

## LETTERBOX

*John Wilkinson reacts to Peter Riley's letter in the last issue (CR 53:1), plus two responses to CR's special on British poetry.*

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Dear *Chicago Review*,

The last issue of *Chicago Review* prints Peter Riley's cry of protest against what he takes my review of Simon Jarvis's poem *The Unconditional* in *Chicago Review* 52:2/3/4 to represent. It seems surprising that a short notice should occasion such a response, but evidently Riley saw it as symptomatic in taking certain ideas and preferences for granted, and he felt that enough is enough. There is passion in his writing beyond what my review could in itself incite. Best therefore to identify the characteristics of the thinking Riley decries. These appear to be: 1/ the assumption that poetry must reflect conditions of crisis; 2/ a restriction of what counts as serious poetry to the works of a very few poets whose work reflects conditions of crisis; and 3/ the tendency of the poetic response to crisis to segregate its products from ordinary human discourse, designating these the privileged site for conduct of "real" politics (as opposed to messy, vulgar political, and other human activity).

To an extent my article on Andrea Brady's poetry, in the same issue where Riley's contribution appears, does consider this thinking and some problems with it. (Neither of us saw the other's contribution when he wrote.) That article was explicit in rejecting the flattering notion that writing or reading poetry might constitute a first-order political activity, although it accepted that poetry might (unusually) influence an intellectual and ideological climate—much as high Theory occasionally does. In recent history, poetry has been most effective politically when involved in some convergence of other cultural forces, as in thirties Britain and sixties United States; and when such a convergence has spared it the compensatory overestimate of its potential that can attend impotence. My article suggested that an exalted and exclusive conception of lyric might be inimical to political effectiveness, and pointed to certain writers whose lyric writing is tied to other modes of writing in a wider political project as more likely to exert a political influence. I would add now that high lyric might be bound inevitably to a peculiar lyric anachronism, a feeling for survivals whether religious or pastoral, or perhaps for revenants, the unthought known coded in gusts of pre-emotional mood; the elegant

poetry of William Fuller provides a place to think about such anachronistic potency in an urban world.

Peter Riley plainly thinks the whole discussion about politics is a red herring. Like many poets he believes the assertion of a relationship between lyric poetry and politics betrays stereotyped or spurious thinking. Indeed he assumes that failure to mention a particular poet he admires must be attributable to such thinking; because my brief notice did not contrive to mention Ezra Pound, he concludes that owing to the poet's fascism, Pound's poetry has been dismissed by the intellectual commissariat. That is not my impression, although a sealed order may lie among the neglectimenta on my desk. Both my review of *The Unconditional* and my discussion of Andrea Brady's poetry have scratched at the relationship between lyric and politics because it itches fearsomely, and for two reasons—one, the poetry of Keston Sutherland and Andrea Brady has got under my skin, and two, their poetry is being written at a point of historical convergence where it might exercise an incidental political potency. That second point might be expressed also by saying that this is a time where politics invades everything including lyric poetry; anyone who reads a little should know this applies to all manner of verse writing, not only where Riley detects the tone of *de haut en bas*.

I reject the idea in Riley's letter that referring to a relatively small number of poets must imply an exclusivity in taste or could be used to impute an aesthetic or political program. It is a mistake to assume that anyone necessarily worries away publicly at what he most loves; and this is especially misleading where writers rather than scholars are concerned, since generally writers write about two kinds of writer—those whom they feel fail to receive their due, to some extent a covert special pleading for their own work; and those whose work seems whether successfully or not to tackle ideas or technical problems which trouble them. But we all have different ways of reading in different circumstances, as musicians do of listening and painters of looking; what need to argue why merely a glance at certain poems by John Donne or Thomas Hardy or James Schuyler can bring tears to my eyes, any more than I have to justify to myself a preference for Lee Konitz over John Coltrane or for sea pinks over daffodils. It is typical that working life has left me too dependent on early-established taste, but teaching now shows me much to enjoy and admire in writers I once dismissed with youth's arbitrariness. But then, I have always liked P.G. Wodehouse—so what?

Peter Riley is self-evidently right to find repugnant the notion that human good “descends to common people from a high intellectuality which disdains to participate in the conditions”; but how sad to encounter this affected man-of-the-people rhetoric in an adventurous poet who can also argue (on his website) for a connection between the popularity of Dylan Thomas's poetry and its resistance to straightforward exposition. I happen to

share Riley's liking for Dylan Thomas, and his article is spot-on in identifying how and why Thomas's obscurities work. As for disdaining to participate in "the conditions," this would be impertinent if *ad hominem*, while the British poetry featured recently in this journal patently is entrammelled in "the conditions" to an unusual extent even if its authors have academic jobs. Talk of intellectuality allows Riley to deploy familiar class metaphors, but given "the conditions," Riley's defense of pastoral and his desire for a departed organic wholeness (of which pastoral was itself a symptom) lie open to the charge of cloistered avoidance despite his invocation of high points, great power, and even the "regal" self.

Now it is true that in his *Chicago Review* letter Peter Riley adverts to a different kind of obscurity from Dylan Thomas's, and specifically to the notion that a poetic practice can be lifted from dependence on speech acts. But this does not say anything about the honesty or otherwise of people's speech (and who on earth could make comprehensive statements about all humanity, whether in their intimacy or calculated self-presentation), although it might say something about certain kinds of public discourse and their perversion—a preoccupation of poets since the dawn of time, after all. Granted there is a question here about what's entailed in the continuity or discontinuity of poetry with ordinary speech, but then, what is ordinary? Does the ordinary include religious thinking and observance? Does it include the entrancements of play and craft? Even poetry which proclaims its connectedness with ordinary speech is chiefly making a point about the resources it draws on for its artifice, and to press the point in the interests of social-democratic piety would entail the kind of side-stepping and queasy contradiction evinced by Wordsworth in his multiple qualifications of what *kind* of ordinary speech serves his high purpose. Which "common people" of Britain would hear their discourse in Peter Riley's poetry or that of any poet he cites?

A discussion about the relationship between poetry and ordinary speech does not present straight alternatives. Probably the derivation of Frank O'Hara's poems from a coterie discourse and from friendly dialogue suggests a more attractive way of avoiding the presumptuousness or mendacity afflicting the posture of individual integrity than either Fernando Pessoa's heteronymic authorship or J.H. Prynne's recent circuit-board counterfactuals, both of which may be one-off successes. But what these various strategies circumvent alike, and rightly, is the model of the individual poet addressing an individual reader presumed to be cut from the same cloth. I find such a model untenable, perhaps because I have worked in Birmingham and in the East End of London where it would be mad to reckon on any shared values or set of knowledge. In any case publication should move poems between very different people, and the idea of heterogeneous readers lighting upon or gathered about a poem feels more accurate than a poem traveling toward

“the reader” in some travesty of interpersonal intimacy. Such a vision of readership is evoked beautifully in a poem written well outside the terms of this discussion, Adrienne Rich’s “From an Atlas of the Difficult World,” and also describes well the conditions of web readership.

Who can know whether individual integrity in the US or UK is more or less reliable than it was a hundred years ago or than it is now in Switzerland or Senegal? The contention here is simply that a pervasive decadent form of romantic-individualist poetic rhetoric is played out (although some may yet perform miracles with it) and has degenerated into self-pity seeking external validation. None of this recommends a strategy “to demolish speaking” but it does reflect a suspicion of a simulated presence as the guarantor of authenticity.

What is Peter Riley advocating? While he is disturbed by Adorno’s messianic tenor in the passage my review cites, he opens his letter with a paragraph filled with teleological, even eschatological rhetoric, talking of poetry as “touching on grandeur in its vise-like grip on presence,” “working through the material ruthlessly toward the final cadence.” This language confers priesthood on the poets he approves, even while he assails the tendencies he disapproves as marks of an intellectual conspiracy determined to suppress the work of poets who nonetheless publish in *The London Review of Books*. When it comes to his remarks on specific “canonical” poets, Riley’s attitudes to Celan and to Shelley are puzzling. His objection to Celan apparently depends on reading the poetry as offering only unrelieved bleakness, and so agrees with the most reductively autobiographical and culturally essentialist accounts of Celan’s work. Riley cites Celan’s direction of poetry toward “strangeness, otherness, absurdity, silence, and impossibility,” a formula which might equally evoke Samuel Beckett, but in neither case does it encompass the challenges or pleasures of the writing, since evidently the writing is possible and silence has been held at bay. “Strangeness, otherness, absurdity” can produce writing which is thrilling or formulaic—even comforting, even funny, as, oddly, Beckett’s writing can be at its bleakest. This would be true of any other prescription, and it’s unwise to take poets’ proclamations too seriously. Since Riley demands that a case be made for Celan, I can refer him to my new book of essays, *The Lyric Touch: Essays on the Poetry of Excess*, where the act of reading is discussed in relation to both Celan and what Riley calls the “hippie ravings” of P.B. Shelley (that’s just what my headmaster called them too, thirty-five years ago); but this is where we reach the nub.

For what is most noteworthy in his letter is exactly the teleological strain in Riley’s thinking; so the militant modesty of imagism in its historical reaction to the overblown “spirituality” of late-Victorian verse is rendered as “transcendental, it sets eye and ear into lenses that pierce thought by mutual displacement, and offers earth as the result, as a value.... There is a kind of purity involved.” This astonishing fustian apparently responds to my comment on the “perilous aesthetics” of imagism, and if imagism has such

an effect on Peter Riley, it should be reserved for adults, with post-trauma debrief mandatory. And here our real difference emerges in a kind of purity, and to put it at its simplest: I prefer poems that amount to something over poems that go somewhere.

Historically this preference might reflect a pre- and post-theory generational split, although theory is surely what good poets in the European lyric tradition have done for a couple of centuries. And yes, that implies a preference, a value judgment, an exclusivity if you prefer. That is to say, good poets are deeply skeptical as a rule, and in their poems make something out of that disposition. Radical skepticism applies to William Blake and Thomas Hardy, poets Riley favors, quite as much as to Celan and Shelley. How is Riley reading these poets whom he counterposes to those he terms the poets of crisis?

Another way to put this would be to say Riley differs from me mainly in his preferred reaction to crisis, because to write a lyric poem with any degree of seriousness is always to work at crisis. That may extend the meaning of “crisis” beyond Riley’s deployment of a more vernacular sense; but surely his apotheosizing of “the poetry that developed through Cambridge in the 1960s and 1970s” relies on a prior crisis so comprehensive as to have shivered selfhood, leaving it to poetry’s “formative work” to produce “completion out of the scatter.” His language is recognizably that of 1950s existential crisis, but might apply to religious or political crisis, or crisis in personal life. Reactions to crisis cover a broad range, but it is doubtful whether it is the chief business of lyric poetry to settle matters, any matters whatever, or to gloss over wounds, or even to heal; and it seems Riley considers that to be exactly its business. What constitutes “comfort” might also divide us, although Riley is wrong to think I find the catastrophes of global warming or American foreign policy comforting.

Since Riley sermonizes on this point, let me say that far from reveling in disaster as he imagines, I feel invaded by bad news, and deeply resentful at the invasion, and sadly ordinary in being overwhelmed by the unassimilable scale of suffering. But the tone of Riley’s admonition is familiar wherever the comfortable gather, applied to the assertiveness of any oppressed group—how they do go on! Here the tone is made more disdainful by the insinuation that some people have no right to feel anything other than fortunate. Well, I feel very fortunate, but that doesn’t make me imagine that all’s well. Although Riley may be right that poetry can offer a truly thrilling “epiphanic evidence operating between language and experience across large historical differences” and that this “comfort” is a prime justification for the poetic carry-on, I would prefer “effect” to “evidence” because I have a less exalted conception of what poetry can bring to the ordinary world. I wish things were otherwise; but if they were, humankind still would not need the offer of the earth by poetry or anything else, because human unkindness took it long ago and just see what it did.

To stress the point: the good fortune of a male born in England in the 1950s, benefiting from the National Health Service and being paid to go to University, personally untouched by war or poverty, free in thought and expression, is truly exceptional historically; and depended on structures of privilege and exploitation which cannot be ignored when considering how comparable benefits might be secured—if they conceivably might be secured—for another generation. This must go beyond liberal uneasiness, since (for example) freedoms of thought and expression are even now subject to a pressure poorly resisted by people who have no sense of what it means to live without the benefits other people die pursuing.

Furthermore, while Peter Riley seems remarkably untouched by such matters, there can be few problems so urgent at the local as well as the international level than the categorical rejection of the very possibility of shared values on the part of Islamicists and Christian fundamentalists, to mention only two powerful and widespread ideologies. Riley might well retort that the responsibility of poetry to insist upon the culturally and historically transcursive becomes yet more urgent, regarding any secession as a prime instance of *la trahison des clercs*. But both the Panglossian assumption of likeness and its urgent assertion must be inadequate to the case, since nothing could be more obvious than the perilous contingency of liberal values. Attention could train most profitably on what might emerge from the cracks. Crisis might fracture the concrete and give way to signs of life, which could so easily be missed if poets and politicians and ordinary people walk around with eyes wide shut. Or is that a blindfold?

I remain fascinated by Riley's *bringing to completion* and *working to the final cadence* because it clarifies a difference which had previously been obscure. Specificity and ensemble are opposed in my mind to positivism and idealism alike. Poems are provisional condensations rather than runways. I do not hear a continual song nor feel a necessity to attune my writing to the music of the spheres or to the Psalms. No horizon beckons; like a painter I work in a mess, daily glancing at work both "complete" and "incomplete," tweaking, vandalizing, diving in again until things seem to me to hold together, any-old-how. Rather than any pot of gold, the best result might be a warmer darkness, perhaps shareable. This provisionality seems to me far less dangerous than invoking Natural Law. The European cultural memory is so insubstantial that it is hard to imagine that before the Second World War, the potentates of the French Catholic Church were openly and militantly anti-semitic and justified their position through Natural Law, or that the authoritarian racism of Charles Maurras was admired by intellectuals across Europe (Pound was exceptional for his unwillingness to shut up in a timely way). Nor in their time and place were slavery or apartheid short of defenders on the basis of Natural Law and Human Nature. For readers of Maurras the

grandiose tone of “working to the final cadence” is troublingly familiar.

Peter Riley is a thoroughly decent liberal, no doubt, and his concerns about political attitudinizing are serious and need to be taken seriously, but it is exactly because he too has inhabited a liberal culture that he conceives of irreducible human truthfulness in such generous terms and fails to recognize their peculiar boundedness. This then is not a question of “theory” or of ivory-tower intellectualism. The problems of what it means to “bring to completion” are negotiated every day in every school in the East End of London.

Again, put on the defensive, I do not propose mine is the only way to write poems, nor accept Riley’s designation of my writing as representative of something. This reply is being written the morning after a reading by eight African-American poets, with remarkable poems performed by Yusef Komunyakaa, Opal Moore, and Lyrae Van Clief-Stefanon, poets as different from Peter Riley and Andrea Brady and from each other as poets could be, except in their steadfastness of art and their adventurous spirit. And in their sense of crisis too: perhaps Riley might license Komunyakaa, who served in Vietnam, to write about Iraq? Or Van Clief-Stefanon, who teaches poetry in a maximum security prison, to write about, dare I say it, a crisis in black masculinity? Meanwhile I embrace Riley’s taunt that I belong among those who believe that crisis keeps poetry alive; and further, poetry keeps crisis alive; and further, crisis keeps you and me alive, from one birth to another, from one beat of the heart to the next, from one bright idea to remembering to clean out the cat litter, from awakening to falling asleep, from one line-ending to the next contest with silence and God’s or the down-at-heel auditor’s balancing of books.

Peter Riley ends by suggesting the distance between a comment of mine and a comment by Ruth Padel is not so great, as though he had found me out. The similarity is neither surprising nor shameful. Riley seems preoccupied by categorical inclusions and exclusions; but it is his teleological thinking and grandiosity that offend me rather than his liking for the poetry of R.F. Langley. Still, while I suspect I am only his stalking horse, Riley has given me a chance to be equally oracular. Pre-eminently, lyric poetry can act as a specific against dissipation. It can effect a condensation, a new alloy, a new hybrid. This is not the same as a new self, whether for reader or writer, for selfhood always entails a rent in the provisional fabric of poetry. If the alchemy is spiritual, it engenders a new spirit every time, a coming-into-being which never arrives. This happens incidentally to the striving for it. What is produced cannot be vaunted as a totality because it is short-lived and soon to be dispelled. To experience such condensation requires an attuning, which can take a long time—Susan Stewart is right about this even if she demands an impossible plenitude and accessibility of conscious memory. Probably these effects can be produced in media other than lyric poetry, although I have not experienced this to be true. And what I am writing about in these

final hippie ravings, and what Peter Riley writes about in his religiose ravings, may not be so far apart either, but he loses his way in the language of achievement; there is no basis for the belief that momentarily to overcome scatter leads to ontological *completion*.

What has any of this to do with politics? Everything or nothing. You might take lyric effects as seriously as Douglas Oliver did in *Penniless Politics*, and pursue an imaginary Manhattan of the human spirit. His rampant humanism seems to me no more ridiculous than the politics of Willesden in Zadie Smith's *White Teeth*—indeed, they are much the same, although Oliver's arise from condensation whereas Smith's emerge from narrative connections. Alternatively, you might decide that such lyric effects are no more than private pleasures. But then, you might resent interference with your private pleasures and find yourself “politicized.” You could also found a religion or a metaphysics on such lyric effects, but that would be treasonable.

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Dear *Chicago Review*,

The British poetry issue was very impressive, and I want to thank Michael Robbins especially for taking the time to review Martin Corless-Smith's *Swallows*, which is a work that justifiably demands our focused attention. Robbins's reversal of Alan Halsey's point that *Swallows* “doesn't bear ‘more than a passing resemblance to our accustomed expectation of a poetry collection’” offers a telling lesson in how this category, as something that can be neither fully absorbed nor repudiated, keeps coming up as an index of literary achievement. What does a book look like that doesn't resemble other books or that isn't saturated by contexts that inform it and make it legible? In that sense, Robbins's claim that *Swallows* resembles his “accustomed expectation of a poetry collection to a depressingly high degree” should be recognized not as among the book's embarrassments but as among precisely the issues of individuation and arrival, or, to put it another way, of novelty and production, that *Swallows* is so intensely bringing into focus. In locating that focus (and it is only one aspect of a large and complicated book) we also locate the legacies of history (through the seductive search for Horace's Sabine Villa and our intensification of self vis-à-vis our obsession with the erasure of self in Keats) that have been erected, retrospectively, to reify these questions.

We can see then that, first, Robbins's dismissal of *Swallows* as “old news” in its “ongoing deconstruction of what has always already been thoroughly