



Open Library of Humanities



Part of the Ubiquity
Partner Network



Review

How to Cite: Eltringham, D, Jenkins, H and Sheppard, V 2016 Book Reviews. *Journal of British and Irish Innovative Poetry*, 8(1): e1, pp. 1–24, DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.16995/biip.21>

Published: 24 May 2016

Peer Review:

This article has been peer reviewed through the double-blind process of *Journal of British and Irish Innovative Poetry*, which is a journal published by the Open Library of Humanities.

Copyright:

© 2016 The Author(s). This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC-BY 4.0), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited. See <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>.

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.

REVIEW

Book Reviews

Late Modernism and The English Intelligencer: On the Poetics of Community by Alex Latter, London: Bloomsbury Academic, 276 pp., 2015

Daniel Eltringham

Birkbeck College, University of London, GB
daneltro@gmail.com

Alex Latter's valuable and necessary study of *The English Intelligencer*, an ephemeral yet influential poetry 'worksheet' distributed to a subscriber list of British poets between 1966 and 1968, is an important archival achievement that irons out many inconsistencies of record and brings to light the complexity and importance of personal relationships within the generation of late modernist British poets writing innovative work from the late 1950s. *Late Modernism and The English Intelligencer: on the Poetics of Community* is more than that, however – it is also a vital bridge that connects the first generation of High Modernists (principally Ezra Pound) with the transatlantic exchange between British and American poets in the 1960s. That bridging is linked by Latter with the work written by those poets later, in the 1970s and 80s, and thus implicitly with the on-going proliferation of radical poetic practice today, which looks to the *Intelligencer* as a problematic exemplar for a 'poetics of community'.

Latter's narrative account of the *Intelligencer's* prehistory, its brief, tumultuous circulation and half-life extending well into the following decade is centrally about the unsatisfactory yet unavoidably necessary nature of any quest for origins. Nonetheless, *The English Intelligencer* is itself a starting point of sorts, and today occupies a curious, perhaps enviable position. It is in one way the most marginal of objects of study – a fugitive, mimeographed collation of poetic information not available outside a self-selecting circle of poets – but in another, a cultural object whose resonance continues to be felt. In the genealogy traced here its continuing

importance is as a point of renewal in a pelagic strand of late modernism stretching back through key personal relationships with and between post-war British poets to Pound, Bunting, Olson and others, gliding all the while beneath the surface trends of the publishing industry.

Latter employs Bourdieu's sociological schema of the restricted field of production as a way of framing an endeavour which was, crucially, free from significant production costs due to J. H. Prynne's access to a Xerox machine at Gonville and Caius College Cambridge, and therefore free too of the usual capitalist imperatives to expand itself, its readership and cash flow, in order to remain viable. Another, less laudable aspect of the *Intelligencer's* dynamic was its figuration as a fraternal community: 'it is in the figure of the brother that the new world is born' (p. 11), Latter notes in his introduction, and it is indicative of the worksheet's concerns that just four women are listed as receiving the *Intelligencer* during its three-year run. The antagonisms that plagued the 'community of risk' might have been avoided, Latter speculates, 'if women had occupied a less marginal position in its exchange' (p. 10). Still, its conditions of production allowed the *Intelligencer* to function as a 'reconfigured public sphere which is directly shaped by personal needs' (p. 30), a collective practice of reciprocal writing, reading and circulation framed as correspondence, with the urgency of a news item.

The apex of this ideal exchange in Latter's account is the summer of 1966, when excitement mounted over the new theory of continental drift, which offered for the first time the possibility that the planet's land had once been a unified whole: the supercontinent Pangaea. The *Intelligencer* was remarkable for incorporating such scientific discourses into its poetry. It 'brought to the attention of its readers a body of knowledge – plate tectonics, neolithic burial rites – that could be alluded to' (p. 135), resulting in both a closed circuit of reference among the correspondents and an ideal of knowledge still undivided by the disciplinary boundaries that boxed only certain lexical items as suitable for use in poems, as 'poetic' or 'literary'. The permission to engage in such radical excavations of scientific knowledge and lexicons was in many respects granted by the transatlantic connection with North American poets,

principally Prynne's correspondence throughout the 1960s with Charles Olson, who had urged in his influential essay 'Human Universe' that in order to 'find ways to stay in the human universe' it was vital 'not to be led to partition reality at any point' (Olson blamed this first epistemological splitting on Aristotle's employment of logic and classification to fragment discourse).¹

But by the end of that year social rather than epistemological divisions had come to the fore. Latter stresses the importance of Prynne's letter to the *Intelligencer* of 27 December 1966 in which Prynne doubted whether there was 'any form of active constancy, of trust and the indirections in which support or any fluency of connection can keep the thing afloat', as he diagnosed frustrated attempts to 'Get back the knowledge, the purities, the lightness of language' as a failure of trust as a sustaining beam of the 'community of risk' that could 'hold up the idea of the possible world'.² This direct acknowledgement of lack was, Latter notes, 'a crucial moment in the *Intelligencer's* history, as it expresses the clearest dissatisfaction with the entire project', as well as revealing Prynne's 'aspirations for it – aspirations which turned on the key terms of trust and risk' (p. 102).

Latter sees this letter as a high-water mark in quantitative terms for Prynne's involvement in the *Intelligencer*, supported by his contribution rate before and after 27 December 1966 – one poem every nine pages versus one every seventeen pages (p. 105). Indeed, from late 1966 things seemed to unravel quickly. Charles Olson's long-anticipated visit to England in autumn 1966 was a terrible disappointment (p. 103). By the winter of 1967 frustration with Peter Riley's editorship of Series Two amongst Crozier and Prynne led them to stage an editorial putsch. Assessing its acrimonious end against its utopian objectives, Latter points out even-handedly that while in one sense the 'antagonism engendered by its pages is its most powerful legacy', in another 'it is necessary to recognize the *Intelligencer* as a failure on its initial terms', as its effect 'on prevailing public taste, and cultural institutions which shaped that taste, was negligible' (p. 85). Bruised by this dual experience of failure, by internal strife, external neglect and depressing political trends, the response of the *Intelligencer's* most frequent contributors was to move 'emphatically towards the

ideological edges' of any coherent social or artistic articulation of wholeness, the reintegration of social and artistic practices, to occupy instead 'the site of damage rather than a recuperative centre' (p. 114).

Disenchantment with the whole was formally correlative to that with Olson's open-field composition – always a source of anxiety, initially that the work in the *Intelligencer* was too imitative of Olson's typographic lexicon and later about the lofty pretensions of 'Physiological Presence + Cosmological Range'³ – and Latter is acute on the formal repercussions of this political and aesthetic shift. In his fifth chapter he identifies the 1970s long poem or sequence, 'as opposed to discrete lyrics', as a prosodic manifestation of the fallout from the *Intelligencer's* dissolution (p. 160). The turn to the open-ended serial work by Prynne, Crozier and Riley, as well as John James and Barry MacSweeney, is glossed by Latter as an 'internalization of the kind of exegetic processes that, in the *Intelligencer's* textual and communal presence, was worked out in the terms of the "community of risk"'. This formal and 'epistemic shift', Latter argues, constituted a bearing away from the way meaning had been determined within the self-contained circuit of the *Intelligencer's* community of reading and writing, which had leant heavily on a flexible consensus about the 'special resonances' of certain 'load-bearing' keywords or tropes:

love, trust and need – as well as forms and discourses, such as the shaman, glaciation or the city, whose significance would sometimes be elaborated in references or contextualized by the exchanges taking place in the community around them (p. 161).

By contrast, 'the longer poetic sequences that were written in the wake of the *Intelligencer's* dissolution were obliged to do without this substrate', such that 'it became necessary to develop a different mode of poetic cognition which was implicitly bound up in a different prosody' (p. 161). Latter's argument about this 'different' prosody actually concentrates on rhyme, rather than the metrical qualities of this work, as marking the formal shift correlative with the personal and political breakdown of the *Intelligencer* community. He is right, I think, to see the structural function of

rhyme – which Prynne had called ‘the public truth of language’⁴ at the end of the *Intelligencer’s* run – as a counter and ‘alternative structural principle’ to the previous faith in ‘the virtue of emplacement’, that names could drill back down into the sub-structure of continent and language to anchor being as ‘covenants that bind | into the rock’.⁵ Instead, rhyme is based not on ‘the substrate of an origin’ that ‘travels along a specific vector’, but is ‘simultaneously present in two places’, working through a correspondence between sites that denies the possibility of emplacement (p. 162). Each echo can only survive as an echo in cooperation with others: no sound is an island, but instead a networked repository of transient, local memory within the lattice.

Latter’s book is part of the Bloomsbury Academic series ‘Historicizing Modernism’, and while it is not therefore within this remit, focused as it is on the transmutations of modernism in the twentieth century, it is possible to trace the *Intelligencer’s* genealogy somewhat further back. It shares its name directly with a late seventeenth-century political gazette which, along with similarly titled political leaflets (*Domestick Intelligencer, The Friendly Intelligence, Poor Robins Intelligence, etc.*), responded to the doctrinal tensions of the Exclusion Crisis (1679–81), the Popish Plot (1678–81) and the de facto censorship of dissent, despite which they were able to publish seditious content. Then there were Romantic models for the worksheet. During the Pitt Emergency of the 1790s – another such periodic clampdown on law and order and free expression, this time due to fears of the French Revolution crossing the channel – the *Cambridge Intelligencer* (1793–1803), was ‘the last national organ of intellectual Jacobinism’ before its eventual suppression.⁶ Despite its name the *Cambridge Intelligencer* was distributed nationwide, and counted such Romantic luminaries as Anna Laetitia Barbauld, Ebenezer Elliott, Henry Crabb Robinson and Samuel Taylor Coleridge amongst its contributors. Its editor, Benjamin Flower, was imprisoned for contempt of the House of Lords for remarks made against Richard Watson, Bishop of Llandaff, a ‘Letter’ to whom – the most explicitly republican text of his prose writings – William Wordsworth wisely withheld from publishing in 1793. Along with other such cases Flower’s sentence sounded the death knell for any remaining freedoms for the radical press, although he continued to edit new numbers from his cell until 1803.

Nothing so dramatic was likely to befall Andrew Crozier or Peter Riley, editors of Series One and Three and Series Two of the *Intelligencer* respectively. If anything, the anxiety was that no one in establishment literary or political circles was paying very much attention, let alone feeling threatened by the twentieth-century underground publication networks that crisscrossed the country.⁷ There is, though, in these seventeenth and eighteenth-century journals, a sense of being under the radar, an argument for a repressed kind of Englishness that was anti-establishment yet still positioned as decidedly 'for the island and its language', spreading vital poetic 'intelligence' across its landmass, as *The English Intelligencer* was polemically conceived from the outset.⁸

Indeed, how the *Intelligencer* should be orientated towards the ideas of nation suggested by its title was debated from the start. Elaine Feinstein responded to the editorial statement that set out the worksheet's scope as 'for the island and its language' with a plea to 'let's not have any fictional "Englishness"', since 'What could be nastier?'⁹ This was in turn taken up by John Hall, who responded, 'nation only makes sense as the land we inhabit'.¹⁰ Prynne opened his pivotal letter to Andrew Crozier in December 1966 by saying he thought the title was 'the most shriveled proposition in the whole drooping matter'.¹¹ These national lineages – despite an ambiguous desire to 'drop the Eng from land' – incorporate both the *Intelligencer's* urgent political charge and its formation as a self-limiting, confrontationally enclosed space that was paradoxically stimulated and inhibited by transatlantic exchange, yet determined to account for the local conditions of Britain's vanished late modernism in the geological and pre-historical terms of its own 'land'.¹²

Tension within marginal poetic cultures between 'the need to assert some independence of the prevailing American culture'¹³ and a pre-national affiliation to transcontinental community made little impression on the way poetry and nation has been and continues to be thought about in 'Betjeman's England', and this lack of impact is – for Latter – where the real division is situated. In his conclusion Latter reflects that while researching the book he would catch a train to St. Pancras a couple of times a week, walking past Betjeman's statue and seeing his lines

inscribed on the platform concourse. What had the *Intelligencer* achieved if, more than 50 years after Prynne had written to Olson about the pernicious blindness of Betjeman's England, Betjeman's words literally made up the ground on which I was walking? (p. 200).

But that is precisely its continuing usefulness, Latter concludes, that its work isn't rendered a monumental part of 'the pre-remembered Betjemanian heritage industry' that 'attempts to ignore, conceal and obfuscate the cultural, historical and ideological forces that shape it' (p. 200). Instead, the *Intelligencer's* historically dialectical relation with this 'land' is provisional, contested, about movement rather than inscription, and it is in that unfinishedness that it continues to matter.

Notes

- ¹ Charles Olson, 'Human Universe', in *A Charles Olson Reader*, ed. by Ralph Maud (Manchester: Carcanet, 2005), pp. 112–123 (p. 114).
- ² J. H. Prynne to Andrew Crozier (27th December 1966), *The English Intelligencer*, Series 1: Issue 12, pp. 189–191, in *Certain Prose of the English Intelligencer*, ed. by Neil Pattison, Reitha Pattison and Luke Roberts (Cambridge: Mountain Press, 2012), pp. 28–29 (p. 28).
- ³ Peter Riley, 'Announcement', *TEI*, 2: 1, pp. 275–6, in *Certain Prose*, pp. 95–97 (p. 95).
- ⁴ J. H. Prynne, Correspondence (14 March 1968), *TEI*, 3: 6, unpaginated, in *Certain Prose*, p. 185.
- ⁵ J. H. Prynne, 'The Wound, Day and Night', *Poems* (Hexam: Bloodaxe Books, 2015), p. 64.
- ⁶ E. P. Thompson, 'Disenchantment or Default?', in *The Romantics: England in a Revolutionary Age* (Woodbridge: Merlin Press 1997), pp. 33–74 (p. 55).
- ⁷ Barry McSweeney wrote to the *Intelligencer* in summer 1967 about the need to expand its reach: 'a public is important. To write and then build little walls around it, is just fucking useless.' 'Extracts from Two Letters', *TEI*, 2: 6, pp. 378–79, in *Certain Prose*, pp. 139–41 (p. 141).
- ⁸ 'Editorial', *TEI*, 1: 1, p. 9, in *Certain Prose*, p. 3.
- ⁹ Elaine Feinstein, Correspondence, *TEI*, 1: 2, p. 17, in *Certain Prose*, p. 3.
- ¹⁰ John Hall, 'Some Notes for the Biographies of Poems Written and Unwritten', *TEI*, 1:8, p. 105, in *Certain Prose*, p. 16.
- ¹¹ J. H. Prynne to Andrew Crozier (27th December 1966), *TEI*, 1:12, pp. 189–191 (p. 189), in *Certain Prose*, pp. 28–29 (p. 28).
- ¹² Prynne, quoted by John Hall to Andrew Crozier (18 February 1967), *TEI*, 1:14, pp. 225–226 (p. 226), in *Certain Prose*, p. 44.
- ¹³ Elaine Feinstein, Correspondence, *TEI*, 1: 2, p. 17, in *Certain Prose*, p. 3.

The Writing Occurs as Song: A Kelvin Corcoran Reader by Andy Brown (ed.), Bristol: Shearsman, 260 pp., 2014

Haley Jenkins

Independent Researcher & Poet, GB
haley.jenkins@hotmail.com

'You Tell Me'. Corcoran wrote these words in response to a questionnaire sent by a sixteen-year-old Scott Thurston who asked: 'What can you say about the "content" of your work, e.g. if there are specific long-standing preoccupations in it?' (p. 125). In *The Writing Occurs as Song: A Kelvin Corcoran Reader*, poets and academics accept Corcoran's three-word challenge and respond in a variety of ways to his thirty-year legacy, from his first book, *Robin Hood in the Dark Ages* (1985), to his 2011 volume, *Words Through a Hole Where Once There Was A Chimpanzees Face*. The volume features three transcribed conversations between Corcoran and Andy Brown (the book's editor), which precede the three main parts of the book: 'Eng-A-Land, Greece and Empire', 'On Song and Lyric', 'Approaches'. These conversations are mirrored by personal reflections from Lee Harwood, Kat Peddie and Alicia Stubbersfield which close each section. Stretching across a variety of topics, Corcoran responds not only with an engaging wealth of knowledge (and self-knowledge) about his field of poetics, but also with personal accounts that draw the reader into his world. Andy Brown's own contribution to the collection is extremely valuable to the Corcoran-expert and the newcomer alike; his introduction provides the rationale for the innovative structure of the volume and gives a much-needed biographical foundation for the reader before he/she is confronted with the more intimate details of Corcoran's life.

The pieces collected in this volume illustrate the diverse nature of Corcoran's work and outline, for the first time, the central ideas surrounding the poetry. In "'Another Language Like Ours": Kelvin Corcoran's Lyric Displacements', David Herd maps the evolution of Corcoran's work from 'a poetics grounded in actual cityscapes, and towards an image of a socio-political space' (p. 44), positioning the poet against the backdrop of Williams Carlos Williams, Charles Olson, Frank O'Hara, Roy Fisher and John Ashbery. Herd explores how Corcoran continually relocates his reader by

adjusting the framework of the landscape and produces an unfixed and shared sense of history that is not pinned to a particular location. This refusal to set any 'historically inscribed limits' (p. 32) creates a displacement in Corcoran's poetry that reflects the poet's 'sense of socio-political space' (p. 30) at the time of his early writing, as well as a disinclination to follow any specific tradition or poet. According to Herd, poets such as Blake are used as devices of verbal change within the poetry; rather than refashioning pre-existing cultural identities, Corcoran declines them, opposing 'the shabby politics of acquaintance' (p. 40).

Ian Davidson discusses the notion of movement in his essay 'Between Red and Yellow: *The Red and Yellow Book* (1986)'; movement, that is, localised to events in Corcoran's childhood in Evesham as well as movements in capitalism, finance, labour and other themes tied up in the 1980s Regan-Thatcher deregulation of global capital. He identifies 'the human practice of mobility' (p. 47) in Corcoran's work; the way humans must adapt and move through spaces of turmoil (such as family illness) and how the speaking voice must alter as a result. Davidson's skill in mapping poetic space (proved throughout his academic career), as well as his specific exploration of 'surfaces [that] are stripped back to reveal what really matters' (p. 52), make this essay compelling reading. With an awareness of the raw emotion of Corcoran's poems, Davidson argues that these emotions shouldn't be cast aside as merely themes that belong to late modernist preoccupations, but as spaces of continual shift between family illness and 1980s politics.

In "'The Umbrage of Green Shade": Kelvin Corcoran and the Landscape Beyond Landscape', Jos Smith unlocks Corcoran's poetic landscape as one that encodes a desire to dispel the picturesque views of scenic tourism. Corcoran's poetry, Smith suggests, attempts to overcome our tendency to gloss over pictures/landscapes that don't quite 'fit' our need to 'recognise – enjoy – share – move on – repeat' (p. 60). Smith identifies Corcoran's pre-occupation with national myth in his 'Eng-a-Land' poems, which manifests as a Romantic idealism as well as a utopian desire for the English to be better than they are. As with Davidson's contribution, Smith outlines Corcoran's attempts to position himself, and his readers, outside what he perceives

to be the dulling of human agency in the 1980s, and sketches his progress towards more pastoral moments in his 1990s work such as *Lyric Lyric* (1993).

Peter Riley's 'Kelvin Corcoran and Greece' examines the dual nature of Corcoran's Greek poems: on the one hand, the relaxed engagement with Greece as a location; on the other hand, the exquisiteness of Greek culture. Riley skilfully tracks Corcoran's journey to Greece-as-subject, alongside his connection with the Cambridge ritualists – such as the important figure of Jane Harrison – and the dangers of Olson's magician-self and devaluation of the 'Now' for the 'Then'. Riley highlights poems that express Corcoran's desire for a pact of sorts between the ancient world and the current one, where the ghosts of the past mimic and follow us in image, language and ritual today.

Lee Harwood introduces the first 'Personal Reflection' in 'Kelvin Corcoran's "Straight Music"'. The piece is written with beautiful simplicity and demonstrates Harwood's close and long engagement with Corcoran's work. The essay might have been better placed nearer the beginning of the volume rather than as the conclusion to 'Part 1: Eng-A-Land, Greece and Empire'. Had the piece been placed earlier, Harwood's elegant outline of the progression of Corcoran's themes would have served as a valuable precursor to issues discussed in Herd, Davidson, Smith and Riley with more academic detail.

John Hall's essay, 'Kelvin Corcoran on and in Song', which begins 'Part 2: On Song & Lyric', is tantalisingly seductive as he roots out Corcoran's links to song/musicality in the last and first sequences of *Hotel Shadow* (2010). Hall carefully limits himself to this certain set due to his awareness of the potential wealth of detail that could be derived from Corcoran's poetry in terms of song and writes in a considerate style never leaving the reader behind, even where you felt he could. Hall's brilliant analysis of words, phrases and structures in Corcoran's work picks apart the surface of each poem and shows up the songful underbelly of the poetry.

In 'The Pleasures of Reification: Kelvin Corcoran's *Lyric Lyric*', Scott Thurston discusses his student experience of reaching out to the established poet Corcoran – a kind of experience many poet readers will likely recognise. Thurston explores

Corcoran's use of reification, the truth table, his prose poems, Egyptian hieroglyphics and his preoccupation with the physical forms of language. Through skilled analysis, Thurston reveals to us that 'such a poetics confirms a belief in poetry as a force for political engagement, despite risking its own reification in a Marxist sense' (p. 136).

In 'Kelvin Corcoran and the Late Modernist Lyric', Simon Smith outlines Corcoran's ongoing dialogue with Modernist poets such as Pound, Eliot, ancient song-masters such as Campion and Byron, and contemporaries/near-contemporaries such as W.S. Graham, Douglas Oliver and Basil Bunting. Smith suggests that Corcoran's most original feature is his questioning and use of the lyric as a political weapon. Smith offers a further angle by delving into parallels for the Late Modernist lyric within the art world, such as Corcoran's engagement with the work of Roger Hilton. He draws interesting comparisons between other artists'/poets' aesthetics and Corcoran's; for example he points out – quoting Corcoran – that while Pound went wild in the 'Broken Ant-Hill Book of Reference', Corcoran's aesthetic is one of 'simultaneity, of all politics, myth, history, all converging on now, formed in a discreet, and yet connecting (and connected) act of seeing' (p. 147).

Kat Peddie opens her 'Personal Reflection – "The Singer Tears Your Heart Out"' with a poetic love-letter to Corcoran, before discussing her response to Corcoran's reading and subject matter. The piece is written in a deeply passionate and richly personal way, with nuggets of knowledge woven throughout; at one point Peddie explores Corcoran's use of antiquity-as-present, which, she argues, challenges the disregarding of antiquity as no longer relevant to politics or economics. The essay ends with the beautiful declarative statement: 'What this poetry *is* is not the emotion of the solipsistic castings-off of a confessional-lite verse' (p. 154), but that Corcoran's continued use of aspects of this verse are vitally important and central to the politics Corcoran fights against.

Andy Brown's interesting 'Only in *Apophenia*: Medicine and Meaning in Kelvin Corcoran's Autopathography' (Part 3: Approaches) explores the medical themes within Corcoran's work, such as his mother's illness, his own stroke, fatherhood and medical terminology. After a skilful analysis of where these features are located

within the poetry, Brown explores Corcoran's use of straight talking when dealing with the death of a loved one and how quickly the mundanity of everyday life returns to us. He reveals how our private/public moments are entwined – for example, a loved one being put into an ambulance, embodying our private family trauma, but visible to the public eye/strangers – and yet we keep to our individual spheres, separate and constant within our turmoil. Having discussed Corcoran's dealings with the loss of others, Brown turns the microscope to the poet's own experiences before concluding with an exploration of medicine in *Words Through A Hole Where Once There Was A Chimpanzee's Face* (2011).

Zoë Brigley Thompson makes the compelling argument that Corcoran has challenged teleological certainties – a form of challenge inherited from poets such as Ashbery. Thompson explains that his ekphrasis contains the English Romantic questioning of art, its permanence and its ability to 'preserve particular public legacies or personal histories' (p. 191). In this enchanting essay 'Ekphrasis in a Convex Mirror: Decaying Monuments and Breathing Statuary in Kelvin Corcoran's Writing about Art', she discusses Corcoran's links to Shelley, Byron and Coleridge, and emphasises his relationship with the artist Roger Hilton and his collaborator poet Alan Halsey. Thompson has an uncanny knack for bringing an image to mind: Corcoran, the Romantics, Hilton and Halsey all as speaking-sketches, their personalities made startlingly clear as they debate the permanence of art and the word, of what poetry and art can do against politics or *as* politics, all riding a ship where Greece can be seen through one window and Hilton's Cornwall in the other.

In 'The Imperial Franchise Endlessly Renewed', Martin Anderson focuses on Corcoran's attention to the consequences of Empire and its consumerism, suggesting that the Global North for the poet 'represents that cardinal point of Atlantic mercantile kingdoms' (p. 214), but also a place where Corcoran can find himself through his work, particularly with its Greek lineage. Anderson offers a further angle by skilfully locating Corcoran's use of luxury goods and concludes by revealing the important influence of Barry MacSweeney. Anderson interweaves relevant and fascinating aspects of history through his essay, that give the reader some perspective as

to the scale of this 'endlessly renewed' franchise of consumerism and echoes previous essays in noting Corcoran's stress on the position of poetry within this system.

In 'In the Dream Village: Mapping Kelvin Corcoran's Prose Poems', Luke Kennard illustrates Corcoran's use of the often radicalised medium of the prose poem, demonstrating how the poet has used it as the 'fat battery of verse' (p. 230), a dream/interlude, a dialectic style choice, a confessional voice and as a tool of self-questioning that is embodied in the form itself: can this really be called a poem? Kennard takes us on an interesting path by briefly sketching the use of prose poems in poetry and novels, citing well-known names such as Martin Amis and Paul Auster, before exploring Corcoran's use of Descartes. The latter half of the essay is a detailed analysis of Corcoran's prose poems and his invitation to 'imagine the enquiry as the unearthing of the poem' (p. 244) that prose poetry prompts.

The book concludes with a well-chosen extract from *Glenn Gould and Everything* (2015). Just before this, Corcoran's long-time friend Alicia Stubbersfield offers her 'Personal Reflection – "This Interior Light"'. Corcoran is shown in this piece as a teacher, with Stubbersfield outlining his love and passion for people. This is a deeply personal and charming piece about the impact Corcoran has had on the lives of others, as well as about his love for people, places, poets and laughter. The personal stories Stubbersfield shares evoke smiles and laughter, from Corcoran's students rallying together when they discovered he was ill, to the white-knuckled car-rides where Corcoran searched for CDs while driving, assuring his passengers that 'if the car rolls it'll be fine because of how its constructed' (p. 248).

Overall, *The Writing Occurs as Song* excels in its purpose: to investigate, illustrate and share the importance of Kelvin Corcoran and his work for the last thirty years. These essays were all extremely well grounded, engaging and enjoyable, and persuade the reader to read more of Corcoran.

Out of Everywhere 2: Linguistically Innovative Poetry by Women in North America & the UK by Emily Critchley (ed.), Hastings: Reality Street, 362 pp., 2015

Women's Experimental poetry in Britain 1970–2010: Body, Time, Locale by David Kennedy and Christine Kennedy, Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 192 pp., 2013

Victoria Sheppard

University of Salford, GB
V.M.Sheppard@salford.ac.uk

The pioneering *Out of Everywhere* anthology edited by Maggie O'Sullivan in 1996 aimed to 'demonstrate that much of the most challenging, formally progressive and significant work over recent years' has been made by women.¹ Twenty years later, the follow up to this anthology confirms that this tradition is thriving, and that 'more formally original, politically and philosophically engaged poetry is being written by greater numbers of women than ever before' (Critchley, p. 9). Among many others, this impressive selection of over forty poets brings together Amy De'Ath, Corina Copp, Rachel Blau DuPlessis, Lisa Jarnot, Myung Mi Kim, Eleni Sikelianos, Julianna Spahr and Lissa Wolsak from North America, and Andrea Brady, Jennifer Cooke, Emily Critchley, Sophie Mayer, Redell Olsen, Holly Pester, Marianne Morris, Sophie Robinson, Zoë Skoulding and Carol Watts from the UK.

Critchley's editing of the 2015 anthology stays faithful in many respects to the 1996 anthology. From a visual point of view the current volume has clearly replicated the feel of the original, maintaining not only the same title and subtitle but also the same layout, font, and uses of lowercase. The editorial statement 'to the reader' follows a similar structure as O'Sullivan's, and the anthology provides minimal contextual detail to the extracts from each poet. Like the original, *Out of Everywhere 2* encourages the reader to engage with the poetry first and foremost, and positions the brief bibliographical/biographical details as a secondary concern, collecting these at the end of the anthology. Even the dates of poems are left out of the anthologised extracts. This unobtrusive approach to editing allows for more immersive reading and a smoother

transition between different poets. At the same time it respects the complexity and multiple versions of many of the works, which, like the poems in the earlier anthology, are frequently 'lifted from longer poetic sequences, project-oriented work, and cross-genre engagements with, especially, visual performance and sound work' (Critchley, p. 10). As O'Sullivan put it in 1996, the poetry engages with larger poetic discourses and practices and performative directions in such a way as to celebrate 'poetry as event'.²

There are a couple of notable editorial differences in the 2015 anthology. This first is the addition of an accompanying CD (with performances by Sascha Akhtar, Lee Ann Brown, Elizabeth-Jane Burnett, Lisa Jarnot, Marianne Morris, Holly Pester, Lisa Samuels, Zoë Skoulding and Carol Watts), providing more opportunity for readers/listeners to engage with poetry as event, and offering a partial solution to the problem of trying to capture the full range of these poetries in text form alone. The second difference is that the 2015 anthology is notably heftier. At over a hundred pages longer, *Out of Everywhere 2* features forty-three poets in comparison with thirty selected in the first anthology. This is testimony to the increased volume of women writing in a linguistically innovative/experimental tradition. Particularly significant from the perspective of British poetry criticism is the increased proportion of UK poets represented: whereas in 1996 they were a minority, accounting for a fifth of the total poets (Paula Claire, Maggie O'Sullivan, Denise Riley, Wendy Mulford, Grace Lake, Geraldine Monk and Caroline Bergvall), they now total over a third of the poets selected in the follow-up. The introduction's account of poetic communities gestures towards some of the reasons for this. Where O'Sullivan's 1996 editorial cited the crucial contribution of many of the poets to small press publishing, magazines and journals (particularly in the US), Critchley points instead to a 'wave of confidence and camaraderie' facilitated by the internet, with the 'public-private slippages' it allows, 'the speed with which writers can link up with other writers, and writing, across the world; the ability to be in or out of everywhere or anywhere at the click of a button' (Critchley, p. 9). While the small presses clearly still play a crucial role, virtual communities, including online forums and an all-female British writers' listserv have been particularly important to women writing innovative poetry.

Both *Out of Everywhere 2* and *Women's Experimental Poetry in Britain 1970–2010* document a turning point in women's experimental poetry in Britain. In analysing a 'sea change in poetic practices this side of the Atlantic' (Critchley, p. 9), both publications draw on a 2007 *Jacket* forum on the recent history of the UK experimental poetry community in comparison to the US. Borrowing the title of this forum, Christine Kennedy and David Kennedy suggest that women poets are now starting to occupy 'post-marginal positions' (Kennedy and Kennedy, p. 6); the majority of the poets analysed in the later chapters of their critical study work in universities, are critics, publishers, and active in forums and conferences, something which 'mirrors a wider shift in the economics and socialities of the experimental writing scene as well as demonstrating significant changes in women's experience and opportunities' (Kennedy and Kennedy, p. 5). Similarly, Critchley foregrounds the cultural work around the poetry itself, the labour of 'reading, teaching, reviewing, organising' as crucial in bringing about recent changes (Critchley, p. 9). For Critchley, the 2007 forum, in which she talked about a 'dearth of women writing experimentally in Britain' (p. 9), is a touchstone showing just how much things have changed in less than a decade. The forum discussed how the UK poetry community lagged behind the US in its visibility and critical responses. Historically, experimental women poets in the UK, as both Brady and Monk point out, have not made the same contribution to poetry magazines and poetic programme as their US counterparts. Importantly, as Monk observes, this has something to do with the financial security of academic employment. The majority of the UK based poets in *Out of Everywhere 2* work within higher education, a factor which is helping to create 'something we have sadly lacked: a strong female tradition' (Monk quoted in Kennedy and Kennedy, p. 45).³

Less openly acknowledged is that institutionalisation may risk a narrowing of the scene's demographic. Both of these publications focus instead on affirming and contributing to the growing visibility of this tradition. Such a focus is understandable, given both the historic and contemporary contexts. Kennedy and Kennedy declare that their project is in part 'historically reclamative', an attempt to redress the balance

of power in the traditional 'hierarchy of attention' which has seen women poets in this field overlooked (Kennedy and Kennedy, p. 4). Their study shows how issues of reception can filter through to the poetry itself, as questions of what women can say, what it means to speak in public, to demand attention and create a discursive space for women form pertinent themes in much of the poetry the authors discuss. The introduction of *Out of Everywhere 2*, meanwhile, highlights that there is still much work to be done. Critchley points to misogyny in the current day 'alt lit' scenes on both sides of the Atlantic, alluding in particular to the 'cliquishness and vocal dominance of men' in these scenes, as discussed in more detail in the *Jacket* forum and in Carrie Etter's 2010 introduction to *Infinite Difference: Other Poetries by UK Women Poets*. Combined with the recent, extreme examples of on and offline misogyny in both the US 'alt lit' scene and the UK poetry listserv, the case for an all-female anthology remains strong.

Women's Experimental Poetry in Britain 1970–2010: Body, Time & Locale is an ideal study to read alongside the 1996 and the 2015 *Out of Everywhere* anthologies, spanning in equal measure the periods represented by both collections.⁴ The first third of the book focuses on contexts, outlining the main themes, and locating the study within existing discourses of 'the experimental' and critical histories of women's writing. The rest of the book turns to close studies of individuals or groups of poets, organised chronologically across eight chapters. The earlier poets, mainly of the first *Out of Everywhere* generation, receive the most sustained and lengthy close analyses, which also respond to the critical reception of each poet. Whole chapters are devoted to the works of Geraldine Monk, Denise Riley, and Maggie O'Sullivan, while Wendy Mulford is paired with Veronica Forrest-Thomson, setting the scene in terms of the lyric self, and posing questions of how women poets locate themselves in traditions of experimental writing. With the final third, the book changes pace as the authors group a greater number of poets together in each chapter. So Harriet Tarlo is considered along with other poets who draw on nature and landscape – Elizabeth Bletsoe and Helen Macdonald; Caroline Bergvall, Elizabeth James/Frances Presley and Redell Olsen are grouped in a chapter analysing the virtual spaces of poetry; and

the final two chapters bring together two lots of 'younger poets': Anna Mendelssohn (aka Grace Lake) is somewhat incongruously grouped with the younger poets, Emily Critchley and Sophie Robinson, and the closing chapter discusses Marianne Morris, Andrea Brady and Jennifer Cooke. The book's structure, with the increasingly broad focus of its chapters, implicitly reinforces the turning point argued for by the authors. While the readings of key poets from the seventies, eighties and nineties are measured, involved and respectful of the distinctness of each individual poet, the brisker readings of the last four chapters work to suggest a stronger sense of poetic community, and of poets sharing many preoccupations. These later chapters also have a greater sense of immediacy and it is here that the authors' excitement about the poetry experienced 'as readers and poets ourselves' is perhaps most evident (Kennedy and Kennedy, p. 16).

To some extent, Kennedy and Kennedy have set themselves a difficult task in bringing together significant examples from forty years of women's experimental poetry in Britain while remaining wary of 'making all experimental poets sound as if they are doing the same thing' (Kennedy and Kennedy, p. 41). This is a charge the authors level at prevailing critical approaches to experimental women's poetry, which, they argue, prioritise form and language to the extent that the poetries seem 'isolated from or not interested in, the energetic contestations of normativities of class, gender, nation, race and region', an approach which ultimately 'risks ignoring what women experimental poets in Britain are saying and talking about in their poetries' (Kennedy and Kennedy, p. 45). The authors position this book in opposition to readings that prioritise the meta-linguistic and meta-poetic aspects of the poetries; calling to mind Marjorie Perloff's comments in a review of the first *Out of Everywhere*, that 'technique is always and only technique'. What makes the poetry in the anthology so startling is, for Perloff, 'less the adoption of this or that technique than the exciting swerve away from the still ubiquitous realist/confessional mode [...] to the historical, the literary, and the mythological'.⁵ Rather than opposing dominant approaches to women's experimental poetry in isolation, it could be argued that through this important book length study, Kennedy and Kennedy in fact extend

and update a valuable line of critical reading of women's experimental poetry represented by Perloff, Linda Kinnahan and Clair Wills in the 1990s, and more recently by many of the critics who contributed to the *Salt Companion to Maggie O'Sullivan*. Such critics have shown how experimental poetry by women can articulate questions of power, marginalisation and 'the redrawing of the relationship between the public and private spheres' – subject matter which Kennedy and Kennedy argue is overlooked by a narrow critical focus on the materiality of language (Kennedy and Kennedy, p. 45).

Drawing on Kristeva, the 'body, time, locale' relationship referenced in the book's subheading is one of the major ways in which the authors distinguish their approach from existing discourses of women's poetry. Critics who have looked to Kristeva in their analysis of experimental poetry have too often 'been looking in the wrong place' (Kennedy and Kennedy, p. 46). Rather than using *La Revolution du Langage Poetique* to justify the radical credentials of experimental poetry, it is Kristeva's writings on women and time which are actually most productive, argue the authors, as these enable a 'clearer focus on temporality, temporariness and the relation of both to the public and private realms' (Kennedy and Kennedy, p. 46). What they identify in many of the examples of poetry in this book is a 'continual movement between inside and outside' which they interpret as a 'renegotiation of the relationship between body, time and locale' (Kennedy and Kennedy, p. 46). One aspect of this internal/external movement is the movement from feeling to affect, which the authors identify in several poetic examples in this study. The authors draw on a psychoanalytical understanding of feeling as a discharging of emotion (or reliving of past experiences), whereas affect refers to 'articulated desire' (Kennedy and Kennedy, p. 8). Feeling becomes affect or articulated desire with the realisation that it is not 'something personal that we possess' internally but something that is given to or produced in us by wider (external) cultural, economic, political and social forces, which produce the self as a social fiction (Kennedy and Kennedy, p. 8). The ways in which these temporal identities are experienced is a key preoccupation for several of the poetries considered here.

In this respect, opening the poetry chapters with Veronica Forrest-Thomson and the earlier work of Wendy Mulford sets the scene well. Both of these poets, along with Denise Riley in a later chapter, question and unpack the lyric self while refusing to abandon it (Kennedy and Kennedy, p. 52). Mulford is explicit in her commitment to a poetry of feeling, to working with 'the unreconstructed domain of the passions' (Kennedy and Kennedy, p. 65). Many of the poetries analysed by Kennedy and Kennedy suggest the continuing validity of interiority, of feeling, passion and emotion and seek ways of externalising and articulating this while avoiding the use of a traditional autobiographical 'I'. Such poetries might, for example, undermine this self through a process of 'voicing and unvoicing' (Kennedy and Kennedy, p. 14), in which one voice quickly gives way to another. In Riley's case, this breaks the lyric contract between the speaker and the listener and transforms the self into an event; a process the authors use a theory of hysteria to illuminate (Kennedy and Kennedy, p. 86). This 'voicing and unvoicing' becomes increasingly prevalent in the younger poets, particularly Jennifer Cooke, Andrea Brady and Sophie Robinson. But while for many of these poets, 'the lie of the self' (Kennedy and Kennedy, p. 7) as Mulford put it in the 1980s, may well be a given, they are still interested in communicating how that self experiences or is experienced. Critchley's reading of Morris' *Tutu Muse* cited by the authors, highlights the work's insistence that 'interiority remains meaningful', and that '[d]espite postmodernism's forceful marketing of the surface, the interiority of the individual life continues' (Kennedy and Kennedy, p. 160). The potential of a poetry of affect to articulate a kind of non-autobiographical interiority is alluded to in a sophisticated reading of Riley's 'Laibach Lyrik' in chapter six. Discussing Riley's envy for abstract expressionist artworks with their capacity to communicate immediacy, speed and gesture in a way that typography can never quite emulate, the authors suggest that for Riley, colour is used as orality. Furthermore the use of colour 'might be an articulation of the self that does not say "I" with all the egotism and vulnerability that involves' (Kennedy and Kennedy, p. 95). While it is not explored by the authors here, there is further scope for reading Riley's painterly poems for their affect – their attempts to articulate felt emotion and desire through wider cultural

and social allusions (for example through snippets such as song lyrics), but which skilfully do so in a way that avoids a personal or confessional mode of poetry.

The radical landscape poets analysed in chapter eight find a different way of (re) articulating the self. In Harriet Tarlo's work, the body is notably absent and the self is 'merely a perceptual registering of the environment' (Kennedy and Kennedy, p. 117), while in Elizabeth Beltsoe's reconceptions of Hardy's women, 'place speaks through self and thereby gives self a voice' (Kennedy and Kennedy, p. 121). But in the work of Olsen and again in the younger poets analysed in the last two chapters, there is a notable return to the idea of interiority made public through a preoccupation with affect. Olsen's *Secure Portable Space* engages with film in its creation of a virtual scene, and seems fascinated with the way the medium makes 'the inner life public through physical gesture', transmitting emotion and turning small movements 'into a powerfully eloquent public language' (Kennedy and Kennedy, p. 143), with which the authors find parallels with lyric poetry. In Morris' *Tutu Muse*, however, affect becomes something more disconcerting. Parts of the text mimic the reader's experience of media culture, and the use of cut-ups 'placed in brutal and casual juxtaposition' exemplifies a characteristic the authors identify not just in Morris' writing but in experimental writing more generally: language that 'seems to activate affective domains in ways that are often close to unbearable' (Kennedy and Kennedy, p. 163).

The notion that affect is political is developed in more detail in Kennedy and Kennedy's reading of Cooke, which acts as an unofficial conclusion to the book. The opening of Cooke's sequence *Steel Girded her Musical: In Several Parts* appears to describe the transition from feeling to affect, which in turn is a starting point for praxis (Kennedy and Kennedy, p. 169). The authors identify a shift in the focus of the sequence from 'the possible impossibility of revolution and the articulation of desire to politics and the workplace. Poetry – one of Bataille's "others" of the system – here registers what the system (global capitalism) does to bodies' (Kennedy and Kennedy, p. 173). In Cooke's poetry, as in Morris', there is a sense of despair as the speaker rails against her 'location in a global system of added value' (Kennedy and Kennedy, p. 173). Ending with a reading of Cooke strengthens the coherence of the book, as it

returns to the notion of what experimental poetry is and what it can hope to achieve, discussed also in chapter two. Here the authors bring together Joan Retallack's sense of 'expanded responsibility to other beings who we do not know and cannot see' with Nicky Marsh's analysis of experimental poetry producing 'alternative fantasies of connectivity' (however hubristic this might be), which acknowledge the individual's responsibility to global politics (Kennedy and Kennedy, p. 29). A real achievement of Kennedy and Kennedy's study is the way in which it successfully brings very detailed analyses of the poetries back to this notion of expanded responsibility, to consider how texts make us think differently about ourselves, our position in the world and our relationship to others. The authors make a convincing case that many of the poets in this book are 'asking and creating answers variously to the question of how to take an active and intelligent relationship to the suffering world' (Kennedy and Kennedy, p. 29). Monk and O'Sullivan are prime examples. Monk's *Interregnum* dealing with the Pendle witch trials of 1612 poses the question of how readers can relate to it socially and personally. But through the discomfiting experience of reading this poetry dealing with extremes of suffering, it manages to put us 'inside what it felt like to be one of the Pendle women' (Kennedy and Kennedy, p. 81), and offers the possibility of transformation through performative language. Meanwhile O'Sullivan's poetry finds ways of voicing the excluded. It frequently uses a language of trauma and suffering to articulate violent relationships between humans and the natural world, but it is also possible to detect an underlying belief in 'disorder as that which will heal us' (Kennedy and Kennedy, p. 114). The book's closing reading of Cooke is a cautiously hopeful one, gesturing towards the transformative potential of experimental poetry, by recognising the text's emphasis upon suffering and its 'yearning for a new collective "we" that could transform the individual and society' (Kennedy and Kennedy, p. 174).

The poets of *Out of Everywhere 2* and those considered in Kennedy and Kennedy's book are difficult to categorise – the breadth of preoccupations and practices present challenges in identifying coherent themes to their work. The reconfiguration of the relationship between body, time and locale is more applicable to some of the

readings (particularly those of Monk, Riley and Cooke) than others. Yet taken as more fluid categories, these areas, particularly the body and locale, provide useful ways in to the concerns of many of the poets. Whether through explorations of embodiment and the physical voice, the abject body or through locale understood as space: the visual, textual space of the page, domestic space, social space and the way the body inhabits these spaces, Kennedy and Kennedy manage to use these themes to draw together an impressive range of poetry from the last forty years. Always conscious of reading strategies, and of the type of work and psychological energy required of the reader, the book provides new readers with an important, nuanced and enthusiastic introduction to this diverse tradition. At the same time, it offers existing readers new ways of understanding and connecting these poets and reminds us of experimental writing's potential to transform consciousness and imagine new forms of collectivity. Ultimately both of these publications realise Critchley's aim to 'inspire readers to look further into this exciting field, to appreciate and be challenged by some of the most important writers of our time' (Critchley, p. 10).

Notes

- ¹ Maggie O'Sullivan, 'To the Reader' in O'Sullivan ed., *Out of Everywhere: Linguistically Innovative Poetry by Women in North America & the UK* (Hastings: Reality Street, 1996), pp. 9–10, p. 9.
- ² O'Sullivan, *Out of Everywhere*, p. 10.
- ³ According to the biographies, of the fifteen anthologised poets currently based in the UK, ten are University lecturers in English, Performance or Creative Writing. Twelve of the twenty-eight US and Canadian poets work in academia.
- ⁴ There are a handful of poets in this book who are not included in either of the *Out of Everywhere* anthologies: Veronica Forrest-Thomson, Harriet Tarlo, Elizabeth Bletsoe and Helen Macdonald. Their work has, however, featured in previous anthologies aligned with experimental/avant-garde traditions of British poetry: Forrest-Thomson in Allnut, G et al, eds., *The New British Poetry 1968–1988* (London: Paladin, 1988); Macdonald in Johnson, N., ed., *Foil: Defining Poetry 1985–2000* (Buckfastleigh: Etruscan, 2000); Tarlo and Bletsoe in Carrie Etter ed., *Infinite Difference: Other Poetries by UK Women Poets* (Exeter: Shearsman, 2010).
- ⁵ Perloff, Marjorie, 'The Coming Age of Language Poetry' in *Contemporary Literature*, 28 (Sep 1997), 558–68 <<http://marjorieperloff.com/reviews/osullivan-perelman/>> [accessed 9 December 2015].

Competing Interests

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

How to cite this article: Eltringham, D, Jenkins, H and Sheppard, V 2016 Book Reviews. *Journal of British and Irish Innovative Poetry*, 8(1): e1, pp. 1–24, DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.16995/biip.21>

Published: 24 May 2016

Copyright: © 2016 The Author(s). This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC-BY 4.0), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited. See <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>.



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

OPEN ACCESS 