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Editorial

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EDITORIAL

a place apart: Papers from the Edinburgh Symposium on the Poetry and Practice of Thomas A. Clark

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Thomas A. Clark is a poet and visual artist born in Greenock, Scotland, in 1944, and currently living in Pittenweem, Fife. With his wife and collaborator, illustrator Laurie Clark, he is the co-founder of Cairn Gallery (1976), amongst the first artist-run gallery spaces in Britain. They also co-founded Moschatel Press (1973), a small-print press run from their home in Nailsworth, Gloucestershire, and later from Pittenweem. In 2016, a symposium was held at the Scottish Poetry Library in Edinburgh to dedicate a day to new research on Clark. Additionally, there were readings of Clark's poetry, both in the poetry library and on Arthur's Seat. Clark appeared in conversation with artist David Bellingham, and in the evening read his work with poet Matthew Welton. This special issue of the *Journal of British and Irish Innovative Poetry* collects an edited transcript of Clark's conversation with Bellingham alongside new papers first presented at the symposium.

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Keywords: Thomas A. Clark; Innovative Poetry; Nature; Symposium; New Papers; Zen; Environmental Humanities

Thomas A. Clark is a poet and visual artist born in Greenock, Scotland, in 1944, and currently living in Pittenweem, Fife. With his wife and collaborator, illustrator Laurie Clark, he is the co-founder of Cairn Gallery (1976), amongst the first artist-run gallery spaces in Britain. They also co-founded Moschatel Press (1973), a small-print press run from their home in Nailsworth, Gloucestershire, and later from Pittenweem. In 2016, a symposium was held at the Scottish Poetry Library in Edinburgh to dedicate a day to new research on Clark. Additionally, there were readings of Clark's poetry, both in the poetry library and on Arthur's Seat. Clark appeared in conversation with

artist David Bellingham, and in the evening read his work with poet Matthew Welton. This special issue of the *Journal of British and Irish Innovative Poetry* collects an edited transcript of Clark's conversation with Bellingham alongside new papers first presented at the symposium.

This special issue significantly expands on the collected scholarship on Clark. The only other anthologised volume of criticism on Clark is Peter Dent's collection of essays *Candid Fields: Essays and Reflections on the Work of Thomas A. Clark*, which was published by Interim Press in 1987. Other than reviews, very little criticism was published during the 1990s and early 2000s, and certainly none which did the critical work of *Candid Fields*. An exception to this is a short work on Clark by Ken Cockburn in Graeme Murray's *Concerning Nature, Poem, The Infinite*.¹ Cockburn outlines Clark as a poet interested in 'the opening-out of new dimensions which the 'poetry' of certain visual artists attempts to achieve'.² Although he does not unpack this assertion, it is interesting that Cockburn addresses Clark's work as both poetic and artistic.

As a result of the intermedial nature of Clark's work, and an historic lack of criticism of small press publishing more generally, he is often overlooked in critical accounts of contemporary poetry. There are, however, a variety of circles in which Clark is well known. He has been commissioned to make permanent installation works in the Scottish Poetry Library, Harewood House in Leeds, and a number of hospitals and hospices, as well as commissions for exhibitions in Japan. Clark is recognised amongst fellow small presses: indeed, the Clarks and Moschatel Press are increasingly cited amongst newer small presses as an inspiration for their own practice.³ More recently, criticism on Clark has blossomed, with significant contributions from critics such as Ross Hair, whose essay 'Folding the Last Sheep' places Clark in relation to artist Samuel Palmer and depictions of sheep-pens in the pastoral tradition.⁴

Critic Tom Jones' chapter on Clark's use of phonemes in his book *Poetic Language: Theory and Practice from the Renaissance to the Present* is remarkable for its emphasis on the formal uses of language.⁵ Jones' is among the first works of criticism to take

Clark's formal innovation at the level of the phoneme seriously, highlighting particularly the means by which complex patterns of repetition are established and evolve through lines, stanzas and sequences of Clark's work. Additional recent criticism of note includes an article from critic Andrew Roberts that charts Clark's relationship with historical networks.⁶ Roberts proposes relations between Romantic self-knowledge and the visual, and between the visual and the natural world in Clark's work. Roberts also worked with Clark on the AHRC-funded 'Poetry Beyond Text' project, which gives context to Clark's work as a visual poet.⁷ Very recently, Neal Alexander wrote on Clark in his conference paper 'Poetry, Landscape, Affect'.⁸ Therein, Alexander explores the nuances that complicate understanding Clark simply as a walking poet:

[Whilst] Clark's poetry is profoundly peripatetic on a thematic or narrative level, its tonal qualities and delicate formal composition imply stasis and a sort of Zen-like calm.⁹

In terms of positioning Clark in an international context, good work has been done by Harriet Tarlo, who situates Clark in an 'eco-ethical' tradition that encompasses certain linguistically innovative UK poets, but which also takes inspiration from American poets such as Charles Olson and Lorine Niedecker.¹⁰

Because Clark has received comparatively little critical attention, many areas of his poetry have been overlooked, whilst others have been over-emphasised. His formal innovation, for example, has largely been considered secondary to his thematic investigations. This is perhaps understandable: the majority of Clark's reviews focus on his more widely circulated collections, printed by mainstream publishers. These traditional bound poetry collections display less formal innovation than works published through Moschatel Press, which are better able to display presentation as an aspect of form. These aspects of form, often under-represented, are given space in this issue.

What is clear from this brief introduction to the state of critical work on Clark is that this special issue, which focuses entirely on Clark's poetry and practice, is long overdue, and focuses on areas fertile for further critical inquiry.

This special issue contains two images, located in the interview between the two artists, which are, *some diagonal lines to brighten a designated space* [2015]. This work, in its original form, constitutes an orange folder containing two posters each painted with diagonal stripes, one blue, one yellow. The only text is the instructional title. Other instructional works, such as Sol LeWitt's 1971 *Work from Instructions*, inspired the title.¹¹

The title of Clark and Bellingham's collaboration mirrors LeWitt's language, adopting both the imperative and impersonal instruction. However, there are two counts on which Clark's collaboration with Bellingham is dissimilar from other conceptual artists' instructional works. Firstly, because it contains 'qualitative' language: the word 'brighten', which Clark argues 'no self-respecting minimalist would come up with'.¹² The use of the verb 'brighten' dictates what the effect of the artwork will be, rather than simply describing what it contains or how to create it. This moves the work away from a 'cool art', concerned with procedure, and into a poetry concerned with 'warmth and lyricism'.¹³ The second way in which the artwork differs is very simple: the artwork is not simply the instruction, but also a visual work. In its function as the cover of this special issue, the artwork assumes yet another iteration, as the frame for a critical examination of Clark's other works. It is a pleasure to have such a striking piece of art included in this issue, and its bright, birthday-paper stripes rightly set the tone for what is both an investigation into, and celebration of, Clark's work.

We were extremely pleased with the quality and variety of articles for this issue, and particularly the range of approaches used. There are articles from critics with backgrounds in poetry, philosophical theology, linguistics and literary criticism. The contributions range from meditations on attention in Clark's work to discussions of visuality, via the primacy of the page and the stanza as units of measurement.

Simone Kotva's article, 'Attention: Thomas A. Clark and Simone Weil', focuses on the relationship between Simone Weil's writings on attention and Clark's formally innovative attempts to perform that attention through his work. Kotva describes how in the 1990s Clark read and responded to the work of Simone Weil, a philosopher

and mystic whose work focuses extensively on the redemptive quality of attention. Kotva traces this relationship through Clark's works, exploring the similarities in style and ideas between Weil and Clark, and identifies moments where attention and redemption are explicit in his work.

Tom Jones' article, 'a common idiom...call it a place' combines what Jones refers to as 'commonplace' conceptions about Clark's work with an exploration of the work's linguistic underpinnings. Jones discusses how Clark's work operates from a series of units, for example the page and the book as units of expression, and that the way these units are ordered and encountered is of vital importance to how the work is experienced. Moreover, Jones claims that the experience of the page and book stand in some relationship to experience of place or environment. He builds on these statements by adding a third foundational idea of his own, arguing that language and environment can both be understood as systems, and that Clark's work makes links between them which inform and enrich the experiences of both. Looking particularly at Clark's early found poetry, Jones focuses on a particularly under-researched aspect of Clark's oeuvre. Indeed, this focus lets him argue that whilst Clark has often been received as a primarily visual poet, it is, in fact, organisational systems of language that have primacy in his works. This is a bold claim which overturns a tendency to situate Clark's works primarily in relation to visual art.

Andrew Roberts' article, 'Time, Attention and the Gift in the Work of Thomas A. Clark', focuses on the way Clark's works resist attention being treated as quantifiable and commodifiable. Roberts explores attention in relation to Clark's work and Deleuze's philosophical writings on time, via the Bergsonian *durée*. Roberts examines repetitions of the words 'delay' and 'waiting' in Clark's work, and examines the formal and thematic complexities that these bring, and the ways in which they combat ideas of attention in relation to the constant onward flow of time. Central to this is the idea of the gift, which constantly resurfaces in Clark's work. For Roberts, Clark's work attempts to remove poetic language from the economy of general linguistic exchange and instead circulate it as part of the economy of the gift. In this latter economy, the poetic utterance is received by the reader without any requirement to

speak back, or repay the utterance. The article, taken together with Kotva's, offers a deep examination of the theme of attention in Clark's work.

The interview between David Bellingham and Clark is a particular highlight of the special issue. Both generous speakers, Bellingham and Clark have a history of collaboration and conversation, which allows the interview to move elegantly from one topic to another, jumping through eras and influences. Of particular interest is Clark's assessment of his relationship with the visual arts, and also with the poet Ian Hamilton Finlay. Bellingham's visual art practice informs the thrust of the conversation, and allows Clark's intermedial practice to be expertly explored from a visual arts perspective. This interview enriches the slim canon of extant interviews with Clark. The most recent of these was an interview in *PN Review*, which I conducted.¹⁴ Other interviews have been notably conducted by Glyn Pursglove, in 1977, and David Herd, in 1993.¹⁵ This interview, then, forms a vital source of information on Clark's poetry and practice, and we were delighted that it took place at the symposium.

Thanks should be extended to all of those whose work enriched the symposium and informed this special issue. Amongst those not otherwise mentioned above are Julie Johnstone, Iain Morrison, Lila Matsumoto, Matthew Welton, Peter Amooore, the staff of the Scottish Poetry Library, Scott Thurston and the editorial team of the *Journal of British and Irish Innovative Poetry*.

Notes

- ¹ *Concerning Nature, Poem, The Infinite: Poiesis: Aspects of Contemporary Poetic Activity*, ed. Graeme Murray (Edinburgh: Fruitmarket, 1992) [n.p.].
- ² Ken Cockburn in *ibid.*, [n.p.].
- ³ Joseph Burnett and Richard Skelton, 'Nature Eclipses Culture: An Interview With Richard Skelton', <<http://thequietus.com/articles/14717-richard-skelton-interview-ar>> [Accessed 01.08.2016].
- ⁴ Ross Hair, *Folding the Last Sheep* (Pittenweem: Moschatel, 2016).
- ⁵ Tom Jones, *Poetic Language: Theory and Practice from the Renaissance to the Present* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012).
- ⁶ Andrew Roberts, 'The Visual Self in Contemporary Poetry' in *Romanticism and Victorianism on the Net*, August 2008, <<http://id.erudit.org/iderudit/019263>> [Accessed 01.08.2016].
- ⁷ *Poetry Beyond Text* ed. by Andrew Roberts and Anna Schaffner, <<http://www.poetrybeyondtext.org/research-questions.html>> [Accessed 01.08.2016].
- ⁸ Neal Alexander, 'Poetry, landscape, affect: senses of place' (unpublished conference paper, University of Derby, 2012) [n.p.].
- ⁹ Neal Alexander, *ibid.*, [n.p.].

- ¹⁰ Harriet Tarlo, 'Radical Landscapes: experiment and environment in contemporary poetry' in *Jacket* 32 (2007) <<http://jacketmagazine.com/32/p-tarlo.shtml>> [Accessed 24.07.2017.] [n.p].
- ¹¹ Clark cites as inspiration: Sol LeWitt, *Work from Instructions, (1971)* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1971) <<https://www.moma.org/collection/works/70137?locale=en>> [Accessed 18.10.2016].
- ¹² Interview, Oct. 2016. Included in this special issue.
- ¹³ Ibid.
- ¹⁴ Alice Tarbuck and Thomas A. Clark, 'In, Among, with and From: Alice Tarbuck talks to Thomas A. Clark' in *PN Review* 229, Vol. 42 No. 5, May–June 2016, pp. 47–51. <http://www.pnreview.co.uk/cgi-bin/subscribe?item_id=9634> [Accessed 01.08.2016].
- ¹⁵ Glyn Pursglove and Thomas A. Clark, 'Interview with Thomas A. Clark', *Poetry Information*, No.18 (Winter–Spring 1977–78) pp. 12–20; David Herd and Thomas A. Clark, 'Making Spaces: An Interview With Thomas A. Clark' in *Oxford Poetry* Vol. VIII.3, 1993, <http://www.oxfordpoetry.co.uk/interviews.php?int=viii3_thomasaclark> [n.p.] [Accessed 01.08.2016].

Competing Interests

Alice Tarbuck organised the 2016 Thomas A. Clark symposium at the Scottish Poetry Library as part of her doctoral research. Additionally, she was supervised by Professor Andrew Roberts at the University of Dundee.

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