

LETTERBOX

Andrew Duncan replies to Peter Riley's letter in CR 53:1 and John Wilkinson's response to that letter in CR 53:2/3.

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Dear *Chicago Review*,

I have deep skepticism about the integrity of the debate between Peter Riley and John Wilkinson in your pages.

When I got started in the poetry world in 1973, I was perturbed by the messages people gave out and was afflicted by curiosity and anxiety. I collected material, and as time went on, even a dossier. So today I can open the dossier and reveal that the messages are barely relevant to poetry. Moments when someone takes on another poet responsibly, instead of via caricature, are rare. In fact, even the reviewing process, at least in this country, is threadbare and largely useless because of the refusal to engage.

Riley's work is hardly a mystery, nor are the writers or the principles he admires. His description of the Cambridge poetry of the '60s and '70s, or maybe 1966-74, is well founded, but he is unhappy about what has happened in the last thirty years. He sees an article by Wilkinson as a threat to his position because it offers a view of the world in which his poetry is unnecessary. This is a sincere reaction but also a paranoid one. It verges into control-freakery once he fails to control it.

I see nothing in Wilkinson's letter that even starts to be a faithful portrayal of this. What is the point of writing a rejoinder if you aren't interested by the argument? What exactly is the paragraph about the French Catholic Church in the 1930s there for? Is Riley a Catholic? Was he there in the 1930s, wearing a beret, carrying a candle, clutching a breviary, subscribing to *Action Française*? Certainly not. He was born in England in 1942. What about the paragraph about African-American poets? Is that there for a reason or because he had just seen their gigs immediately before he wrote the letter? The paragraphs are irrelevant. They serve to cover up the fact that Wilkinson is not considering Riley, or his proposal, or the texts he expressly commends as supporting it.

Wilkinson and Riley are fighting over the meaning of "Cambridge poetry." In detail, they mean non-overlapping sets of texts, so the ground

they are fighting over is too small to stand on. At some level, Riley is right in what he says—although I don't really accept the implication that there is an "exchange of roles"; one doesn't inherit a role and the older generation doesn't give one up. Did I inherit from Peter Redgrove, or John Betjeman, or anyone? No. Maybe that stuff has a meaning for eldest sons, or something.

I can deal with the idea that the scene has split up to the point where three critics fail in dialogue because they talk about three non-overlapping sets of texts. This is what happens in a vast imaginative landscape. But we seem to be seeing the exact opposite in a certain struggle over genealogy and position in a line of succession. I think it is the latter which is going to be found wanting and tossed aside. You don't have to defeat your predecessor in a duel, or be procreated by them, or be anointed by them, or do homage to them, because you have no predecessor. All that belongs with a fixed-role society in which we no longer live. My best guess is that fitting Andrea Brady into a chain of illustrious "Cambridge" predecessors is not necessary for understanding her poetry and ideas. Her poetry is connected to very widely shared ethical and civic issues, which it addresses in a coherent way that is adequate to their complexity. In fact, the genealogy that Wilkinson constructs is just old iron.

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