

## LETTERBOX

*Peter Riley responds to John Wilkinson's review of Simon Jarvis's The Unconditional (from CR 52:2/3/4); Catherine Wagner discusses CR and women.*

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Dear *Chicago Review*,

The poetry that developed through Cambridge in the 1960s and 70s was a high point of the art. It proposed a relationship of tensivity between language and experience which was complex, subtle and of immense range, and fundamentally musical. It inhabited a threshold of great power because it gathered together the fullest possible versions of cognition neither wholly constructed nor wholly discovered, and proposed high and continual song as the great cohering and honoring force of this perceptual opening. The self in it was multiple, historical, regal or bewildered or excited or humiliated, but anchored on formative work, demanding completion out of its scatter by working through the material ruthlessly toward the final cadence, every poem an exercise in the form of mortality. It was a poetry which did not subserve anything but its own possibilities, spreading out over the world's categories. It had novelty only as it needed it, to regain the full content of the song from its history; innovation was a by-product. It was not a reaction to anything but the whole condition. Compared with most British poetry from mid-century it occupied a totally different scale of necessity, touching on grandeur in its vise-like grip on presence. In all the talk that surrounded it and among all sorts of disasters, the scan remained open and generous, refusing to disqualify any honest effort, and for all the complaining, guarding quite fiercely against resentment and aggressive impotence.

And it continues, there's no doubt about that, three or four poetical generations, dispersing, splintering, courting innovation and experimentation, but with a lot of the fiery promises still in the air. Moving into differences, as it should, but perhaps above all maintaining an insistence on the quest into actual experience and its prosody as the doorstep of the enterprise. But as it spreads and diversifies I find there are also worrying signals about what is happening to it, as if some people are stressing as central what were marginal or tentative positions, or not in the act at all, and most worryingly of all, acceding to directives from "the times." (We used to think in our humble way that poetry was one of the forces which created the times.) So—politicization, academicism, religiosity, Augustanism, occultation, extremism, disdain, resentment, ungrounding, contradiction, and perversity.

So questions arose, and John Wilkinson's review (the intellectual ambition of which I admire wholeheartedly as a thing entirely beyond my own measure; I'm not questioning his judgment nor Simon Jarvis's book in any way) is a convenient place to site a few of them, though some of what follows comes from elsewhere and far away.

For Wilkinson as for most other commentators on the forward side of things, to speak of poetical virtue is to speak of political virtue, there is no distinction. Poems and poetical thinking are politically good or they have no good in them. I guess we are used to that these days. The one big claim left to the poem, that it (rather "somehow") holds the answer or counter to political harm by occulted inference. It's more alarming to notice that in this particularly fervent British version the contrary also holds: political virtue can only be poetical virtue. "Aesthetically-founded politics" (which involves more than poetry of course, but): *only the poet is qualified to be a politician*. It is not just that the poet "knows better" than the working politician, indeed I don't think that claim is made, but that only the poet has the spirit to inhabit the sphere of total oppositional negation which is the only political register to be tolerated. Doesn't this mean that in a sense there is actually a withdrawal from politics, from the politics that happens and can happen into one that can't possibly? An understanding of how politics works and how amelioration can be wrought through the science of it, of what the mechanisms are and so of what could be done—all this would be beneath us? To assume that you can go straight from aesthetics to ethics is worrying enough, but aren't the two here fused into one substance?

Imagism for instance entails "a (politically) perilous aesthetic." Is this literary criticism, or some more secret kind of policing? For we're not talking about Pound's ravings in the late cantos, but of his and others' short clear-image poems of the 1910s, perhaps including *Cathay*. If political danger adheres in these pieces it must be buried a long way below the surface. There is disdain in Pound's and others' imagism, but I don't think that is the point. Imagism is not, or not enough, "dialectical"? And yet the poems seem to be crammed with strongly opposed forces, so perhaps a particular interpretation of the dialectical is what is urged, and it is strange to think that Zukofsky supplied that, where, to me, the forces involved seem to operate at a far milder level however messed-around the language is. Imagism, anyway, is transcendental, it sets eye and ear into lenses that pierce thought by mutual displacement, and offers earth as the result, as a value. This won't do. Why? Because there is a kind of purity involved, by which the final focus is on neither self nor world but an epiphanic evidence operating between language and experience across large historical differences? Or merely because of Pound's disastrous subsequent career?

It is assumed that we are “in the face of despair.” It is more than assumed, it is sought and relished. The whole thing sets out from that basis, globally. The planet, no less, is in a state of crisis, for which non-poetry is responsible. The ordinary language of persons, the practical articulate language of day to day living and of practical politics, is declared “false, corrupted, lying, depraved and distorted...of course...in the condition of the planet at the present time” (J.H. Prynne, my emphasis). How “of course” is this and who escapes the indictment? For if the language is a lying instrument you are a liar using it, with no excuse. And if this does hold, it must, mustn't it, result in: *Whatever you hear, deny it.* If you understand it, it will be a lie. And obviously if you don't hear, you don't speak. Instead, you create linguistic strategies to demolish speaking. Has the world, as a whole, really forced this on us, or is it something we have willed onto ourselves by persistently believing that human good (in language and possibly beyond) descends to common people from a high intellectuality which disdains to participate in the conditions?

The poetry itself is not the problem; it is no doubt needed as much as its contrary is—it's the mounting sense of embattled privilege jousting with despair on behalf of humanity.

There are clearly occasions for despair in the world at present; in many ways it appears to have passed its sell-by date. Ecologically, especially, we seem to have bound ourselves to a very difficult future. Plus the dismantling of international law, the resurgence of large-scale international plundering, concentration of power in privileged enclaves, massive corruption, removal of social rights... To some it suggests a lot of work to be done, to others it suggests that the whole planet has fallen into a putrefaction which is irremediable and the only hope is for a spreading redemption of the “inner draught.” How do we arrive at this totalization? How do we make sure that there is nothing *reachable* in the entire world to mitigate our affronted rage? How much do we have to ignore for this, and at what levels? If the news, bad as it is and worse as it gets, seems to damn our speech, the monstrous injustices and casual massive creation of harm, if this seems to stun us into silence... When did we decide not to wake up from that, but to sink that paralysis into our entire knowledge of the world, the entire sphere of our being, until it fills it, while some kind of reactive anger ejects the entire non-poet population of the world (and most of the poets), condemned as criminals? And does this become all we need to know? We don't want to know any particulars except the horror stories which will feed our resentment and impotence? The negated total (a kind of black hole sucking in our knowledge of the world) itself engenders the entire fractured vocabulary as a desperate struggle against itself, against despair. Am I on the track of things here? How do we get to be so *haughty*?

Particulars, or the cultivation of any full or accumulating sense of what

there is in the world beyond the news, the actual drama of stratification, will have to be avoided, because an acquaintance with, for instance, the lives lived at a local level and the scale of their resource, might provide occasions for optimism which would wreck the whole enterprise. In researching *A Salvo for Africa* Douglas Oliver didn't visit Africa, not because he couldn't be bothered to, but because it was essential not to, it would have risked bringing him down from his height. He might for instance have found happy people! (In his more extrovert version of crisis writing the emphasis is, however, on what needs to be done urgently in concrete terms, though the poetry (or the proximity of poetry) too often diverts the discourse away from the sympathy of anyone in a position to do it or of enough people to create a demand for it.)

Crisis poetry. It's all crisis isn't it? Olson is crisis. Prynne is crisis. Celan is crisis. All the art is crisis art, or if it is not, all the explanations and justifications of it are crisis explanations and crisis justifications. Crisis is becoming all we know, it's becoming what we breathe. But it's not a situation of crisis that is contemplated, it is crisis itself, without hope, running crisis that will never stop being crisis. Would we actually want it to stop? Crisis justifies all the extremism, all the idiosyncrasy and every destructive act. Crisis keeps poetry alive. If it stopped we'd all be out of a job. It can continue indefinitely because it is unspecific except as symptomatology; specific or fully analyzed crises tend to have countering forces attached, or the very raising of crisis is part of the process of remedy. Look for instance at the magnificent cohering crises of Greek tragedy. How they are not constructed out of resentment, and don't produce prohibitions and contradictions.

How does this sound? *The poets have decided that there is no hope to be had anywhere and have retreated into language. And there's certainly no hope there, but it gives you the illusion that you're doing something.* I thought I'd just try that one on for size.

Then I came across this:

More and more, too, fundamental issues of political reform were beginning to shape a national psyche, as the country slowly edged towards the formation and passing of the Great Reform Bill of 1832. For Fanny Kemble, society was becoming "a sort of battlefield, for every man (and every woman too) is nothing if not political." And the *Athenaeum* commented: "in truth, till the great question of reform is settled, we need look for no commanding works in literature or art...the great market of literature will not open its gates full and wide, till the public mind is settled..."

(Tom Chilcott, in his introduction to his edition of Clare's *The Shepherd's Calendar* (Carcanet, 2006), referring to the poor reception of the 1827 edition)

In the present climate this comes buzzing out of the page like an angry wasp, especially when you realize that the precise period in question (late 1820s) represents the decisive termination of the “moment” in English poetry we usually call romantic (all recently dead except Wordsworth who was inactive). The next thing to look forward to was Tennyson’s and Browning’s first books in 1833, which means that by then wholeness of poetical vision had disintegrated into the cultivation of sensation, and emotional tensivity into sensuality. About this time English domestic architecture began to degenerate toward brick-Gothic.

To maintain these special and extensive claims, it is essential that the substance or message of the poem be concealed, unstated, to be teased out of it by subverting the text in the various (unproven) hypotheses of subliminal reading. Its virtue (its politics) is entailed, not spoken, silent under the displacements of a linguistic performance, and perhaps a quality of the author rather than the poem. This is our version of the world. Nothing is as it seems. Nothing can be trusted, least of all the organs of perception. Trust nothing you hear or see. Experts will tell us what is “really” happening, in the poem or in the world.

And there we plunge into a library of scientism which I prefer to keep locked. Of course a mass of transactions occurs silently below the linguistic threshold, in poetry as elsewhere. But does this occur any more when surface sequence and recognition are negated? Might not surface negation in fact hinder florescence? Might not that balanced place, the threshold itself, be the real stronghold of the creative act?

It is easy to think of many kinds of recent poetry, both careerist-pop and “linguistically advanced” (tall for his age) which operate entirely by inference and entailment, which set bits of our condition against each other in a nod-hint-wink kind of way, implying a (political) sagacity which need never be evinced. Also as if it was brought into being to serve an industry of explication. Is there such a thing as a “knowing” which will never say, but “knows” between the lines, or carries its knowledge in the impact of acts of linguistic jarring like a punch on the nose (projective verse). Is this what critique has come to mean in poetry, rather than the explicit identification of operative forces in the world?

If indeed there is a world other than the language world which our poetry language undermines. We’re told that the “natural world” is “obsolete.” O peoples! We have come so far and we have done so much. We have eliminated the physical world; no world exists other than the one we have constructed. Why, then, can’t we get it to behave itself? But this is not what is meant, is it? It’s a way of trashing “pastoral” in poetry, in a narrow sense, mention a flower or a cow if you dare. I think pastoral in a much larger

sense, the pastoral of earthly space, was very much part of the original Cambridge impetus. It was the signal of the extent open to the imagination. R.F. Langley's poetry, for instance, comes straight from there, as did, later, Helen Macdonald's, presumably both now entirely disallowed, if the world they attend to is classed as detritus.

Adorno's "great concluding passage," which Wilkinson in his piece offers as a foundation stone of his critique, is unashamedly evangelistic. It speaks of "redemption" and speaks of it as "messianic." Wilkinson also speaks of "heresy." What used to be called militancy, a matter of manifestos and demonstrations and a lot of shouting, has become a visionary religion, and not the first one in the history of the world to offer us redemption in the speaking of tongues. What's not clear from Adorno's paragraph is who the redemption is *for*—the mass of humanity or the soul of the artist, with, I fear, an inclination toward the latter.

Messianic requires Messiahs, and it requires essentially a few of them, preferably one at a time. Apart from self-election to this post, what happens in this religion to the history of poetry in English? A tremendous amount of leap-frogging takes place. Wilkinson's version in his review looks, in spite of a scatter of favored Americans, like an enormous pole-vault from Shelley to Celan and Olson, with Adorno as referee. A lionization of a handful of extremely selected poets who attain what can only be good old-fashioned "genius" status. Two-hundred years of poetry in English reduced to four or five approved authors. The genealogy changes from critic to critic and from essay to essay, but they are essentially a band of saints, they are poets not poems, and they are voices in the wilderness. And their theoretical works tend to have more weight than their poems. Of course, the more intensely and exclusively you promote the canon, the more silent trashing you do. In fact the trashing is epic; there is almost no poetry left standing.

And those who are not trashed, for what are they chosen? Extremism? Oppositionality? Disdain? Mental/linguistic disorder? Cynicism? Crisis mentality? Celan, seemingly the king of modern European poetry both for the Cantabrian avant-garde and for Penguin Books (for these elections transgress many boundaries) explicitly directs poetry towards "strangeness, otherness, absurdity, silence, and impossibility" and does so in the anticipation of defeat. Is that challenging, or comforting? How much of Shelley's output was actually no more than "hippy ravings"? How much harm did Mary Shelley do to the notion of what constitutes poetical substance by the way she edited Shelley's posthumous fragments? What happened to Blake? How does Chaucer fit into this monument? Or Hardy? Was Celan actually a better poet than, say, Bobrowski and if so how? By being "all cut up"? Is Pound "out" now? And if so are the reasons political, or poetical, or a back-reading of his politics into

his poetry? How much more than an haute-couture poseur was Mallarmé? Some of these questions must be impertinent and naïve, but they might still need to be asked. I plead “yes” every time to the professionalist accusation: “You are an amateur, unqualified.” There are hundreds more questions like these. There are more hundreds of a different kind of question...

“The most idiosyncratic and inadmissible is the most deeply shared” (Wilkinson). “Poetry fortifies our inwardness” (Ruth Padel). What is the degree of difference between these (I don’t deny that there is one)? Could they both be emanations of some current climate of introspective retreat into the inviolate castle of the self? By whom inadmissible? (Ruth Padel, possibly.) Couldn’t deep be thought as party to extent rather than disappearing into your own impossibility? How much am I going to regret writing this piece? Can we really dispense with “truth” in poetry or any human field of act whatsoever? What hope lies in hopelessness? How can any of these ruthlessly exploited contradictions bring us to anything but an impasse? (Yes, I know, impasse also is valued.) Who turned the world upside-down?

The argument is between cognition and recognition, but no holdable knowledge is purely either.

There has to be more than one way of being in the world.

There must be (even if we can’t reach it or don’t want it) a third term which transcends the dialectic.

*Nobody escapes the conditions.*

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Dear *Chicago Review*,

I’ve been a subscriber for years because the essays you publish are stimulating, the poetry generally strong, and the editing elegant and careful. Recently, I’ve valued the beautiful influential double and triple doorstep issues on particular writers and artists (the Stan Brakhage and Ed Dorn issues were standouts for me). I’m troubled, though, by the magazine’s masculine orientation, especially in the context of the influence *Chicago Review* wields. *CR* does publish women—a quarter to a third of every issue, I’d guess—but the big flashy attention goes to men. With one exception, men have been the subject of every special issue you’ve put out.

Here is a list of special issues that have appeared in recent years: