



<b>Title</b>	Poetics
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<b>Publication date</b>	2011-08
<b>Publication information</b>	Williams, Nerys. "Poetics" 19, no. 1 (August, 2011).
<b>Publisher</b>	Oxford University Press
<b>Item record/more information</b>	<a href="http://hdl.handle.net/10197/7157">http://hdl.handle.net/10197/7157</a>
<b>Publisher's statement</b>	This is a pre-copyedited, author-produced PDF of an article accepted for publication in The Year's Work in Critical and Cultural Theory following peer review. The definitive publisher-authenticated version, 'Poetics', The Year's Work in Critical and Cultural Theory, Volume: 19, Issue: 1, Page numbers: 159-172 (2011) is available online at: <a href="http://ywctt.oxfordjournals.org/content/19/1/159">http://ywctt.oxfordjournals.org/content/19/1/159</a> .
<b>Publisher's version (DOI)</b>	10.1093/ywctt/mbr007

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**Poetics**

Nerys Williams

**Summary**

This chapter presents an overview of current critical enterprises regarding the conceptualisation of poetics primarily in twentieth and twenty-first century poetries. Covering criticism published during 2010, this review assesses debates concerning the tensions between a poetics of self-expression and the public sphere, the political efficacy of contemporary poetry, the impact of Asia and Asian philosophy on American poetics, the identity of Jewish-American modernist and contemporary poetics, as well as the relationship between poetry, community and social relations. The chapter also introduces a critical reconvening or re-reading of the New American Poetry in tandem with reflections on configurations of masculinity, subjectivity and phenomenology. Comparative readings of the modern ruin are offered through readings of European poets and poets of the Americas. Moreover the discussion incorporates recent studies on the following: poetry that perform encounters with the nonhuman world, the regeneration of the lyric impulse by contemporary poets, how poetry reflects upon issues of displacement and exile as well as a reflection on the negative effect of poststructuralist discourse on the critical reception of certain poetries in the past.

The tensions between a poetics of intense self-expression and a poetics of the public sphere is actively interrogated in *Intimate Exposure*, a collection of essays whose premise is to examine the public-private divide in post-war British poetry. ‘British’ here is taken in its wider geographical scope as British Isles, since one section of the volume concentrates on the poetry of Seamus Heaney exclusively. The book’s ambition is to consider the ‘Platonic Aristotelian duality

that has always dominated discussion of poetics in the West' (p. 9). Editors Emily Taylor Merriman and Adrian Grafe explain that that the private element of this dialectic is Platonic 'inward psychological, the inspiration lying behind the poem, the beauty of ideal poetic form or forms' (p. 9). Correspondingly, the public realm of poetry is interpreted as Aristotelian— the 'technical or linguistic realization in the form of in the poet's mind, the utterance of the idea' (p. 9). At the close of their introduction the editors stress that this division of 'intimacy as Platonic, exposure Aristotelian' (p. 9) is not a given for every poem. Indeed they stress that a poem may perform publicly and privately simultaneously.

Several of the poets featured are the usual suspects in a particular vein of post war British Poetry. This selection includes Ted Hughes, Tony Harrison and Geoffrey Hill. Of course a focus on canonicity is not necessarily a restriction, but given the scope and ambition of the project, two essays each on Geoffrey Hill and Harrison, with three exclusively on Heaney, does limit the range of post-war British poetries presented here. Marc Porée offers a lively review of poetry's engagement with the public imagination in his 'Poetry as "Open Diagnosis."' He suggests that the enthusiastic public reception of Hughes's *Birthday Letters* indicated the revelation of 'something extraordinarily personal' (p. 14). Porée proposes that the reception of Hughes's volume was framed by 'an added frisson presumably derived from the bitterly ironic awareness that Hughes was aligning himself at long last with a self-confessed confessional poetics' (p. 14). Using the term 'diagnosis' to mean a 'form of pathology and therapy, auscultation and self-torture' (p. 14) he considers how Hughes's work conducted a risky analysis of personal history in public. Daniel Szabo investigates the boundaries between private and public in Welsh Anglican minister and poet R.S. Thomas's work. Usefully Szabo proposes that for this fiercely private, but

notoriously nationalistic figure, poetry was a vehicle for exploring his personal belief. Szabo states that while Thomas in public was resistant to revealing 'too much of his own metaphysical doubt' (p. 65), his poetry underlines his own 'suffering, sometimes his hope of communicating with God through ritual, through nature and finally through his own silence' (p. 65).

One essay that attracted my immediate attention was Robert Archambeau's provocatively entitled 'Public Faces in Private Places: Messianic Privacy in Cambridge Poetry'. While poets loosely affiliated to the Cambridge School resist definitive characterisation of their work, Archambeau's own description works convincingly enough. He describes the work of Cambridge poets such as Tom Raworth, John Wilkinson, Jeremy Prynne, and a younger generation – Keston Sutherland, Andrea Brady and Simon Jarvis 'as a hermetic poetry, circulated outside the regular system of publication among a small group of cognoscenti' (p. 31). He adds that the dominant texture of writing affiliated to the school performs 'what we might call a kind of striation of discourses, a mixing of poetic verbal registers with resolutely un-poetic kinds of language – scientific discourse, technocratic forms of language and the like' (p. 34). Critics such as Richard Kerridge have claimed that poetries associated with the school 'collide with the powerful instrumental discourses of the culture' with an effect of 'smashing them into pieces' (p. 34). Causing some controversy with its publication, Archambeau's essay pointedly asks 'what ought we make of a school of poetry that has strong public concern, but no appreciable public presence' (p. 31). A central and thoughtful question posed by this essay is 'can poets who choose such marginal venues and who eschew the pursuit of more popular distribution really 'challenge' the public sphere?' (p. 37). This essay poses important questions on the ethical claims for poetry and its political efficacy. Other essays included in *Intimate Exposure* consider Stephen Romer's 'Les

Portes de la Nuit’, performance in the poetry of patience Agbabi and the poetics of a Northern dialect.

What indeed makes a poem an activist poem and the poet an activist? These are key tenets in John Kinsella’s collection of essays and musings *Activist Poetics: Anarchy in the Avon Valley*. Long time environmentalist, Kinsella states that ‘environmentalism ... is what I do in my life and in my writing’ (p. 1). He adds that ‘however, long ago – I differentiated between polemic and open-endedness, between rhetoric and, if one likes, the lyric impulse’ (p. 1). Kinsella claims that poetry can act as a form of resistance to social and ethical ills as well as ecological concerns. In his opening chapter ‘Herewith the (Auto) Razo: Activism and the Poet’ Kinsella is at pains to distinguish between political protest poetry used in demonstrations and the ‘activist’ poem he is describing. He suggests that polemical or protest poems are the most ‘ineffective outside their immediate moment of action’ (p. 2). They are characterised by ‘absorbable singsong and banal rhythms and strict rhyming patterns: these are “aids to memory”, mnemonic devices to allow the message to be carried by word of mouth’ (p. 2). A protest poem ‘means exactly what it says, serves a specific purpose and is never intended to grow with the telling’ (p. 2). Contrastingly, the activist poem in Kinsella’s configuration should motivate investigation, and not tell readers what to think.’ (p. 2). Usefully, the poet chronicles how the activist poem might work in the process of political direct action. He poses that before he takes public action through writing a letter of complaint, giving a lecture or attending a protest he may ‘inevitably write a poem on the subject’ (p. 3) For Kinsella, poems often follow action as well since for him ‘the writing of poems becomes a part of a mantra of witness and empowerment’ (p. 3).

*Activist Poetics*' compelling blend of personal witness, aesthetic rumination and illustration provides a useful environmentalist poetics handbook. The thirteen chapters offer insights into the personal experience of political activism and its relationship to poetry. Some of these titles form manifestos such as 'Standing up to Aggressors', 'Why I am a Pacifist' as well as a proposal for 'The School of Environmental Poetics of Creativity.' Kinsella offers an 'activist' reading of three early modern Australian poets 'A.D. Hope C.J. Brennan and John Boyle O'Reilly. One of the key essays 'Geodyplasia: Geographical Abnormalities & Anomalies of an Activist Poetics', builds upon his earlier poetics statements concerning a form of 'radical', or 'neo', or 'post', or (even) 'poisoned' pastoral. Traditionally pastoral poetry presents a romanticised, idealised or nostalgic impression of countryside spaces, often targeted at an urban audience. Kinsella has suggested that his radical pastoral' arises from the human destruction of landscapes and indigenous cultures. In 'Geodyplasia' he presents the situation of the environmentalist witnessing the 'abnormal' being made 'normal' through the clearing of land. He comments that 'Most locals see the natural bushed area as an irritating aberration, that they would clear for pasture or cropping at first opportunity' (p. 92). He adds that 'in attempting to deal with these conflicting contradictions of presence and interaction with the land, I have, over my life, turned to poetry with its expectations of anomaly and ambiguity' (p. 92). While he recognises that 'the health of the land is being compromised beyond hope', he does not believe in 'such a thing as good or bad, normal or abnormal' (p. 92). This conflict between environmental destruction and the refutation of criteria of worth is described in the essay as a 'clash between linguistic anomaly and environmental exactness' (p. 22).

From another initially very different perspective, Mark Payne's *The Animal Part: Human & Other Animals in the Poetic Imagination* opens with a reflection on the natural world. Beginning by recounting an early hunting expedition, Payne's volume considers humans' acknowledgement of their own status as animals among other animals. The book reflects upon literary works that perform encounters with the nonhuman world. His introduction frames this sense of encounter through Levinas's discussion of the ethical engagement with the Other. Drawing from Derrida's delightful late essay 'The Animal that Therefore I am' (2006)– which describes at one point the philosopher's description of the anxiety he feels being seen naked by his cat– Payne poses that 'Derrida is especially concerned to particularize talk about animals, to move philosophical discussion from the "animal" as opposed to the "human" toward the experience of particular animals' (p. 9). The introduction also reflects upon philosopher Thomas Nagel's famous paper 'What is it like to be a Bat' (1974). According to Payne, Nagel suggests that 'there is a deliberate procedure to imaging the life of an another animal.' (p. 14). Payne continues his analysis of the paper posing that:

Nagel's assertion of impossibility rests on a contrast between successful and unsuccessful imagining. But what would it mean to imagine being a bat... unsuccessfully? For Nagel it means not to have the perceptual experience of a bat, but this is not to be a bat, not to fail to imagine being one. (p. 14).

Eventually Nagel proposes that 'to experience an animals life requires a more sustained effort at understanding than the momentary knowledge... that emerges from shared corporeality' (p. 19). *The Animal Part* frames its discussion of how animals are imagined and created through poetic

thinking into two main sections. The first section entitled ‘The Abject Animal’ initially considers the work of William Carlos Williams. Through a focus on Williams’s *Paterson* and later volumes *The Desert Music*, *Journey into Love* and *Pictures from Breughel* Nagel investigates the representation of vulnerable, injured or dying animals in tandem with the techniques Williams claimed for his poetics at this time. Entitled ‘the Beast in Pain’ this chapter considers ‘assertions of emotional continuity between human beings and other animals, particularly in areas of aggression and wounding’ (p. 28). Interestingly, Payne makes the claim that Williams ‘does not proclaim generalized laws of animal behavior, so that human beings can be satirized for diverging from them’ (p. 53). Instead the poet looks ‘for actions in which the characteristics of individual animals manifest themselves against the background of norms for their species’ (p. 53). The second chapter in this section considers human aggression directed towards animals, referring to a story by Gustave Flaubert ‘La légende de Saint Julien l’Hospitalier’, the sonnets of Gerard Manley Hopkins and the late *Cantos* of Ezra Pound. The second section of the book ‘Becoming Something Else’ account for attempts to negotiate boundaries separating human beings from other animals; it examines the process of joining a society of animals in works by Aristophanes, Herman Melville, Louis Ferdinand Céline. The final essay of Payne’s volume reflects upon the shape shifting bodies, involving the processes of becoming an animal in Semonides, Ovid and H.P. Lovecraft.

Will Montgomery’s *The Poetry of Susan Howe: History, Theology and Authority* builds upon the work of established critics such as Kathleen Fraser, Rachel Blau du Plessis, Lynn Keller, Marjorie Perloff, Peter Nicholls, Peter Middleton and Elizabeth Frost. Of the poets loosely affiliated to that now historical movement, known as language writing, Howe’s poetics



are the most broadly investigated from differing perspectives of architecture, visual arts, theology, documentation and experimentation. As Montgomery poses in his introduction ‘in recent years it has become clear that there are numerous contexts in which Howe’s work can be read’, a proposition which is highlighted by his monograph’s subtitle ‘History, Theology, Authority’. The book aims to be ‘a comprehensive survey of Howe’s poetry’ and is informed by Howe’s own critical writings such as *My Emily Dickinson* and *Birth-Mark*. Montgomery asserts that his book progresses thematically, beginning with Howe’s writing’s ‘relationship to tropes of displacement and authority’ (p. xxi). His opening chapter considers Howe’s Irish roots as a site for what Montgomery calls ‘Maternal Disinheritance’. He continues by examining ‘the mechanisms of metamorphosis’ apparent in Howe’s poetry of the 1980s that ‘anchors itself in the Renaissance imagination’ (p. xxi). The meeting of Europe and America is explored in a chapter on Howe’s volume *Singularities*, while another considers the interrelationship between poetics, print and manuscripts. The book closes with a consideration of the lyric impulse in Howe’s work and how we may begin to categorise or respond to the particular challenges to more established lyric forms associated with workshop poetry.

The conclusion explores whether Howe’s poetry can be read as a form of ‘late lyric’. This term coined by critic Elizabeth Willis in her essay ‘Some thoughts on the late lyric’ (2002) to indicate a crossover between avant-garde or experimental practice and lyricism, describes emergent lyric works which are highly self-aware and embrace formal multiplicity. The late lyric in Willis’s definition creates a lyric texture that is ‘overlaid or mixed with other influences, forms and rhetorical sampling’ (p. 145). Usefully she poses that the late lyric acknowledges that it is not a derivative of within ‘but from elsewhere’ (p. 145). Cast in this light the late lyric is not ‘self-

expressive except to the extent that ideas of self or voice are never entirely absent from the tonal shadings of language' (p. 145). Much has been written in the past of Howe's palaeontological texts, with a focus on the stammering inadequacies of the poetic voice in her work. Howe's poetry is often read in terms of its tracings, evacuations and absences. For Montgomery, Howe's more recent volumes *Rückenfigur* (1999), *Bed Hangings* (2000) and *Souls of Labadie Tract* (2007), with their emphasis on sound and brevity, place a strong focus on a lyric encounter. Essentially Montgomery views Howe's poetry as informed by this lyric tracing, even Howe's 'wounded syntax' (p. 146) performs an iteration of lyric impulse. On a more general note, Montgomery usefully comments that 'Lyric writing after modernism can be explained by neither an approximation to song; nor brevity; nor the continuity of the lyric subject; nor a passionate, intimate or even private register' (p. 146). Yet, as he emphasises, 'traces of all these features whether ironically deployed or not, can be found in Howe's writing, despite its formal radicalism' (p. 146). Read in this light, Howe's work extends the terrain of our preconceptions regarding lyric ambition.

Given the rapid expansion of masculinity studies over the past years into subject areas as diverse as fiction, music and media, Andrew Massin's *Male Subjectivity and Poetic Form in 'New American' Poetry* provides a welcome addition. The five chapters cover the work of poets Charles Olson, Robert Duncan, Robin Blaser and Nathaniel Mackey. Massin's argument proposes that 'masculinity and the various subjectivities that developed its discourses are foundational aspects of male poetic practice' (p. 3). He continues by explaining that his aim is to 'tease out the relationship between masculinity and the broader framework of gender and the authorial subjectivity that develops in response to sociocultural pressure by the male subject' (p.

3). A key element of Massin's investigation is its focus upon the 'formation of manhood' through the poetic work (p. 4). Moreover his volume considers the impact of collaborative relationships established by male poets upon their poetics. Invariably ideas of literary collaboration are also connected to ideas of literary community. Massin explains that his early interest in poets of the San Francisco Renaissance drew him to reflect upon how 'these writers had initiate poetic communities or, perhaps more appropriately, poetic coteries, and situated themselves in a collaborative set of personal and aesthetic relations that had a direct effect on the poetry they produced for and with one another' (p. 5). He initially takes as examples the activist poetics of Allen Ginsberg and Duncan with their complex sense of the interrelationship between leftist politics and gay activism. Friendship forms an important strand to conceptions of collaborative poetic practices, and Massin cites how earlier studies have focuses on male friendship between poets as performing strategies of exclusion, often reflecting homosocial and misogynistic commentary. His book argues that these male friendships were an enabling factor in furthering the ambitions of avant-garde and innovative practices. In explaining his methodology of using community as a framing mechanism, Massin states that this book is not meant as a survey:

I've chosen poets whose careers and moment represent particularly revealing tendencies within the post-war avant-garde, specifically as these relate to questions of gender and the development of alternative poetic forms in response to the larger cultural and historical pressures placed on the poets and their work. (p. 6).

Taking as his starting point Olson's notorious pronouncement in 'Projective Verse' that the poet must resist the 'lyrical interference of the individual as ego' (p. 9), a major part of this book is dedicated to the relationship between poetic form and the representation of male subjectivity. The poets featured in the volume not only 'share a joint legacy in the modernist and postmodernist avant-garde' but a rooting in 'the lyric tradition' (p. 9). Massin's book identifies how the poets in the book strive to create forms concomitant with ideas of postmodern subjectivity. Through this lens of renovated lyric forms, the discussion proposes that Duncan incorporates into his poetry a late Romantic stance presenting a 'shifting and multiple self echoed back through time' (p. 9). Olson's lyric is identified with his ambition for an objectivist subject, whereas Mackey's poetry inscribes 'cross cultural' and 'multitextual voicings' (p. 9) to establish a poetic language adequate to the expression of the subjective self. Certainly this work with its focus on the performance of masculinity through lyric form offers an important and compelling examination of the 'politics of the lyric and the continuing viability of lyric as part of postmodern discourse' (p. 10).

Miriam Nichols's *Radical Affections: Essays on the Poetics of Outside* also revisits the reception of the New American Poetry. The six poets she considers include: Charles Olson, Robert Creeley, Robert Duncan, Jack Spicer, Robin Blaser and Susan Howe. Her work offers 'a contemporary reframing' (p. 1) of existing methodologies for approaching the poetics of the New American Poetry. Nichols considers that established approaches rely too heavily on the ideas posed by the poets themselves in their essays and overemphasises the degree of rupture or breakage exhibited in their work. Yet, Nichols is at pains to reaffirm the continued importance of Olson's manifesto essay 'Projective Verse' as a useful vehicle for new poetics:

Projective verse offers an adaptable, pragmatic poetic methodology and it articulates a range of experience of ongoing significance. I believe it has been too quickly dispatched to the far side of 'over' for theoretical reasons– the wrong reasons, in my view. Olson famously appealed to perceptual experience as a means of renewing poetic language and restoring the 'familiar' – intimacy with nature and the body – to the human species. In the 1970s and '80s however, it was precisely perception that fell under Jacques Derrida's poststructuralist critique of phenomenology. (p. 3).

She reflects that academia's embrace of poststructuralist theory during the late 1970s and 1980s made Olson's projective poetics appear anachronistic and at odds with the noetic tendencies of the postmodern. Olson's mythopoetic position with 'its situating of humanity in a cosmos "outside" the mind seemed naive in comparison to the movement of psychology and postmodern philosophies that had 'so firmly moved everything in' (p. 3). Reflecting on her choice of poets she cites their 'mutual influence' (p. 11) as a compelling way of presenting a narrative of 'an evolving poetics' (p. 11). Olson and Creeley were of course affiliated to the Black Mountain School, whereas Duncan, Spicer and Blaser have a relation to the Berkeley Renaissance. Finally, Susan Howe acknowledges the importance of Olson, Creeley and Duncan who are important poetic predecessors to the Berkeley Renaissance.

Nichols's first chapter considers Olson as an architect of a new form of poetics and interrogates the poet's key terms 'kosmos', 'field' and 'human universe' (p. 12). Creeley's efforts to conceive works which stay within one temporal moment are interrogated in the second chapter.

Nichols reflects upon the relationship of Creeley's poetics to Olson's emphasis upon the 'resituating of humanity in space' (p. 13). Challenging the overpowering perception of Duncan as a poet of mythopoesis, religious imagery and the occult, Nichols asks us to consider his works as 'a cultural archive' which includes 'the possible as well as the actual, the unreal, and phantasmatic; the camp, the trivial, the wicked as well as the profound' (p. 13). She argues that although known as a derivative poet, with his ventriloquism of other writers, Duncan's poetry 'knocks at the boundaries of what it means to be human' (p. 14). Reading Spicer 'against' Duncan, the fourth chapter considers the powerful lyricism that he creates from 'gaming, magic, mysticism, surrealism, dictation' (p. 14). In contrast to Duncan, it is not the *grand collage* which forms the axis of Spicer's poetics, but private passion. In this way Nicholls reads Spicer as advocating Olson's proposition of "'aleness" in the "felt world"' (p. 14). Blaser's poetics have tended to be overshadowed by a focus on both Spicer and Duncan's work. *Radical Affections* proposes that Blaser's poetry extends the phenomenological import of Olson's ideas through his 'vigorous defence of perceptual experience in essays and poems written over the 1970s and 1980s' (p. 14). In Nichols's view Blaser's main contribution to a projective poetics is his extension of Olson's treatment of myth, through his interest in irreligious experience. To situate Howe in this world of male poets might seem initially disconcerting, but as we have already noted, Howe is explicit in her acknowledging of a debt to a lineage of projective poetics. Nichols remarks that Howe 'expands Olson's field to include diverging perspectives and trajectories' (p. 15). The discussion adds that Howe's poetry through her treatment of history and manuscripts confronts 'the cannibal cosmos – the cruelty of becoming or world-as-process – for which there is no remedy.' (p. 15).

Continuing in this vein of reappraising twentieth century American poetics, *Radical Poetics and Secular Jewish Culture* (in its first paperback version) edited by Stephen Paul Miller and Daniel Morris, asks the complex question of whether one can detect discernible characteristics to the work of Jewish poets writing in a modernist tradition. This question is problematised by the fact that many of the essays in this bumper collection acknowledge ‘you need not be Jewish’ (p. xiv) to write ‘Jewish Poetry.’ The examples cited are Hank Lazer’s analysis of ‘Jewish qualities’ (p. xiv) in Fanny Howe’s poetry, Marjorie Perloff’s recognition of Paul Celan and Wallace Stevens as ‘poetic contemporaries’, and Miller’s own analysis of Spalding Gray’s self-portrayal as Jewish. The collection emerged from a poetry symposium held at the American Jewish Historical Center in 2004. Daniel Morris reminds us that the original papers were aimed to address the following questions about Jewish secular identity posed by Charles Bernstein:

What are the innovations and inventions of American Jewish poets over the past century? Can we say that there is a distinctly Jewish component to radical modernist and contemporary poetry? What is the relation of Jewish modernist and contemporary poets to the historical avant-garde and to contemporary poets to the historical avant-garde and to contemporary innovative poetry? How do Jewish cultural life and ethnic and religious forms and traditions manifest themselves in the forms, styles, and approaches to radical American poetry? What role does a distinctly secular approach to Jewishness by poets and other Jewish artists mean for ‘radical Jewish culture’? (p. 1-2).

Perhaps as a result of this guiding intervention, the presence of Bernstein looms large in this collection of twenty-eight sections. Two critical essays alone are dedicated to the poet's libretto *Shadowtime* for the opera based on the life and work of Walter Benjamin. Bernstein's own essay 'Radical Jewish culture / Secular Jewish Practice' presents Jewishness as a performative aspect of identity: 'I am no more Jewish than when I refuse imposed definitions of what Jewishness means... Jewishness can, even must, in one of its multiple manifestations, be an aversion of identification – as practices of dialogue and as openness to the unfolding performance of the everyday. Call it the civic practice of Jewishness.' (p. 13). Most importantly, he identifies a major strand of Objectivist poetry as Jewish-American second-wave modernist poetry. The central figures he identifies are: Louis Zukofsky, Charles Reznikoff, George Oppen, Muriel Rukeyser and Laura Riding. Usefully he comments upon Zukofsky's 'A Poem Beginning "The"' as both a Jewish response to Eliot's *The Waste Land* and 'as an extraordinary poem about the tensions of assimilation for the young poet with Yiddish in his ears, into an Anglophilic literary culture' (15).

Several essays in the collection examine the work of Objectivist poets from a Jewish-American background. Ranen Omer-Sherman's 'Charles Reznikoff's Urban Poetics of Diaspora and Contingency' presents a reading of Reznikoff's radical poetics which suggests that identity in his poetry performs as interplay between self and other. Omer-Sherman comments that Reznikoff faced the 'daunting challenge to prove his literary value in spite of a world that was largely indifferent to the voices of "ethnic" poets until near the end of his lifetime' (p. 110). The critic adds that Reznikoff's poetics offer a 'direct and unadorned poetry rooted in humility and concern for the disenfranchised that is never condescending precisely because it encompasses his own



identity, achieving a tangible mutability' p. (110). Closely linked to ideas of responsibility to the other as well as ethical responsibility, Zukofsky's poetry presents a radical humanistic poetics, argues Joshua Schuster. Schuster interprets Zukofsky's long work "A" and his use of Judaism as a way of demonstrating a secular Jewish identity or a mean to 'invent the very notion of secularism out of Judaism' (p. 130). The editors suggest that Reznikoff's 'diasporic poetics' (p. 5) are 'carried forward in the work of several contemporary Jewish American poets' (p. 5) which include the work of Alicia Ostriker, Norman Finkelstein and Rachel Blau du Plessis. All of these poets offer reflective analyses and theoretical proposals in the volume. In addition the book includes poems by Bob Holman and Paul Auster. Other essays focus on a consideration of the experimental grammar of Gertrude Stein by Amy Feinstein, a reflection on Zukofsky's body of poetry by Bob Perelman, on the translation processes of Yiddish poetry, analysed by Kathryn Hellerstein, as well as on a discussion of radical relations in the poetry of Muriel Rukeyser and George Oppen by Meg Shoerke.

Another work reflecting upon the complex intertwining of cultural identity and poetics is Jonathan Stalling's *Transformations of Asian Thought in American Poetry*. Stalling considers how poetic figures of the twentieth century present American formulations of East Asia and the Pacific Rim in their poetics. These developments are chronicled firstly through the work of Ernest Fenollosa, Gary Snyder, Wai Lim Yip and Theresa Kyung Cha. In his introduction Stalling notes that:

I want not only to chart the catalytic role that concepts of emptiness have come in the creation (imagining) of new poetic discourses and aesthetics in twentieth-century American literature, but

also to show how these discourses draw upon and contribute to distortions of East Asian poetics and philosophy generated from within historically and politically specific social contexts. (p. 3).

He adds that in trying to define and explain the distortions of East Asian poetics, he aims to assess how each poet ‘transforms both East Asian philosophy and American poetics through their explicit attempts to fuse distinct discourses into new, heterocultural productions’ (p. 5). Central to the book’s argument is the reappraisal of the term ‘transpacific’ as a way to understanding this symbiotic geographical discourse. His usage draws from a formulation of ‘transpacific’ by Yunte Huang with the latter’s framing of the term through ideas of displacement. Huang’s use of ‘transpacific’ emphasises ‘a historical process of textual migration of cultural meanings, meanings that include linguistic traits, poetics, philosophical ideas, myths, stories and so on’ (p. 4). Moreover, Stalling explains his use of the term ‘heterocultural’ as a method for denoting a transpacific poetics. He proposes that ‘heterocultural’ avoids ‘the pitfalls of “cross” “inter” and “trans” cultural since it does not posit two autonomous cultures between which transmissions or crossings can occur, nor a transcendent position beyond culture itself’ (7). Instead ideas of the heterocultural complicate ‘the very conceptual integrity of concepts of culture altogether’ (p. 7).

The introduction presents an overview of what Stalling calls the ‘poetics of emptiness or the cult of nothingness’ (p. 10). His discussion impresses upon us how writers at the beginning of the twentieth century were attempting to bring to American Letters ‘new languages adapted from two distinct and yet heterogeneous philosophical systems (Buddhism and Daoism)’ (p. 11). This inclusion was an attempt to expand thought beyond the horizon of binaries such as ‘being/ non-being, existence/ non-existence... fullness /emptiness’ (p. 10). Considering Ernest Fenollosa’s

much circulated and cited work ‘The Chinese Character as a Medium for Poetry’ (1919) Stalling assesses the critics’ commentaries on his ‘ideogrammatic method’ as erroneous and suggests that the pursuit of a transcendental or Adamic language needs to be considered in the historical context of his writings. Instead he suggests that the ‘startlingly rich heterocultural poetics’ is exemplified in Fenollosa’s ‘complex weave of Western philosophy and Buddhist epistemology’ (p. 37). A chapter on Gary Snyder’s poetics considers how Snyder’s poetry ‘responds to the task of transmitting Buddhist law/ teaching’ (p. 97). The discussion of Wai-Lim Yip’s writings explores his combination of ancient Chinese philosophy, translation theory and modernist poetics to create a poetics of emptiness. Stalling poses that Yip’s poetry and his critical writings ‘reveals a uniquely transpacific vision of Chinese and American Modernism’ (p. 126). Cha’s *Dictée* has most frequently been read as a critique of gendered postcolonial resistance. Stalling considers that many of the ‘epistemological insights’ of the book can be read through Cha’s engagement with theorists such as Roland Barthes and her own ‘appropriation of Daoist and shamanic language and concepts’ (p. 160). To conclude, this volume attempts to emphasise how ‘Asian philosophical discourses and aesthetic traditions are already interfused within American literary discourses’ (p. 198). Stalling challenges that it is up to critics to ‘learn how to engage with these heterocultural conditions, not to idealize them or lament their difficulty or impossibility of their introduction from a mythic “outside”’ (p. 198).

The thirtieth edition of *Alif* focuses on ideas of trauma and loss in collective and individual memory. This journal of comparative poetics aims to extend the range of critical writing concerning trauma and memory studies to include material from Algeria, Egypt, Iraq, Iran, India, Lebanon, Palestine, Pakistan, multi ethnic America and Greece. Frequently appearing in a

multilingual format, this particular edition is divided into an English and Arabic language section. One of the essays in English, by Ibis Gómez-Vega specifically considers contemporary poetry. The poetry of Naomi Shihab Nye, born in the US to a Palestinian father and American mother examines war in the Middle East and her own positioning to the war as an American citizen. Shihab-Nye's open letter 'To Any Would be Terrorist' written shortly following 9-11, attempts to 'change the American mainstream perception of Arabs by providing readers with images of Arabs whom she knows and loves' (p. 110). While Shihab-Nye is not an exile and has never experienced cultural displacement, her poetry is acutely aware of the problems of exile and the sense of nostalgia it may induce. Gómez-Vega reiterates near the close of her essay that the poetics of this American writer are invariably informed by the negotiation of heritage and family experience of displacement. The critic states that 'Writing personal problems in the shadow of larger communal issues has become Shihab-Nye's life work. She rewrites the negative stereotypes of Arabs without losing track of the political turmoil that caused their grief and displacement in the first place' (p. 121). It is worth noting that other English language essays concerning a poetics of trauma and memory include work by the following: Anna Bernard 'Forms of Memory: Partition as a Literary Paradigm'; James McDougall 'Social Memories "in the Flesh": War and Exile in Algeria Self-Writing'; Vincent Crapanzano 'The Wound that Never Heals'; Abdennebi Ben Beya 'The Question of Reading Traumatic Testimony: Jones's *Corregidora* and Morrison's *Beloved*'; Vassiliki Kotini 'Aristophane's Response to the Peloponnesian War and the Defeat of the Comic War'; Walid El Hamamsy's 'Epistolary Memory: Revisiting Traumas in Women's Writing'; Mark Westmoreland 'Catastrophic Subjectivity: Representing Lebanon's Undead' and Magda Romanska 'Trauma and Testimony: Heather Raffo's *9 Parts of Desire*'. These essays extend our understanding of representing

trauma not only from their discussions of literary genres, but references to films, fiction, folk culture and the visual arts.

Finally, Cecilia Enjuto Rangel's comparative study *Cities in Ruins: The Politics of Modern Poetics* examines the prevalence of urban ruins in a wide range of modernist poetics from around the world. For example, the roles of urban ruins are examined in the poetry of Charles Baudelaire in tandem with Luis Cernuda's writing; T.S. Eliot's representation of the cityscape in his poetry is placed in dialogue with the poetry of Octavio Paz; reflections upon the Spanish Civil War are framed as a transatlantic relationship in the poetics of Langston Hughes and Nicolás Guillén and chapter five is dedicated to Pablo Neruda's cities in ruins, chronicling a poetic history from Madrid to Machu Piccu. Beginning the work just after the 9-11 attacks Rangel explains how the momentum of the writing with its focus on the evocation of ruins in modern poetry became a politicised and important historical narrative:

Ruins evoked an imminent sense of reality and gave these poems, these *artificial* products, a powerful scent of authenticity. Contemporary events and the modern ruins remind us of the political impact the Spanish Civil War and the two World Wars had in the development of the poetic topos earlier in the twentieth century. For instance, Pablo Neruda's experiences in the Spanish Civil War molded his vision of the Inca ruins and Latin American politics and poetry: and the new mechanized machines of mass carnage of World War I are also unmistakably present in T.S. Eliot's metaphoric language in *The Waste Land*, itself in dialogue with soldier poets like Wilfred Owen. (p. 3).

Rangel conceptualises the modern topos of ruins as a critique of capitalist progress and the horrific effects of modern warfare. Evoking Theodor Adorno, she proposes that ruins in modern poetry evoke not only an ‘apocalyptic vision of history’ and ‘a poetics of disillusionment’ but a process of ‘cultural mourning’ (p. 4). With reference to Walter Benjamin’s *Arcades Project* she adds that ruins in modern poetry do not provide the melancholic representation of the past characteristic of Romantic poetry, rather they evoke ‘a historical awakening’ (p. 4). This awakening in turn ‘empowers the text with political and historical agency’ (p. 4). Rangel explains that these ruins however configure a complex sense of time since:

The Latin *ruo* “to rush or fall” initially meant that ruin was a movement, the process of collapse. Through time the word *ruin* also came to signify the result of the destructive motion, the remains of a historical past. (5).

Usefully she also proposes that ruins cannot only be defined as broken and abandoned buildings, ‘ruins can have a human shape’ (13). The emotions evoked by modern ruins may also be of shock, trauma and nostalgia. For Baudelaire, the shock and disillusionment with a degraded cityscape and its humanity often ‘represents a historical awakening in the face of the erasure of the past and its margins’ resulting in a reshaping of how the ‘present will be remembered’ (p. 276). Unsurprisingly the chapter on Eliot stresses aspects of the poet’s cultural conservatism. *The Waste Land* is described as ‘reflecting upon a wider historical interpretation: the social and cultural decay of Western civilisation, which he calls the “disintegration of the intellect”’ (p. 101). A chapter on the Spanish Civil War considers the solidarity between Hughes and Guillén’s war poems. Rangel interprets Hughes’s work as a ‘redefinition of Spain and of war as an

international event' (p. 158). While reading ruins in Hughes and Guillén's poems as the 'damaged bodies racialization', the critic emphasises that their poems extend our critical understanding of modern warfare and fascist ideology' (p. 163). Key to this comparative reading of poetics from Europe and the Americas is the sense in which the modern poet uses 'ruins to reread and rewrite their historical and literary traditions' (p. 274). This confrontation with ruins often evokes a political awakening in the poet. Most importantly these processes of excavation engender in modern poetics a political agency, which resists any easy disillusionment with modern life.

### Books Reviewed

Gaol, Ferial J. ed. *Ali Journal of Comparative Poetics Trauma and Memory No. 30*. American University in Cairo. [2010] pp. 536. pb £17.95. ISBN-13: 978-9774164071.

Kinsella, John. *Activist Poetics: Anarchy in the Avon Valley*. LiverpoolUP. [2010] pp. xi + 224. hb £65. ISBN-13: 978-1846314698.

Massin, Andrew. *Male Subjectivity and Poetic Form in New American Poetry*. Palgrave. [2010] pp. ix + 235. hb £52.50. ISBN-13: 978-0230617322.

Merriman, Emily Taylor and Adrian Grafe, eds *Intimate Exposure: Essays on the Public Private Divide in British Poetry Since 1950*. McFarland. [2010] pp. 229. pb. £42.50. ISBN-13: 978-0786442218 +

Miller, Stephen and Paul Daniel Morris, eds. *Radical Poetics and Secular Jewish Culture*. AlabamaUP. [2010] pp. xvi + 456. pb £35.50. ISBN-10: 0817355634.

Montgomery, Will. *The Poetry of Susan Howe: History, Theology, Authority*. Palgrave. [2010] pp. xxiii + 219. hb £52.50. ISBN-13: 978-0230621978.

Nichols, Miriam *Radical Affections: Essays on the Poetics of the Outside*. AlabamaUP. [2010] pp. xxii + 355. pb £31.50 ISBN-13: 978-0817317119.

Payne, Mark. *The Animal Part Human and Other Animals in the Poetic Imagination*. UChicP. [2010] pp. 164. hb £22.50. ISBN-10: 0226650847.

Rangel, Cecilia Enjuto. *Cities in Ruins The Politics of Modern Poetics* PurdueUP. [2010] pp. xi + 363. pb £40.50. ISBN-13: 978-1557535719.

Stalling, Jonathan. *Poetics of Emptiness Transformations of Asian Thought in American Poetry*. FordhamUP. [2010] pp. xxiii + 267. hb. £39.95 ISBN-13: 978-0823231447.