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An Introduction

This introduction aspires to be a brief but accurate guide to the development of poetry in the UK over the last fifty years or so as it informs the work of the four poets collected in this issue of *Chicago Review*. Though this is almost certainly the first opportunity for the journal's readers to engage with the often startling and unfamiliar work of these poets, we want to avoid offering the kind of reassuring exposition that would seriously blunt the impact of poetry that is designed to confront and unsettle. The poems do not deserve to be smothered in coyness or slick generalization from the outset, so here we aim merely to provide a narrative that eventually but not of necessity leads to them, and to issue a handful of coordinates with which to navigate their very different approaches to the art. The best guides to reading the poetry are undoubtedly the poems themselves, in the seductions and resistances they set up for each reader.

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After the Second World War, the experimental arts in Britain were shrunk, or shrunk themselves, to a more-or-less invisible fringe, thanks in part to a readiness to identify linguistic experimentation with the varieties of political extremism which had been waging war in Europe and elsewhere. The poetry ascendant in the early 1950s had vestigial roots in the most mundane elements of Auden's and Eliot's modernism, which were combined with the disenchantment and sentimental stoicism of pre-modernists like Arnold and Hardy. This "new" tendency in poetry was not, therefore, conceptualized as an advance on modernism but as a deliverance from it, a restoration of values that Pound and his affiliates were seen as having scorned: lucidity, mildness, accessibility, etc. Since poets usually identified with late-modernist propensities—such as W.S. Graham, Gael Turnbull, and Peter Riley—have written important work that embodies just these values, one is forced to conclude that it is the professional appropria-

tion of these values (along with a reflex antagonism to modernist difficulty) that has constituted what many take to be the mainstream tradition in British poetry.

While it was presumably easy enough at the time to develop a distaste for the work of the Movement poets (Philip Larkin, Kingsley Amis, D.J. Enright, et al.), it seems to have been difficult to find viable alternative modes of composition. Turnbull and Charles Tomlinson are transitional figures, poets ahead of their time in terms of their awareness of advances being made in post-war American poetry. (Turnbull's transatlantic Migrant Press published Robert Creeley in 1957.) But it wasn't until the early sixties that such major figures as Tom Raworth, J.H. Prynne, and Tom Leonard made contact with the work of American poets such as Olson, Oppen, Creeley, Dorn, O'Hara, and Blackburn, and developed a poetic language that incorporated expressive intensities and economies of information well outside the range of popular verse in Britain at the time. Although the Beats had made a substantial impact on popular culture in Britain by the mid-sixties, it was the legacy of Black Mountain College, as well as an idiosyncratic take on the New York School, that proved the decisive influence on British poets working outside the mainstream.

Donald Davie, as poet, critic, and presence in Cambridge, is another crucial figure, both in the crystallization of the Movement *and* in the avant-gardist dispensations that the Movement abhorred. The author of *Purity of Diction in English Verse* taught Prynne at Cambridge and later, at the recently-created University of Essex, was instrumental in creating space for scenes that included Raworth, Dorn, Douglas Oliver, and Andrew Crozier. The networks that developed from these relationships led to the creation of small presses and little magazines to publish and distribute the latest work of the emerging poets.

It was just this kind of venture that resulted in *The English Intelligencer*, a mimeographed bulletin circulated between 1965 and 1968. The *Intelligencer* aimed at making available new poems, commentary, and letters by a dedicated band of contributors, including Crozier, Riley, Prynne, Turnbull, John Temple, John James, Barry MacSweeney, and Lee Harwood. In 1967 many of these poets, along with Tom Pickard, Tim Longville, Pete Armstrong, and John Hall, met at MacSweeney's house in Sparty Lea, a fairly remote hamlet in

the north-east of England. Gathering to write and read and discuss the potential for new kinds of poetry, they looked toward the most recent work of their American correspondents, as well as maverick presences from the English tradition (Blake, Chatterton) and a sanctioned handful of European modernists (Rimbaud, Trakl, Celan). The short experiment in supposedly peaceful composition and conversation resulted, like *The English Intelligencer* project itself, in mild acrimony as well as some intense new investigative relationships. (The event has become somewhat mythologized since, principally by some exaggerated claims made in interviews by MacSweeney, who died in 2001.) Whatever happened at Sparty Lea, it's difficult to appreciate from this distance how such enterprises, with their ideal of widespread and open engagement informed by Olson's Figure of Outward, could lead to the widely-promulgated apparition of a Cambridge School of poetry associated with elitism and self-serving obscurantism, but that appears to be just what happened.

The existence of a so-called Cambridge School of poets (or poetry) is one of the most contentious and misleading notions that dog the reception of advanced poetry in Britain. The label predates the arrival on the scene of all of the poets included in this volume, but since three of the four poets featured studied at the University of Cambridge, and the one poet who did not study there, Peter Manson, has a number of connections with those who did and was employed as Judith E. Wilson Poetry Fellow there between 2005 and 2006, it is important to spell out exactly what is at stake in the notion of a Cambridge School.

Though informal networks have existed and continue to exist among some practitioners in the vicinity of the University, the principal function of the Cambridge School label is as a useful target attracting mostly hostile feeling and comment by poets and critics working in the mainstream. The label is held to stand for a deliberately inaccessible mode of writing, engorged with critical theory, often held to be "only about language itself" and written purely for the delectation of a smug coterie of reclusive adepts. This second-order gossip, though ill-informed and aimed at nothing that exists, has been persistent enough to obtain a half-life in the media whenever a "State of British Poetry" article is written in a broadsheet newspaper.

J.H. Prynne's presence as a poet and teacher at Cambridge since his appointment as a Fellow of Caius College around 1964 has trans-

formed the territory of British poetry. A common sense of the motives animating his life-work is, however, only now beginning to take shape thanks to critical work of Simon Jarvis, Kevin Nolan, and Keston Sutherland. Prynne's refusal to follow the standard career rut of the professional senior poet, by not giving interviews to critics and not giving public readings in the UK, has probably contributed indirectly to the idea of a hermetic and reclusive Cambridge School with him as its absent center. In practice, however, he is an active correspondent and participant in a range of activities devoted to establishing the importance of poetry and critical thought wherever it is pursued. His work, along with Raworth's—with its speed, wit, and utter lack of self-regard—has indelibly affected the poetry in these pages. If we add the name of the late Bob Cobbing, a sound poet based in London whose performances and workshops were important for Peter Manson and Chris Goode, we form an unholy triumvirate who are the most senior precedents for the four poets collected here.

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It is our contention that exactly the kinds of affiliation that spring up and are dissolved among the poets in this issue are made and dissolved elsewhere and, in fact, are the kind of relations formed between poets anywhere and everywhere else. The four selected for this issue form important parts of other overlapping sets that include peers such as Tim Atkins, Sean Bonney, Stuart Calton, Miles Champion, Jeff Hilson, Elizabeth James, Tom Jones, Helen Macdonald, Marianne Morris, Tim Morris, and Neil Pattison, all of whom have written notable work.

The most recent and concerted attempt to establish an affiliating venture has centered around Andrea Brady and Keston Sutherland's Barque Press, Sutherland's *Quid* magazine, and a host of curatorial initiatives, involving readings, conferences, seminars, and web-based presences such as Brady's *Archive of the Now*. These efforts began when Brady and Sutherland were resident in Cambridge; they continue to this day. The immediate precursors for their activities include the journal *Equofinality* edited by Rod Mengham and John Wilkinson, Drew Milne's *Parataxis,* and Mengham's Equipage press. The forms these real and virtual assemblies take are various but center on relations of friendship, generosity, and hospitality as much as they do on shared aesthetic commitments.

The difficulties this poetry poses for readers are potentially daunting. Complex hierarchies of syntactical dependence have to be followed and retraced, highly condensed and thoroughly dislocated references to the social world and its myriad discursive fields have to be followed up—and all the while readers' efforts are sabotaged by bathetic collapses, pratfalls, and aggression. It is the sort of poetry that seems to require introduction. And yet the quickness of prosody and critique refutes in advance the sure-footed preface that would measure up each poet and sing a dirge to finalize their interment. We cannot circumscribe this work, principally because its most fundamental concerns circumscribe us: who am "I," who are "we," how am "I" made and, in that making, who suffers as a result?

The work of the four poets in this issue is among the most advanced and resourceful currently available for investigating the ramifications of these questions—the truth that our identities, as we crouch over a laptop or eat a clementine on the subway, are dependent for their making and sustenance on the catastrophic exploitation of the unfortunate inhabitants of other places. This is one reason for the poets' concern with consumption in all of its forms, and especially the co-implication of digestive, commercial, military, and information economies. The apparently delinquent manipulation of the word-surface here is emphatically not a celebration of the freedom to do anything one wants with language, and there is no sense that such a freedom would count, or could be taken, as significantly liberating in the wider world, a fact which immediately sets this work apart from the polemics associated with Language writing.

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The diversity of Peter Manson's influences and interests is primarily down to his own intellectual curiosity, though it was also affected by his poetic development in Glasgow in the late 1980s and early 1990s. At a time when Scottish culture in general appeared to be insular and most poetry seemed focused on notions of Scottishness, Manson engaged in a unique and solitary practice informed by data that could only be received piecemeal in the absence of the internet. An engagement with a copy of Zukofsky's *"A"*, donated to Glasgow University library by the Scottish poet Edwin Morgan, led Manson to interrogate

and translate the Italian and Provençal *canzoni*. The work of fellow Glaswegian poet Tom Leonard taught Manson to pay systematic attention to the phonology of his own accent. Other important influences include Cobbing, whose Writers Forum imprint published Manson's first two books, and Mallarmé, whose work Manson has translated in his book *Before and After Mallarmé*. In late 1993, he started a poetry magazine (with Robin Purves) called *Object Permanence*, which ran for eight issues and is now a small press. And in 2004, he published what is probably his most celebrated work: *Adjunct: An Undigest*, a prose book fashioned from a hilarious combination of found linguistic detritus and original notations.

Andrea Brady was born in Philadelphia and educated at Columbia and Cambridge. She is a long-term resident of Britain and lives in London, where she lectures on renaissance literature at Brunel University. Her poetry lays out and critiques the competing logics of exchange inside fiscal, sexual, military, and consumer matrices with a measured anger that is meticulously controlled and therefore never pointlessly belligerent or self-regarding. The work exhibits a strategic restraint that is, on the whole, foreign to the work of the other poets. While the cartoon violence and splashing vitriol in Sutherland's poems figure the absurdity of exchange under capitalism in order to make its cruelty and ridiculousness affectively manifest, Brady's more grammatical polemic shows how these absurdities constitute our daily routine, our sense of normality: the mundane exchange of our lives for our wages, the child's pleasure in new shoes for the child labor that produced them. One of her most ambitious projects to date is a web-based long poem called "Tracking Wildfire" (hosted at www.dispatx.com) that documents the converging mythologies of Greek Fire and White Phosphorus, staples of ancient and modern warfare. Her writing represents one of the most far-reaching interventions into the history and rhetoric of lyric poetry as an art of persuasion now far removed from its origins near the seats of political power.

Chris Goode, born in Bristol in 1973, is a musician, dramatist, and theater director as well as a poet. His work pays rapt attention to the noise inside and outside the sign, building and undermining itself by focusing on intrusions that effect the loss of a clear, communicable message. His work in the theater is often created in extensive improvisations and frequently incorporates the difficulties *of* performance *in*

performance. Like Manson, he has an idiosyncratic pantheon of hallowed names, including Edward Lear, Oulipo (though Goode's work seldom emerges from its constraints unscathed), and Christopher Knowles (the autistic American writer who composed while listening to pop songs on the radio, incorporating and transforming their choral hooks in fascinating ways). An intense interest in procedural poetics combined with his commitment to live performance and its ramifications (sanctioned intrusions related to local conditions, audience, background and foreground noise, etc.) make for a startlingly original array of poems that tear across and down the page.

Some of the essays collected here refer directly to, or mention in passing, the humor in the work of these poets. If humor is discernible at odd places across several of Keston Sutherland's books, it's only with his last, *Neocosis*, that it reaches a consistency of presence and pitch that is simultaneously funny and distressing. As his poems have become longer, they function more and more as tirades aimed in every conceivable direction, including back at the self which is their nominal source. This self-coruscating tendency may originate in the feeling that there is something laughable about the notion of a militant aestheticism in 2007, and a militant poetry in particular, when poetry is already so far off the radar of both the general population and the power elite. Accordingly, Sutherland's poetry incorporates in advance the expectation of provoking no reaction whatsoever from its targets.

The challenging nature of Sutherland's work results from a self-administered warping that pre-registers the poetry's inadmissibility to wider fields of reception, even as it apes the crudity of the distortions that would occur if the work were translated into the mediatized zones of mainstream culture. The most influential argument for the necessary obscurity of poetic language derives from Adorno, who argues that forms of communicative discourse that help to sustain structures of unequal exchange must be dismantled and rearranged in ways not assimilable to the interests of consumer capitalism. The absolute control exerted inside Sutherland's out-of-control prosody works in this context as an ethical intensifier. His poetry is the violently futile attempt to reconcile immediate corporeal sensation and political strategy, and to live inside that impossibility as the truth of the times. The poems' brutal chunks of not-life are transformed into irregular

pulses of not-not-life, the arrhythmic force of the versification providing access to the closest thing available to "life," its double-negation.

In the work of each poet there is an intermittent attachment to the more traditional idea of incoherence as the index of ungovernable feeling. The poetry frequently stages the disintegration of selves as coherent sets of managed needs and desires, one agent of which is anguish at the endless pleasures proffered this side of the capitalist equation. Ethics, in the US and the UK, tends to be experienced by most citizens as the freedom to exercise self-restraint in the face of all the opportunities we have to be bad (driving SUVs, all-you-can-eat buffets, crack cocaine, etc.). Meanwhile "love" and "life" are the two concepts most inassimilable to the system embodied and critiqued in this poetry. Increasingly, they are unrepresentable there, incapable of being idealized in poetic language, only able to be named, and only as words, in ways that merely underline their unnameable aspects. Poems smolder or burn up in mourning for the absence and impossibility of love, of life, and any unmitigated pleasures. Even as we read, words and things are lining up outside for their orgiastic combination, couplings sanctioned by the arbitrariness of their relations and accelerated by the sexualized excitement of those of us who can afford to own them, and the sexualized excitement of the rest who just sit around, wanting.