



Open Library of Humanities



Part of the Ubiquity  
Partner Network



---

## Book Review

**How to Cite:** Kiely, R 2015 Book Review. *Journal of British and Irish Innovative Poetry*, 7(1): e6, pp. 1–7, DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.16995/biip.6>

**Published:** 28 September 2015

---

## Copyright:

© 2015 The Author(s). This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 3.0 Unported License (CC-BY 3.0), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited. See <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/3.0/>.

## Open Access:

*Journal of British and Irish Innovative Poetry* is a peer-reviewed open access journal.

## Digital Preservation:

The Open Library of Humanities and all its journals are digitally preserved in the CLOCKSS scholarly archive service.

---

**The Open Library of Humanities is an open access non-profit publisher of scholarly articles and monographs.**

## BOOK REVIEW

# Book Review

*News from Afar: Ezra Pound and Some Contemporary British Poetries* by Richard Parker (ed.), Shearsman Books, 330 pages, 2015

Robert Kiely

Shue Yan University, Hong Kong  
[rmdkiely@gmail.com](mailto:rmdkiely@gmail.com)

---

What does it mean to discern Pound in contemporary poetry and poets, to cling to such links, to expand and adumbrate on them? Pound is probably most useful as a litmus test between what might be termed linguistically innovative poetry and a more mainstream poetics. But even within the band of innovatives we need to disambiguate the unconscious or dissimulating quietist-cum-apologist, and the poet who takes a stand in opposition to a *status quo*. Some of the poets yoked to Pound include Andrew Crozier, Ian Sinclair, Geoffrey Hill, J. H. Prynne, Anna Mendelssohn, Veronica Forrest-Thomson, Allen Fisher, Alan Halsey, Reitha Pattison, Michael Kindellan, and Keston Sutherland. What does Pound bring to this poetry as a counterweight which might prise open less obvious readings and meanings? Or do we need new readings; do we need to be reading this at all? All dead horses emit gases, especially when flogged, and those gases tell tales. This is a book about heritage. Pound says 'What thou lovest well is thy true heritage' (*Canto* 81, p. 541), and Pound is loved *well* here.

What is striking throughout the book is the intensity of each contributor's *gaze* on the object of their inquiry. Several of the authors develop complex strategies for negotiating the briefs they have been issued: a single mention of *canto* in Anna Mendelssohn's poetry, a similarity of historical situation and impulse and reaction in two periodicals nearly a century apart. David Vichnar's contribution constructs some ley lines through Ian Sinclair's work through to Pound's, *via* Djuna Barnes. Barnes herself, while meandering through a drawing of Joyce, gets transfixed by his crooked teeth and becomes unable to zoom out. This might serve as an allegory for many of the

essays. Above all, the essays have a rabid attention that would argue for the perspective of Nietzsche's marginal midge. Leap into the detail, like Neo into an agent. 'How much pressure of attention do we bring to this concept?' (p. 289). The answer is usually: as much as possible. What the book demonstrates is that the question of poetry, in Pound's lines, is a question of perspective and attention. Charles Olson's mantra that if you stare long enough at a grain of sand, you'll see the universe in it. (Olson is almost absent in this collection, only appearing obliquely through Mottram or Prynne.) To be a bit more specific, it may take, he says, about 5,113 days.<sup>1</sup> That is 122,721 hours and eighteen minutes. But concentrating on things until they blow up in importance might be quite different to concentrating on things until they just *blow up*.

The editor's introduction ("Here's Your Fucking Light Shithead": Ezra Pound and Contemporary British Poetry) emphasises that for many of these contributors, it is liberal obfuscation to go down the *Pound was insane* route, as Geoffrey Hill does (p. 17). The distinctions between Pound's poetry and politics are not to be teased apart and contemplated as discrete units, but knotted together more furiously. *Contra* Elizabeth Bishop's 'Visits to St. Elizabeth's', here we have 'Pound unchained, sane *and* fascist,' a man 'apoplectically sacrificing his judgement upon the altar of his rage' (p. 12; 13). Because of Pound we know that 'Formal innovation is a necessary concomitant to intellectual innovation' (p. 9). The British writers you are about to see are more interested in mid-century American poets than the mid-century Brits. We shall observe, we are warned, a rebarbative reaction to Pound *in Pound's own terms* again and again. Contemporary poets have moved beyond Pound, even if, as Parker notes, these poets have 'passed along Poundian paths to have arrived at such a point' (p. 19).

I can't go into detail on each and every essay in the 300-plus page collection, but I'll discuss and summarize some of the highlights in brief. One of the great virtues of Richard Parker's editorship is that he has not pummelled the submissions into homogeneity. There is no standard means of demarcating sections in essays, referencing, no one typeface or type-size for sub-headings.

Amy Evans edits, annotates, and introduces an essay by Eric Mottram on 'Pound, Olson, and *The Secret of the Golden Flower*'. Evans suggests that the Pound present

in contemporary British poetry is indebted to Mottram, but perhaps this needs to be modified. Shared enthusiasm, and even recommendations, do not imply mediation. The importance of Taoism in Mottram's essay probably has more to do with 60s counterculture and Robert Duncan than Pound himself, which is not to say that Mottram does not have a point. As Robert Hampson says later in the collection, Mottram was attuned to contemporaneous counter-cultural thinking, from Wilhelm Reich to Buckminster Fuller. The occultist Pound of Mottram – probably most strongly argued-for in Leon Surette's *The Birth of Modernism* and Anthony Mellors' *Late Modernist Poetics: From Pound to Prynne* – largely disappears after these contributions.

Robert Hampson's essay, 'Eric Mottram and Ezra Pound: "There is no substitute for a life-time"', traces lines of influence from Eric Mottram as *fount* to Allen Fisher, Gavin Selerie, and Frances Presley. Although most encountered Pound before Mottram, this common interest was fostered by him. Later in the collection, Gavin Selerie's 'Pound and Contemporary British Poetry: The Loosening of Form' offers some autobiographical details of his encounter with Pound and discusses Alan Halsey's work in the context of this tradition.

Gareth Farmer's "Obstinate Isles" and Rhetorical Sincerity: Veronica Forrest-Thomson and Ezra Pound' gets a 'grip on her conviction that one of Pound's major innovations was to re-examine the "beauty of the means" of nineteenth-century poetry and find a way of using these means for contemporary poetic practice' (p. 162). Farmer suggests that Forrest-Thomson's poems exhibit an additional layer of self-commentary above Pound's that registers a discomfort towards insincerity in inherited modes. Farmer's description of Forrest-Thomson's close-readings might describe the book as a whole:

The precision and vigour of her 'fanatical' close analyses are designed in large part to circumvent lazy critical practices such as concentration on content over analyses of poetic form and overly casual and unsubstantiated claims about poetic influence. (p. 173)

If other essays in this collection sometimes shamefacedly slip from one object to the next, Laura Kilbride's essay ("Real Games With Books": On Anna Mendelssohn and Ezra Pound) is a *tour de force* that lays bare its perverse choices through playful footnotes and switches of reference. Observe Kilbride and Mendelssohn continually 'outpound' Pound (p. 190). The final sentence is the most direct response to the question of Pound's influence: Mendelssohn hated Pound 'with an almighty fury' (p. 192).

The book shows that Pound is most obviously alive today in certain practices of translation. Alex Pestell's "All in for folly and mustard": Pound, Zukofsky and *Word is Born*' contextualizes Reitha Pattison and Michael Kindellan's translations of Bertran de Born in a Poundian-inflected tradition of translation *via* Louis Zukofsky. If Pound is indelibly linked to the troubadours, he is even more important for the reception of Chinese poetry. Harry Gilonis introduces some of his own translations from Chinese, most of them retranslations of the source material for Pound's *Cathay*. They are 'faithless translations' of the originals, always 'quite a way after' whoever they are based on. As with Pound, 'these poems come out of a close and long-standing engagement with Chinese poetry, but *not* out of Sinological expertise' (p. 245). Robert Sheppard's 'The Li Shang-yin Suite' offers some more compelling translations from the Chinese, in particular utilising a dizzying space between words to slow our reading down or trip us up. Tim Atkins parodies the manifesto-tendency and the bombast of Pound in some more translations: 'Happiness/The Art of Poetry Being a translation of the 10 Buddhist Ox-Herding Poems': 'The building of a personal poetry empire [. . .] I reject utterly'; 'THE TASK OF POETRY TODAY IS TO— (sigh)' (p. 313; 319). That sigh is probably the most overt attack on Pound in the collection.

Two of the essays deal with J. H. Prynne. Josh Kotin's 'Blood-Stained Battle-Flags: Ezra Pound, J. H. Prynne and Classical Chinese Poetry' resists thinking of *the poem* as a unitary object separate from its reception and translation, aware that both this and its historical contexts morph the poem. Ryan Dobran's 'Myth, Culture and Text: Ezra Pound's Homer and J. H. Prynne's Aristeas' argues that where scholarly authority is mediated by a heroic poetic persona in Pound's early cantos, some of Prynne's

later works are closer to actual scholarship; they are not mediated by the ego of the maverick scholar-poet.<sup>2</sup> Where 'Pound collapses historical distance by his combinatory writing style', 'Prynne preserves it' (p. 143). 'Aristeas' is one of only three poems in Prynne's back-catalogue to use references. Dobran proposes that

Prynne's use of scholarship has an effect analogous to that found in scholarship itself. There is an institution of expectation at work, a selective fidelity to experts in the field, among which the poet does not include himself. There is a dispassionate and provisional trust in these sources that seems to place Prynne's poem on the solid ground of the social and natural sciences. (p. 150)

And yet, an ego might function in a text without an I (to borrow a remark of Andrea Brady's).

Keston Sutherland's contribution ('In Memory of your Occult Convolutions') has been extensively annotated by Parker in *Glossator*.<sup>3</sup> It is constructed of excerpts from a copy of *The Literary Essays of Ezra Pound*, and the title riffs on O'Hara and Whitman. Elsewhere in the collection, Sean Pryor's 'Some Thoughts on Refrigeration' contextualises Sutherland's use of a fridge patent at the outset of 'The Proxy Inhumanity of Forklifts' in *The Stats on Infinity*, published by Parker's Crater Press, with Pound's early reference to the 'fridgidaire' (p. 277) in *Homage to Sextus Propertius*. This is about intellectual property and that buzzword of the Arts Council, *access*: 'Rather than jealously hoarding him, Pound puts Propertius into free circulation' (p. 274). Economics and poetry jostle, but the analogies remains artistic: 'Sutherland's allusion trades in the grammatical irreverence with which Pound reads Propertius. Is that to contract a debt, or put Pound into circulation, or both?' (p. 274).<sup>4</sup> Pryor makes extended analogies between the fridge and Sutherland's poetry: both utilise a spring door of sorts, as both have to be held open or they spring shut; the book (like a fridge door) pivots on a hinge. The essay concludes that 'There is something inadequate in poetry's plenitude. The refrigerator is broken and the food has spoilt' (p. 279). The implication that a better door, or a door left open less, would have stopped poetry

from spoiling is slightly troubling. Here the poet is hoarder and dispenser, rather than antennae and listener.

Danny Hayward's essay ('Or Storming the Shopping Centre: Poetry, Competition, Pound, *Quid*') asks many questions. Those answers which it does venture are both tentative and remarkable. It attempts to describe the ways in which the possibility of a victory over capitalism and imperialism might be related to poetry. He draws an analogy between *BLAST 2*, the 'War Issue', and Sutherland's *Ira Quid*, issue number 13 of the magazine *Quid*. His questions are put with more urgency than anything else in the collection, because they *are* urgent. More readers must try to answer these questions, rather than retracing their steps through the door they entered, scared off by the delicacy, virtuosity, or the passion with which Hayward asks them. But ultimately, Hayward's essay becomes a delineation of the profound powerlessness of poetry, a poetic nihilism:

[P]oetry devises new resources of repudiation, it strains to make language more resourceful than any language that has ever preceded it, and the resources sit in our mouth and allegorise nothing except the implacable effortlessness of their performance. (p. 299)

The essay's power resides in its refusal to relinquish its utopian impulse to this nihilism.

Where Pound is everywhere present is in the contributors' passion, which can blow tiny details into a cosmos. Pound's criticism introduced a 'vital, clarifying, encouraging viciousness' (p. 9). Such an attempt at sustained attention, and its attendant desires, is markedly different from forms of not-knowing. Fire, invective, passion, campaigning. Pound as translator, as fearless critic, and as scholar – this is usually the Pound we get here. What is absent from contemporary British poetries is the later, tired Pound. This is an effort to avoid quietism and defeat. As Parker, himself an eminently post-Poundian poet, concludes, it is in *political* writing and translation that Pound has been most useful.

## Competing Interests

The author declares that they have no competing interests.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Cf. 'A Bibliography on America for Ed Dorn', in *Collected Prose*, ed. Donald Allen and Benjamin Friedlander (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), pp. 297–310 (p. 307).
- <sup>2</sup> This relates to some issues in Juha Virtanen's 'Allen Fisher Reading: Facture, "Atkins Stomp" and Ezra Pound' which delineates some of the similarities and differences in 'process-showing' in Pound and Fisher. Virtanen expands on some of the allusions to and riffs on Pound in the preceding poem, Fisher's 'Atkins Stomp'.
- <sup>3</sup> Richard Parker, 'On *In Memory of your Occult Convolutions*', *Glossator* 8 (2013), 317–44.
- <sup>4</sup> Cf. Pound's poem on Whitman, 'Pact'.

**How to cite this article:** Kiely, R 2015 Book Review. *Journal of British and Irish Innovative Poetry*, 7(1): e6, pp. 1–7, DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.16995/biip.6>

**Submitted:** 28 September 2015

**Copyright:** © 2015 The Author(s). This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 3.0 Unported License (CC-BY 3.0), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited. See <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/3.0/>.



*Journal of British and Irish Innovative Poetry* is a peer-reviewed open access journal published by Open Library of Humanities.

**OPEN ACCESS** The Open Access logo, which is a stylized 'O' with a person icon inside.