

Vanishing Points

NEW MODERNIST POEMS

ROD MENGHAM is Reader in Modern English Literature at Cambridge, where he is also Curator of Works of Art at Jesus College. He is the author of books on Charles Dickens, Emily Brontë and Henry Green, as well as of *The Descent of Language* (1993). He has edited collections of essays on contemporary fiction, violence and avant-garde art, and the fiction of the 1940s. He has written on art for various magazines and composes the catalogues for the biennial 'Sculpture in the Close' exhibition, at Jesus College, Cambridge. He is also the editor of the *Equipage* series of poetry pamphlets; his own poems have been published under the title *Unsung: New and Selected Poems* (Folio/Salt, 1996; 2nd edition 2001).

JOHN KINSELLA is the author of over twenty books, including *The Hunt* (Bloodaxe/FACP, 1998), *The Hierarchy of Sheep* (Bloodaxe/FACP, 2000/2001), *Auto* (Salt, 2000) and *Peripheral Light: Selected and New Poems* (W. W. Norton, 2003). He is editor of the international literary journal *Salt*, consultant editor of *Westerly*, Cambridge correspondent for *Overland*, and international editor of the American journal *The Kenyon Review*. He is a Fellow of Churchill College, Cambridge University, Adjunct Professor to Edith Cowan University and Professor of English at Kenyon College.

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NEW MODERNIST POEMS

Edited by

ROD MENGHAM & JOHN KINSELLA



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PREFACE

It could be argued that the lyric in poetry is a *fait accompli*, that it is generic across languages and cultures. If musicality and the register of song inform the line of poetry, or are worked against, then the lyric becomes a truism. But the lyric is more than that. It's a political registration as well, a declaration of relationship between self and text, self and the empirical "outside". It declares an intentionality in appearance, in its desire for continuation.

Typically, a poem gives the reader or listener something to take away from the text—an emotional gravitas, whimsical joy, intellectual or spiritual connection or awakening. These expectations have been challenged and undermined overtly through the stages of Modernism, but such challenges are the proto-typical concern of the poet regardless of age or context: that is, the relationship between the originating words and word strings, and their intended audience. The ceremonial chant, the private utterance scribbled on a prison wall, the paternalisms of a society's laureate: it's a question of where the packages of word, or words, disseminate, take on lives of their own through the context of each individual or group encounter with the moment of utterance.

In a sense, the lyric is lost in the moment of realisation: it is that engagement with "self" and articulation, the many possible engagements of the lyrical "I" with signifier and signified. Modernism in poetry maps this frustration of self-expression. The ownership of certainty of observation—that what the poet sees and conveys to those other than him or herself is a constant—has been placed under pressure and found wanting. Social and cultural upheaval on an unprecedented scale, the destruction of natural "resources" (the word itself is a large part of the problem), and death by mechanisation have led to obvious shifts in notions of what constitutes the "I", or rather, what

the “I” can validly express outside its own constructed empiricisms. This is, of course, a “culturo-centric” observation.

Context does matter. Someone writing a poem in a luxury apartment in a great city at the centre of a military empire does create a different intentionality from the singer composing with community members, expressing the group’s marginalisation, loss, and defiance. The expression “avant-garde” is military in origin, be it from Napoleon’s shock troops or dredged out of Mallory. The modernist avant-garde, and the avant-gardes that have emerged out of modernities, have worked to challenge a status quo, or to assert their differences in perception. A more just way of expressing, or expression comes into play. It’s to do with “seeing”, and conveying the politics of that seeing. The relationship between the poet and the tools of expression, and the tensions between experience and expression, are highlighted. Language is of the user, but the user is also a product of language. This paradox informs the desire to make of poetry a weapon to challenge a “false” or “deceptive” status quo. Be it the Dadaists after the First World War, or the play-ploys of Gertrude Stein, or the post-Vietnam War and Watergate eruption of Language poetry, or the smouldering rejectionism of the “Cambridge School”, or the guerrilla de-hybridisations of Murri poet Lionel Fogarty. There is iconoclastic intent in each expression, and language is the weapon.

It could be argued, however, that the lyric has always been the vehicle for such expression, and the “form” itself—in its paradoxical combination of the universal and the centring of self—evolved as the most effective linguistic-musical vehicle for such expression of opposition. This anthology is an example of how diverse not only conceptualisations of the lyric are, but how malleable its co-ordinates can become. Each poet here is conscious of the implications of a text that might imprint itself on memory, the effects of the mnemonic, and the lyric’s power of subliminal expression. Rather than see aggressive intentionality, one might equally see a responsibility and concern about the effect the lyric has once it leaves the space of composition. That words “change”, that meaning alters according to context, are variable factors that ironically liberate rather than restrain the poem.

In the 1980s it was not unusual within European-language poetry communities to talk of the death of the lyric—especially within linguistically innovative circles of English-language poets. Maybe what

was observed, or intended, was a rejection of the exclusiveness of the self, that the poem could exist in a bubble, “ignorant” of political responsibility. Of course, poetry was never so easy, whatever form it took, but the need to express such concerns—and to test these concerns within the structure of the poem itself—was strongly felt. In recent years, there’s been talk of new lyricism, post-lyricism, and the gamut of groupings that comes with a need to reconcile past with present poeticising. There has been a sense of the meta-textual, but this is not necessarily a new thing. Thomas Stanley, “Lesser Caroline” poet, was a great translator. Most of his own compositions still show traces of those poets he translated. He brought Italian, French, and Greek conventions to play within his strictly formal English verse. He replayed popular conceits in new frameworks. He was an intellect; he was a meta-textual poet. The contemporary English-language innovative lyric captures some of this—text and sound to be received on a mnemonic level, but also need to be processed and thought about. Reading and listening should be work as well as reception.

Each of the poets in this anthology challenges us to think about how the lyric works, and whether it is a relevant literary concept in whatever environment/spatiality we experience it in. The power of the word itself, of the line, of the packaging and distribution of those lines, is in play. The lyric has never been the prisoner of convention that some would have us think—metrical consistency in English, or the conventions of the French syllabics (for example, with the alexandrine, placement of caesura, alternating rhymes, and so on) have always been displaced or eroded without the loss of lyrical effect. The metrically variable lyrics of Sidney through to the resonant paratactics of Prynne, have in no way impaired the singing of the language. Rather, they have developed sophisticated layerings of political possibility.

This is not a “school” of poets, but a grouping of unique voices. Some speak more directly to us than others, but the sheer power of the lyrical template must bring our certainties into question.

JOHN KINSELLA

INTRODUCTION

The vanishing point lies beyond the horizon established by ruling conventions, it is where the imagination takes over from the understanding. Most anthologies of contemporary verse are filled with poems that do not cross that dividing-line, but our contention is that many poems in this volume are situated on the threshold of conventional sense-making. They go beyond the perspective of accepted canons of taste and judgement and ask questions about where they belong, and who they are meant for, often combining the pathos of estrangement with the irascibility of the refusenik.

Stephen Rodefer's poem 'Brief to Butterick' (included here) encapsulates the position; it is simultaneously an elegy for a dead friend, a lament for the neglect of his poetry, and a diatribe against the editors of the Norton anthology who have excluded Oppen, Riding (and Butterick) from their selection. Rodefer's poem is a kind of counter-anthology, since it quotes several lines by Butterick and places them alongside allusions to Auden and Shakespeare. This editorial activity, which relates both the subject and the poet himself to a tradition of writing and to certain principles of recognition, memorialises both of them far more effectively than the offer of walk-on parts in the Norton anthology could ever have done.

All anthologies enter the world fully aware of their genealogy, of where they fit in, of how they relate to certain traditions of writing by affiliation or rejection. This combination of dependent and independent gestures is inevitable, particularly in the case of selections of work aligned with national or regional versions of literary history. The present anthology does not fall into that category; its international reach does not, however, bring exemption from the dilemma of wanting to stand apart from conditions of rivalry while also needing to claim a special value in comparison with publications already available.

The means by which an international anthology might take up its position are simultaneously more elusive in one way and more decisive in another. Insofar as its relationship to national traditions of practice and debate has been relaxed, to the same degree the requirement to identify alternative criteria of selection and association is more insistent. Our subtitle proposes elements of continuity with an historically identifiable form of international writing that sets at a premium experiments with form and language. One thing our selection does is to reflect the extent to which the community of experimental poets is now, at the beginning of the twenty first century, genuinely international in its scope and in the directness of its interactions. Since the mid-1960s, the poetic avant-gardes of several English language-speaking countries have depended on communication with like-minded groups in other countries far more than with the mainstream writers they are geographically lumped together with. The writers in this anthology have been part of a process of exchanging ideas manifested in little magazines, in the publishing programmes of small presses, and in the sheer volume of email and internet transactions. Contemporary innovative poetry of the kind selected here is genuinely and profoundly international in character.

Most (arguably all) of the writers in this volume represent a strand in recent poetry that has stayed in touch with the agendas of modernism; they are not postmodernist, but late modernist writers. Each writer has a definable project, her or his work refers to a body of concepts even if the literary method employed appears to be non-referential; each has maintained a significant degree of contact with the speaking voice, even when the manner in which the speaking voice has dominated the history of literature in English is challenged and complicated; all are concerned with working in or against the grain of the literary forms and genres that have evolved in the course of that same history.

This is not an anthology of 'language' writing. The roster of names includes senior figures whose careers began prior to the launch of 'Language' magazine and its attendant, postmodernist ideology. It also includes the names of poets associated with 'Language' whose work has developed in quite independent directions over the last two decades; and the range of styles represented here includes the work of younger writers who regard their poetry as subsequent and alternative

to the example set by 'Language'. What binds together their various kinds of innovative practice is a strong insistence on finding ways of continuing and renewing the lyric impulse in poetry in English. What is equally important is a commitment to work that examines the political scope of poetry, that questions the grounds of spokespersonship in a world that is simultaneously global and local, that takes seriously, has ambitions for, the social responsibility of poetry and its relationship to other, culturally powerful discourses; poetry that critiques, and is unashamedly antithetical to, the discourses of power.

All anthologists stake out their territory by an appeal to large intellectual and cultural ambitions realized through the agency of a medium that often seems untranslatable into such terms. The big, sweeping claims can be seriously embarrassed by the resort to individual poems whose main purpose is to work with language in ways that are incommensurate with other forms of knowledge. We risk the claims, nevertheless, trusting our judgements about a body of work that brings together a diversity of ways in which poetry constitutes itself as antagonism, as the ideally situated forum for confrontations between public and private meaning, between individual rights and ideas of the common good, between song and jargon, testimony and cliché, the somatic and the civic. The vanishing point is where these tensions are poised, creatively unresolved, somewhere off the map of conventional half-measures that so many anthologies have inured us to.

ROD MENGHAM

1 JOHN ASHBERY

All Messages Have Been Played

A chance encounter—he'd
dropped a stitch somewhere along the way
to a palimpsest. Put it all there
and then wonder why it was done?

You don't need to die there.
A freshet is ever restless,
the stars coming undone in a way
thought to be magic before there was magic,

dim process of stars.
It seems to have gone back
to doing what it was doing all along.
Maybe we'll enjoy these together.

There were more of us
then, when we seemed so few.
This plenteous space confined us—
an afternoon of succulents, hens and chicks,

the rusted roadster. The waterfall is the window.
You can see through it. Still more of us.
Have her meet you at the party for the residents.
But the poetry—how do you handle it?

A Holding Mode

Out of a pure blue sky, on East River dusk,
memories of misbehavior soldier on,
still fresh in their minds.

Because the night didn't favor it
I did advise these to leave me.
Nothing more was said for several months.
Then, like a bee one has to swat,
it was August again.

Just so far could he go.
She didn't seem to defer to his
idea of tacit cooperation.
It was a compliment or a complement.

The huge pallor is shouldered
like an opera cape; gloves are clasped
in an incidentally waiting hand.
Should we stay? Would there,
in any case, be time to see more,
see further? When the government orders
every fourth bayonet seized, do we strip naked,
or is a holding mode indicated?

Franchises in Flux

Another chambered nautilus bequeathed me
this other portent, the new present,
and I am glad now,
fuzzy, even.

That you got off at your stop
makes it correct. As for my behavior,
who knows? Tangoing in from thither
Texas, could you add a name to the scroll?

We foregathered in the scrub forest on the bluff
the loudspeakers reached. "And who is to say
who says it? You must promise to leave your regrets
among the chaff and shucks. That way,
they'll never haunt you."

Back in the city square it seems as though
the quiet had never been dispersed.
Panhandlers and cheerleaders pass as in a daze.
Only hitchhikers seem alert

to the favors God distributes to His guests.
Some, if not all, are sleeping,
planning to make amends when they waken
at a time convenient to both parties.

If you hadn't liked these, why
take them away to Tartarus, where approving
moms will never see them, dab
at a tear with folded hanky?

And on the tenth step, turn and pretend to waver.
Pigeons are alive and wheeling. It's not spring,
it's winter, but tropical clouds damp
down the horizon. In the spirit of lifting, march.

Nut Castle

Somehow the intentness of the whole
moment of watching takes hold
and is obsolete.

A sneering star lit up the casual
abstracted look of the place.

There's no dodging the confederacy once it consents
to call itself that.

Until then there's the turbulent exit to write about
and—yes—perhaps think:

oiled portraits backing up for miles,
a meadow, past its prime and still virgin.

Interesting People of Newfoundland

Newfoundland is, or was, full of interesting people. Like Larry, who would make a fool of himself on street corners for a nickel. There was the Russian who called himself the Grand Duke, and who was said to be a real duke from somewhere, and the woman who frequently accompanied him on his rounds. Doc Hanks, the sawbones, was a real good surgeon when he wasn't completely drunk, which was most of the time. When only half drunk he could perform decent cranial surgery. There was the blind man who never said anything but produced spectral sounds on a musical saw.

There was Walsh's, with its fancy grocery department. What a treat when Mother or Father would take us down there, skidding over slippery snow and ice, to be rewarded with a rare fig from somewhere. They had teas from every country you could imagine and hard little cakes from Scotland, rare sherries and Madeiras to reward the aunts and uncles who came dancing. On summer evenings in the eternal light it was a joy just to be there and think. We took long rides into the countryside, but were always stopped by some bog or other. Then it was time to return home, which was OK with everybody, each of them having discovered he or she could use a little shuteye.

In short there was a higher per capita percentage of interesting people there than almost anywhere on earth, but the population was small, which meant not too many interesting people. But for all that we loved each other and had interesting times picking each other's brain and drying nets on the wooden docks. Always some more of us would come along. It is in the place in the world in complete beauty, as none can gainsay, I declare, and strong frontiers to collide with. Worship of the chthonic powers may well happen there but is seldom in evidence. We loved that too, as we were a part of all that happened there, the evil and the good

and all the shades in between, happy to pipe up at roll call or compete in the spelling bees. It was too much of a good thing but at least it's over now. They are making a pageant out of it, one of them told me. It's coming to a theater near you.

Meaningful Love

What the bad news was
became apparent too late
for us to do anything good about it.

I was offered no urgent dreaming,
didn't need a name or anything.
Everything was taken care of.

In the medium-size city of my awareness
voles are building colossi.
The blue room is over there.

He put out no feelers.
The day was all as one to him.
Some days he never leaves his room
and those are the best days,
by far.

There were morose gardens farther down the slope,
anthills that looked like they belonged there.
The sausages were undercooked,
the wine too cold, the bread molten.
Who said to bring sweaters?
The climate's not that dependable.

The Atlantic crawled slowly to the left
pinning a message on the unbound golden hair of sleeping
 maidens,
a ruse for next time,
where fire and water are rampant in the streets,
the gate closed—no visitors today
or any evident heartbeat.

I got rid of the book of fairy tales,
pawned my old car, bought a ticket to the funhouse,
found myself back here at six o'clock,
pondering "possible side effects."

There was no harm in loving then,
no certain good either. But love was loving servants
or bosses. No straight road issuing from it.
Leaves around the door are pencilled losses.
Twenty years to fix it.
Asters bloom one way or another.

Wolf Ridge

Attention, shoppers. From within the inverted commas of a strambotto, seditious whispering watermarks this time of day. Time to get out and, as they say, about. Becalmed on a sea of inner stress, sheltered from cold northern breezes, idly we groove: Must have been the time before this, when we all moved in schools, a finny tribe, and this way and that the caucus raised its din: punctuation and quips, an “environment” like a lovely shed. My own plastic sturgeon warned me away from knowing. Now look at the damage. You can’t. It’s invisible. Anyway, you spent his love, swallowed everything with his knives, a necessary unpleasantness viewed from the rumble seat of what was roaring ahead.

I want to change all that.
We came here with a mandate of sorts, anyway a clear conscience. Attrition and court costs brought you last year’s ten best. Now it’s firm and not a bit transparent. Everybody got lost playing hide and seek, except you, who were alone. Not a bad way to end the evening, whistling. They wanted a bad dinner, and at this time a bad dinner was late. Meatloaf, you remembered, is the third vegetable.

The Template

was always there, its existence seldom questioned or suspected. The poets of the future would avoid it, as we had. An imaginary railing disappeared into the forest. It was here that the old gang used to gather and swap stories. It was like the Amazon, but on a much smaller scale.

Afterwards, when some of us swept out into the world and could make comparisons, the fuss seemed justified. No two poets ever agreed on anything, and that amused us. It seemed good, the clogged darkness that came every day.