicate to the generality exactly what it is they have learned about the world but treat it as a cabalistic secret which can only be manifested in hidden tongues. Whoops, that paragraph slipped out somehow.

What are the grounds for saying that meaning originates in the totality? [*KS had proposed that we regard the totality of human relations as "the least mendacious conceptual origin of meaning"*] Why should we believe that meaning descends to earth like the Holy Ghost from some unknowable heaven, some utterly remote totality of which only certain gifted persons have the realisation? Why shouldn't meaning be generated among persons using language all over the place? Why this constant high catholicism in all departments?

How can you “see” the totality of relations? What you call the totality is precisely unknowable, not to mention unlovable, it stands there more like a threat than a prize. It is a horror and a contradiction, and an immense possibility, which we cannot ignore and cannot not ignore. It is a neuter. It is not a vehicle for understanding because it has no bounds and we cannot know, sense or guess at what it contains. We have no contact with it as an entity, it is closed from us, though we can “think about it” till the cows come home. Of course everything we do is “in” it but where does this purely notional stance get us? And why, incidentally, is your “totality” limited to human relations?

To know or see something it is necessary to recognise a boundary to it, and the nation has in the past of poetry been the immediate boundary of such ambition, which we agree is no longer tenable, if it ever was. But nobody really knew what was actually going on in the nation at a time when generalities such as “Britain” were floated all over the poetry. The coastline was a construct. What actually might have taken place one Wednesday in Aberdeen in 1769 was on the other side of the earth. You only reach even a minor total such as that by vast acts of disregard (based, here, on class and power placements mostly quite cinematic)

And yes Wordsworth saw through that and surpassed it; a culture such as that of the Lancashire hand-loom weavers (something, I mean, which had been there all the time but was not part of the totalised verse “Britain” of town poetry, any more than Newcastle-upon-Tyne is part of Elgarian pastoral “England”) began to participate in the vocabulary. And yes, he did that by a pure striving for the greatest possible reach of understanding—but surely not the idealism of grasping the total as a unit, rather a quest outwards towards the world apprehended by that which makes it knowable. By its handles, as it were. And how it broadened and democratised his language! (It could be argued that the late WW abandoned this quest in favour of a total referent).

But in other cases we have to ask acute questions. Like if “thinking about the totality” does to people’s minds what it did to Pound’s mind perhaps it would be better if most people didn’t do it. Or do we all want to end up promoting harm from within prisons, having reached the point where common humanity just cannot tolerate our dangerous ravings any longer? Pound’s poetical virtues concern close earthly/visual perception figured into the tongue, a uniquely powerful song usage, not that horrific clutching at bits of the quasi-global entity.

Anyway, all this is somewhat marginal. The big questions are not raised. You raise them in the most alarming way when you start talking about the starving millions. You imply, I think, that modesty in poetry causes world suffering. That’s pretty horrendous especially if you do not (and up to now you have not) explicate how an immodest quasi-religious attachment to a conceptual totality does anything whatsoever for anyone. Of course “thinking big” in these zones is necessary, the need to approach a knowledge of all forces at work and their histories and the furthest reaches of consequence—are you really saying any more than that? Poetry needn’t come into that at all.

And here I see the hidden agenda approaching miles away. Because if we agree to your compulsory formulation about Totality we’re then going to have to agree that so-called “ordinary” language can’t serve, that Total can only be addressed in Total’s language, that the language we say with is fastened to subjective (therefore capitalistic) (therefore wicked) modes and we must agree to smash that language and all poetic language partaking of it, and forfeit its beauty and its consolation in favour of a necessary negativity and subversion, constant denial from unit to unit, therefore constant aggression towards the reader, the mere individual set in hated ordinariness or maybe even enjoying aesthetic pleasure in this frightful place, what right has anyone? Or something roughly along those lines. With the threat that otherwise we are promoting poverty in the southern world. But the workings of the impossible poetry and how it solves the world’s miseries remain a complete mystery.

So the Question repeats itself: How does a language-use which deliberately renders its products unknowable reach to the population of the world and increase its understanding or

relieve its suffering? Conceptually? If conceptually where is the act of translation located? How does an overview so astronomical as to be telescopically invisible bring aid to the ground?

Is it really the case that by replacing all articulating units in language with inarticulate ones or absences, thus destroying categories and continuity and pushing all possible recognition out of sight, you form a thing which by means of bafflement improves the human spirit? How except in some quite weird Puritanism, should the human spirit benefit from suffering the tortures of bafflement?

To say that all language says whether it says or not is not an answer. Of course the refusal to say is a form of saying, but it is not saying anything in particular. Why should negative saying be prioritised?

Because we are in a wicked place called capitalism and all our public language must be denial? Do we think that "capitalism" is a single definable entity, cause of all social and economic trouble, which can be associated with subjective language uses? How do we get that connection? Isn't "capitalism" as diverse an activity as language itself with a history almost as long? Isn't it in fact a useless word?

Do we believe, in fact, that we inhabit a society in which personal virtue cannot take effect? If so we should get out fast.

[It seems to be agreed throughout northern academic intellectuality now that nothing is as it seems—"You think you're here? You think you're male (female)? How can anyone be so naïve? You think that's a tree?— anyone can see it's a melancholy construct of the refusal and loss of not-tree. You think you act freely? You think you act kindly? Nothing is as it seems...."etc. But what it is instead of what it seems remains infinitely speculative and unrelated, the mere words for it endlessly re-proposed without reference to any narratable specificity. Whether this is a response to the unreliability of commercial/promotional language or not, this big and successful market doesn't seem to be able to prove anything itself, except that it is possible to create the impression that nothing is as it seems. Whereas the world's language is for the most part entirely evident. I don't know any reason why poetry shouldn't participate in this evidence instead of relying on concealment and subterfuge.]

[And by the way, the "nation which insists on continued sanctions against Iraq" is not a liberal democratic nation, democracy in particular having no part in the matter, and I am not a member of that nation and neither are you and we are not responsible for its acts, and in no way does an honest apprehension from a singular viewpoint of what I personally discover regarding alteriority whether in poetry or elsewhere involve me in a parallel structuring which endorses such a thing. That's guilt-creation, that's Blake's Satanic accuser. In principal there is of course nothing whatsoever wrong with a "liberal democratic nation" supposing there has ever been such a thing on earth, which I doubt. ]

But among all this pother what we really ought to be getting at, as "poets" banded together for Total-knows what purpose of discussion, is this to me startling justification for the most recalcitrant, obstructive, and self-defeating poetry the world has ever created: that it is aimed precisely at the whole world, and will considerably alleviate conditions on the streets of Calcutta, now or some time, without anyone actually having to know it.

[Actually for the most part the poetries get along fine together, there's no problem there. The poetries are happy with their differences. And indeed most of what you say seems to me to relate tangentially to your own poetry, or its present tendency. ("The happy place we want to live in is a place in happy hands"). As, I hope, mine also partakes of the condition you so breathlessly assert. It's the fabrications people make around their poetries presumably for justification and importance, which create such vast non-understandings. And of course these influence the music, disastrously sometimes, but not necessarily, not as much as you'd expect. I think they should be kept at a cautious distance from poetry. Poetry isn't necessarily important.]

I'm not asking here for justification of difficult or obscure or experimental poetry, and especially not within totalising theories of language/ society/ self. I've heard quite enough of that to last me through twenty selves. What I ask is: given any justification, given indeed these most

honourable purposes that Keston claims, what are the actual mechanisms of transfer, what is the message you actually receive, how is the precise effect of good realised in resultant reality, how is the contradiction, of claim and effect, settled?)





## Peter Riley. Two Letters to British Poets (2<sup>nd</sup> Letter)

### [II. To British-poets 17/7/2000]

[....]

I kind of hounded Keston because I wanted to get at the motivation of a powerful tendency in a corner of British poetry, an attitude or procedure which is not fully evinced in any one person's work but exists as a leaning or inclination in a number of people's, and which I view as extremist. Well it obviously is. Keston by what he promotes and in his own writing stands in a strong relationship to this mode but there are quite a few more. They are brilliant people, they mostly have immense knowledge, vast vocabulary, great alertness of mind,.... in terms of virtuosity you won't find anyone to touch them in this country. But I increasingly believe that their poetry becomes virtuous when it escapes (as it always does, if only momentarily) from this tendency, this climate, this extremity, this "thing". I sometimes call it The Beast.

The kind of poetic urged by Keston's theories (and I think shared in some way by others) especially when talking about Totality as informant, (though he takes it very categorically) should be a valuable support to poetical practice. It opens up a sense of poetry as something inhabiting no less than the world and which by whatever means should attain a movement in constant touch with the reaches of distance as a form of responsibility. Which I absolutely believe in. To me this means also that it should be very attractive. It should set us where we are as inhabitants of the earth in the finest judgement of tone, image, cadence, the full reality never lost sight of.... It should be aspirational and consoling, even sublime. Or important (which I never trust) but OK important, in terms of a "new global ethics" as Keston said, that would be something too.

But when you turn from that potential to the page, frankly, the whole thing is frustrated, there must be an immense contradiction somewhere, because you just don't get that. You get a feel of the desire for it, defeated by some kind of perversity.

So it is the path from that noble (even) concept to that grotesque (even) printed thing which came mostly to concern me. Keston's account of that may not be the only one and it must have been frustrating for him that I treated it as archetypal but at any rate it was one, it was an answer. Most of the rest, if you hint at inquiry, just sit tight and look down their noses. "We despise explanation".

The king-pin of that is Keston's thesis of the transmission of meaning through groups, and the formation of ethical responsibility in the reference of particular connections to the conceptual total through group informants. This only seems to me to work as an abstract, like a scientific formulation, a diagram, where "group" is a specialised definition (actually I increasingly detest specialised definitions). A kind of conceptual tribalism. In the exhibited world, which is where I (choose to) operate, it lacks necessity.

Groups are optional. You elect your groups. Everything belongs in any number of them. Tuna belongs in a multitude of groups apart from Fish. Even the biggest groups (e.g. English-speaking) have very fuzzy edges; you can readily be half in and half out of any group you care to name. The only absolute group I can think of is the species itself, the only pure group is the final and total one (and I have a feeling that species-definition is not such a clear-cut thing as I assume here).

Back home, what I still call the National Front also is a group, and no doubt would, if it knew a reason why, claim that it participated in the totality. And it would be perfectly right—the totality of human relations must include the National Front. The total cannot therefore be a good, the best it can be is neutral. It can't be a source of virtue in small-scale acts, but only of scale itself, as such, neither virtuous nor evil. If it stands at the origin of meaning the meaning it devolves (which

I don't think it does exactly) is undifferentiated, and so inferior to the meanings picked up from the ground.

What group finds your meanings for you? The Cambridge School of Poetry ? This only exists in a revisionist history. Other writings? You can choose which writings confirm your position and ignore others. I find that revelatory new meanings come mainly as an immediacy, unmediated by pluralities, out of the blue. The blue (sky) is not the total but the condition, the connector, the arching cover, the human predicament, which transmits directly when you have a receptor for it. And whose basic terms (death, e.g.) are already there long before we learn to speak them.

[Of course a local grouping develops receptivity, vocabulary, the possibilities of linkage, any human congress should do that, but the creating need will then surely transgress, sometimes violently, the terms imposed by groupage, and seek to do so in all directions. Marxism helps people to understand that A is connected to B, but these connections have to be constantly tested against history. The parameters have to be rooted out.]

So I got to feel that the actual motivation of this poetical extremism was probably not any vision of totality, because the notation of earthly plenitude does not imply or necessitate such treatment of language, except in global historical crisis or by a personal act of torsion. It struck me as more likely that the motivation is push not pull—that it is impelled from below and you grab your groups to suit the impulsion.

I take the impulsion to be something very common, mainly a sense of alienation and a whole set of emotions (anger, resentment, anxiety, frustration, puzzlement, guilt... ) amounting to an opposition to the entire condition, whether that is read politically or psychologically or educationally or culturally. An impulsion which is primarily opposition rather than inquiry, which wants to locate enemies responsible for the conditions and this need stands prior to righteousness or concern, though capable of eliding with them, of course. The tone in which such terms as democracy, capitalism, imperialist, are used (generally in fact, among experimentalists) suggests to me that the impulsion dictates the reading of history emotionally rather than there being any desire for a full understanding of what happened or how things work.

There is no doubt that the state of the world is dire, but that the best response to that lies in the empowerment of this class of impulsion seems to me very dubious indeed. At its zenith it is itself a war-maker. It wants reversal above amelioration.

It's easy to see how such an impulsion (however crudely I manage to define it) would distort poetry into an ungainly and secretised discourse.—Nothing is as it seems, all public language is a con trick concealing suppression and exploitation; private language merely confirms public language; even individual feeling especially if bright or relaxed, is a facade behind which lurks contextual error and economic oppression. All sense and emotion except the Impulse is dictated from the economic structure, which is evil. The very forms of practical language are harmful. Soft emotion is murder. To delight in a daffodil is to stamp a black child's face into the mud..... and so on, all that kind of vicious nonsense. Poetry can then be elected to redeem language from the total infusion of complicity, not by declaring the true case of the world, truth is itself suspect, but by subverting meaning at every point, breaking all evenness, articulation and unity into a mass of wildly irrational juxtapositions—smash the known with the *recherché*, break serenity and beauty into brutal repulsion.... Hurt the reader, who is but a construct of capitalist harm. I exaggerate of course—no one would actually subscribe to this. Well, not many.

Crudely sketched or not, I see some such impulsion as forming the particularly distorted features of that poetry, that beast-infected howl.—while at the same time and in the self-same poetry the impelled faculties reach through a deployment of intelligent imagination and altruistic intent towards what might have been the very crown of our condition. It is a distinction of this whole intent that the poetry does reach beyond identification, and strives to deploy language as an instrument of the widest action, which almost nobody else on the poetry "scene" even wishes to consider attempting.

Why does our best poetry have to be at the same time our worst?

Did I say that?

I said hurt the reader, and it is so. I don't think people realise that the reader experience they are creating in the furthest reaches of this poetical mode (and in other linguistically innovative zones) can readily be (a) painful (b) offensive. The alienist impulsion dictates that the poetry must not be grounded, that at all points, from word to word, sense of or wish for belonging at any level must be vehemently annulled (home, belonging, stability = property market = vile dictatorship of financiers.... etc.). The soul's love of peace is a fascist vote. To most normal and reasonable people, this hurts.

It is painful also because language directed towards you must be felt as an invitation to a response, and there is no possible response, so a basic human participatory impulse, involving generosity, is denied. Unlike the "floating avant-garde" which tells you to let it hang out and not to worry about either affirmation or denial, this poetry comes equipped with all the articulating devices of language which invite you to comprehend a connection and thus confirm, deny or extend it, but they come disabled. The sentence structure is precisely not abandoned but broken, so that everything you receive is interrupted and your interlocutor turns away mid-phrase as if to address someone else or the wall. Or there is a silence (a gap) which you cannot fill and when the language is resumed it has gone somewhere else, so far away that no trustable connection can be conceived, for it is not just a distance but also a barrier. Obviously this is painful, it is an assault. It is an assault not just on custom and courtesy, but also on the individual who, like it or not, is what reads the poetry.

It also offends, because it leaves the reader with no way of being—we can only be somewhere. It nullifies all the labour which goes into realising where you are and denies that that is a leverage on elsewhere. Quite the opposite of Wordsworth's insistence. It denies the reader's right of participation, it deadens thought, it declares an absolute, unprovable and undisprovable superiority over the reader in the entire realm of human mind-work. It doesn't hand you anything by which to understand the world, it just increases the amount of incomprehension there is in the world—I mean the world's difficult enough as it is and then we get this load of impossible poetry on top. It leaves the reader alone, subjugated, with nowhere to stand. The heroic poet floats off into the ether and is not seen again on this darkened earth.

There's no way I can see that this language experience motivates anyone towards ethical responsibility of any kind. You can't move from ideology into ethics. If you agree to it, all it produces is frustrated rage, if you agree to the whole bag of it, you end up shaking your fist at the world from some bedsit somewhere (exactly there, exactly somewhere) inarticulate and alone. It seems a wild injustice to say that the only alternative to this kind of violating involution, is egotism. And that solitude is dishonourable.

I realise that for some people reading *The Beast* even at its rare extreme manifestation is not painful or offensive. This is because of a group reason? Or an impulsion reason? (Let us not entertain the thought that it could be for a career reason.) Surrender to the Impulse will probably lead to an emotional appreciation of *The Beast's* contours, but I'd rather not. I try not to. The impulse to war is surely strong in almost everybody living when we do under the scourge of money, but it just as surely sinks us deeper in the pit (of despair, what else?). I find I am strongly empowered by the Impulse on many occasions, but despair is the last shack in the desert anyone wants to retire to. There are societies on earth where the need to surpass the parental definer is irrelevant, at which the Impulse melts to a trickle.

My thesis is, I think, that the Impulse contradicts the Totality. Because it forbids an open scanning of the world to establish the balance of its varieties. The Impulse is essentially pre-selective, prioritising what serves its purpose. Owing allegiance to both of these gods, the poetry is engaged in a fight with itself. Well I don't know but it's a possible account.

I re-emphasise that I'm talking all the time of a substance, not people or their work, which escapes this substance again and again. But they do court it. That such a risk comes attached to the highest imaginative purpose, is just the most enormous headache.

And I come again to saying that it comes down to questions of tone and direction. Not of action on the world, but of how you create the self in its purpose, in what declination venturing, to face what we all know, whether we acknowledge it or not. That we participate in a larger noun.

I hope a fellow list-member won't mind my quoting him as a means of stopping writing, because this fell before me recently in the middle of the struggle with this Totality lark, with a shock of recognition and an immense relief—

Tonight, standing in earth's shadow,  
close your eyes and see  
that this universe is itself a statement  
within which every statement made  
is partial and uncomprehending,  
that every detail suggests a total  
at which one may not arrive,  
that no amount of words  
countable in a human lifetime  
can absolutely express truth,  
that no finite number of truths is sufficient  
to check all possible propositions.<sup>1</sup>

I don't know if this writing would be allowed or not in Keston's ethic, or the group consensus behind it. But it seems to me that you have here the whole thing, in a quite catholic version, objectively realised and completely untouched by the neurotic need to surpass. And it is perfect common sense.

*With especial thanks to Keston Sutherland and the makers of Château St Martin-Baracan,  
Bordeaux Supérieur. —PR*

<sup>1</sup> Randolph Healy, from the poem "The Size of This Universe" printed in the anthology *Other*, edited by Richard Caddel and Peter Quartermain (Hanover and London 1999).

## Keston Sutherland. Thursday and Forever

The street rate more feasible is cylindrical,  
continuously the visible subjection fails  
to disappear of ourselves to estranged,  
mutilated sincerity, as however the backdrop  
rises to clinch you hopes thrash about,  
I cannot begin to disclaim how most idiotic  
wishes I have thin, they screw up like  
crepe and easily burn. As faraway I wish  
parades through my eye disheartened,  
at the petrol stop, that the agreed tremendous  
corrugated flight into Parliament should  
eradicate you fool, each branch of indirect havoc  
gouge out fitting room for the medicated  
solid infection you are if too late  
discuss that combined anyhow, I see basil  
in the windowbox lilt. The storm they  
are created passion, people each ran into what  
had faced conjecture off and burned this,  
twitches, takes back her hand. Could we now  
each sees myself descried as always inside  
flamboyant neutral bodybag of air and rain,  
teeth habitual so face of you, so alert fixate,  
so they said the power cut. I cannot believe  
that the U.S.A. hadn't provided for this,  
sneers at the bang away outside and falls  
down time destroyed, where became of  
my perfectible love for you, you my  
pain has serenaded that fades, in a corridor  
way broken remarks distribute everything,  
each cassette of sleep is live, the forensic  
regiment of dreadful love and copy  
will you base Belgrade on the whole thing  
this evening. Wishes flock to across  
possibility in a flash of quiet they take  
viciously into your buying power and die,  
six cloudy feet to the back rubbish.  
Pace yourself to the dead centre of that riot,  
I reflect on the street edge. And of embraces  
such as these now querulous ask nothing.

## J. H. Prynne. A Quick Riposte to Handke's Dictum about War and Language

[For the remark of Handke's to which this piece refers, see 'Nervous Breakdowns in Chris Emery's The Cutting Room', *QUID* 5 p.14]

Whatever the context may have been for the comment attributed to Peter Handke, who in a recent protest against the NATO air-raids over Bosnia is reported to have observed that the first victim of war is language, it is hard not to wince at what seems extreme naivety and self-righteousness. Of course it is rather easy to 'see what he means'; and the history of Europe in this century is full of those terrible events supposed to have traduced or contaminated language, along with those sorrowful bystanders, perched upon some peak of purity, who can bewail the loss of a model of rational, passionate and poetic discourse that would somehow resist the ruptures of historical process. But, how silly. Warfare between nations is most often waged across language-frontiers, as a fiercely linguistic event, even if often for reasons not fully conscious or not admitted into full public view; but the mounting up of a war programme, in advance of the hostilities and to justify their methods, is a concatenation of intensely linguistic processes, in which the whole identity and propensity of individual language-histories are worked into the deepest complicity. By the time that war 'breaks out', that is, is declared by one nation or tribal cohort confident of subjugating another, the cascade of positional alterations to language use has been largely completed.

Modern nation-states not yet ready for a war that they see looming, as a means of taking revenge for past defeats, seizing ascendancy within disputed power structures, annexing territory, annihilating traditional rivals, or 'struggling for a new justice against corrupt oppressors', commence to manoeuvre for advantage in matters of treaty and international support, and at the same time gear up their economy for re-armament and internal self-sufficiency. The promotion of a consciousness within the social order that will gradually align itself with these processes is set up by and through language more than any other medium. Yet if the as yet unfocussed idealism and variety of motivation within a populace is to be concentrated upon purposes that will inflict sacrifice and killing upon very many ordinary people, some high principles must be found that can bind the waverers into a unified purpose, to 'totalise' the cultural apparatus. Who can deny that, supplanting even religion in this respect, a national language in its loftiest and most inspiring forms does not mediate these purposes and provide totems for aspiration, the noblest expressions of national consciousness and history carried through into hearts and minds by the work of a nation's writers and poets.

It may be resisted that true poets are patriots only to an ideal kingdom, of pure language and equally pure humanity; but enquiry shews this contention to be mostly false, because such purity is itself chimerical, often substituted for less admissible alternatives. The bread and butter that a man or woman eats (or even a poet) does not materialise like manna out of thin air. The emergence of nineteenth-century European nationalism, in the period of state-formation that composed the map for the start of the twentieth, was propelled by the intense development of national schools of culture and literature, by the locking up of international possibilities into the closed citadels of a national language, and by the poets who endorsed its ultimate separateness from the other languages all around its frontiers. No other art will do this so well, because music and painting are able to be more transparent to trans-national modalities; but writers proclaim the essence of their patriotic kingdom, and their work is most frequently enrolled into ideas of national identity by which one kingdom rallies its purposes against another. (As an aside, does this not re-emphasise the astonishing and exceptional defiance of Heine towards poetic, religious and

national-political conscription; as a further aside, recall Bartok's courageous note on folk-music transmigration, 'Race Purity in Music' [1942], in *Bela Bartok, Essays*, ed. Suchoff.)

Comment [a1]:

Consider a few examples of historic complicity in diplomatic terms. After the first Austrian Republic had been proclaimed in 1918 the Treaties of Versailles and St Germain foresaw the danger of a new German ascendancy in central Europe and in 1919 included an interdict against any future merger of Austria into a greater Germany. Yet after the preceding intense manoeuvres Hitler's troops entered Vienna and in March 1938 the Anschluss was proclaimed, welcomed by the majority of the Austrian populace. When after the second war the allied powers recognised the second Austrian Republic in 1946, the interdict of 1919 was restated, as again in 1955. The languages of military aggression and diplomatic manoeuvre blend into seamless overlaps of blindness and complicity, as demonstrated by even more recent developments in Austria and foolish European responses to them. The Nazi-Soviet Non-Aggression Pact of 1939 and the Tripartite Pact (Germany, Italy and Japan) of 1940 are other examples of preparations for war in which the mediations of language rehearse the channels of ascendancy.

These pacts were secret but were developed in parallel with sustained propaganda manoeuvrings of national will all over the European map, and like any modality through which bids for power might flow the languages of national identity were relentlessly manipulated. One might compare the Dayton Peace Accords of 1995, to be enforced by NATO formations, by which Bosnia was to remain a single state with unchanged external borders but internally divided into a western Bosnian-Croat Federation and a north-eastern Bosnian-Serb Republic; Handke's own linguistic history as an Austrian might have prepared him to see that the attempt to impose ethnically homogeneous partner-states in a region of antagonistic racial intermixture could only result in fierce violence and inhumanity, just as the British insistence on calling the civil war in Northern Ireland 'sectarian violence' was an insult to both sides that could only prolong the bitterness which sustained it.

The languages of international diplomatic manoeuvre remain as complicit as ever with the terrors they envisage: Additional Protocol I of 1977 to the Geneva Convention of 1949 interdicts concentration or carpet bombing (mass-bombing attacks on whole cities or territories), but as supra-national entities neither NATO nor SHAPE nor IFOR (the U.S.-led Implementation Force set up to enforce the Dayton Accords) were parties to the Geneva Convention or Protocol I thereto; according to Max Johnson, legal adviser to the supreme allied commander in Europe writing in March 1996, IFOR, as a multinational force under the operational command and control of NATO, 'should not be equated to a State in terms of international obligations' and that as IFOR was 'not an army of occupation' it was 'free to do anything it pleases' (Roy Gutman and David Rieff, eds, *Crimes of War; What the Public Should Know* [New York, 1999], p. 259). Even the PLO has ratified the full Geneva Convention, although cynics might argue that, by this aspiration to be behaving like a state, it has rather little to lose if (even after the Camp David breakdown) rather little hope of advantage: the PLO and the Arab refugee communities in Lebanon are probably closer to the ultimate definition of no-hope than almost anyone except perhaps the tribes of Mali who are so far out of civilised awareness that their wretchedness can't even be imagined.

Whatever the actions of human social aggregations, whether internal or external, divergent or monolithic, the implied social contract has been validated by and through values perceived to be upheld within language itself. Human language is the tribal continuity of expressive human behaviour, and is marked in its very core by whatever depravity or nobility an exercise of linguistic analysis may discover within the human record. If writers and poets think that language can somehow resist this involvement with the worst, while claiming natural affinity with the best, then they are guilty of a naive idealism that ought least of all to attract those who know how language works and what it can do. Treaties and diplomatic instruments are not drafted by poets; but poets live within the illusion of peaceful free choice that such protocols broker into the historical process. Language in its more elevated functions trades forward upon a future, upon readers yet to come, 'just as' the other social modalities of money and war also trade forward in order to buy out the future by competitive power-investment against the status quo.



It may be that Handke's dictum disguises an ambiguity within German grammar and usage, in which 'die Sprache' could refer either to 'the language', i.e., our language, the speaker-community from within which the dictum is expressed; or alternatively to 'language', i.e. the underlying abstract schedule of an undifferentiated human-speech manifold. But in either case, and even if Handke meant that the conquest-language suffers most as the language of the most powerful and thus potentially the most corrupted by the special pleadings of military advantage, the idea that there is an innocent or unwounded condition for language in any of its historic or conceptual formalisations, from which at some determined point in war-like operations it can passively fall into victim-damage and victim-anguish, with all the pathos of a deflowered virgin or Congolese nun, is false and dangerous and absurd. What most casual observers in Europe thought about the Bosnian bombings was not that NATO forces should not have broken their defensive role nor that their superior resource-strength was morally repugnant, but that the bombardment needed to go on for so long and, even so, achieved so little.

Or if Handke is clenching his fist at the spilled milk on Bosnian peasant tables, does he not surely know that the words for violence and torture, rape, pillage, extermination, despoliation of entire communities and destruction of means of livelihood, indeed of internment camps and ethnic cleansing itself, are all deeply rooted in most of the Balkan idiolects, ever since the collapse of the Ottoman Empire and beyond? Does he believe that the grammars operating these terms within the performable and speakable are really some harsh and monstrous new mutation in language, in the human imagination itself? His task in reading and hearing about such things has been, not to imagine but to remember: *Vernichtung*. No previously functional truth-telling capability was newly disabled by the usual lies and prevarications in Bosnia, in Europe and the USA, in the NATO command structure, in the mouths of government spokesmen and the reports of the media, because these fabrications and distortions were built into the long-term history of diplomacy and of political language. Language is not a victim, though its trusting and forgetful users may be wounded by what it is used to say and do.

Does he then somehow believe that, because he is a writer and lives in close companionship with 'free' language, unconstrained by overt pressure from acts done across distant borders by supra-national bodies and their agents, that the idiomatic of his innermost thoughts (Urtext) or of anyone else's was somehow less damaged before the Bosnian air-raids than after them? If his dictum was uttered for effect, as part of a 'protest', then its terms were already part of the scrapping over the spoils of righteousness; if his remark claims an innocence, of a bystander only in crisis alerted to the ways in which meanings are distorted and dishonoured by the words purporting to contain them, then at this final stage in the twentieth century one has to profess a certain amazement. The concentration bombing of Bosnia by NATO, of the defeated Iraqi troops retreating from Kuwait by Rockeye fragmentation bombs, and the reported British support of the US in dropping, in the last eighteen months, 78 tonnes of bombs into Iraqi territory (The Times, 5 August 2000, p. 17), are acts of barbarism which implicate every human domain; but they mobilise the anxiety of the only partially observant bystander principally because of the moral imbalance between a technologically superior aggressor against an under-equipped or third-world victim. This is luxury window-shopping for those normally busy with more important things, which makes the protest almost as distasteful as that against which it levels its superior moral allegation.

All this is most terribly obvious. We live, as always we have, in an historic glasshouse of language; we can see out but only through the glass and it is not easy to cast a well-aimed stone that will not smash up more than was intended. All bystanders are by definition imperfectly observant, and mostly assuage this imperfection by climax outbursts of sanctimony. The complicity with bad consciousness is universal, though it may be argued that societies with more power to elaborate fanciful domains of individual freedom and purity of heart ought maybe to carry more of the guilt for their own self-deception. The only workable alternatives are sainthood (model now discontinued) or the intense cultivation of dialectical consciousness. Otherwise the self-implication of all consciousness in all acts of reflection designed to search out its limits and blind spots will completely obstruct even partial insight. The total scheme, in whatever kind, is the

final obstacle, because it interdicts the even possible part-success of dialectical enquiry. Alienation of human consciousness is fundamentally inevitable within the structure of mental presence, and its acknowledgement is the necessary precondition for an attempted dialectic. Human language in particular is not some innocent civilian victim too defenceless not to fall at the first waves of warlike assault somewhere within the system, when the handy concordat of moral reason starts to shatter; it sits at the tables where war is planned and social consciousness manipulated and it services the justification of war aims and the rescheduled debt provisions of just, patriotic, necessary and humanitarian terms of engagement. Not one word of any language ever known to man has ever been innocent of these things; just as no human body has ever submitted to be expressively at the complete disposal of the mind that inhabits it or the meanings which that mind claims to deploy.

Cambridge, 5th August 2000

## Ben Friedlander. Statement of Principle

STATEMENT  
OF PRINCIPLE *for*  
*Ben Hollander* We

Who experience history  
As an inter-  
Generational effect develop

Symptoms of other  
People's memories, then  
Fend off an

Embarrassment of riches  
Of distress. For  
Less is always

More of the  
Same old shit:  
Knowledge for which

One has no  
Words, only self-  
Destructive actions that

Feel good, but  
Bear no future  
Scrutiny.