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Editorial: Against Methods of Assessment

Here everything is bathed in the adequate clarity and delicious obscurity of harmony.

(Baudelaire, "The Double Room")

ONE WORD ABOVE ALL OTHERS dominated the response to our first number: obscurity. In the back pages of the TLS, for example, our poetry was deftly glossed as "impenetrable." This is symptomatic: "difficulty" becomes an increasingly common and glib place-holder for "difficult" poetry itself—something to be dismissed out of hand—which is frustrating for those who hold that to challenge the reader is to encourage *more* and not *less* thorough engagement with life and literature. But there was fruitful debate too, as seen in the responses to issue 1 toward the back of this volume. Gerald Bruns, for example, takes up Raymond Geuss's enigmatic claim that a kind of "productive obscurity" might have transformative potential both within and without the confines of the printed page and book. Just how far this might extend is the dominant theme of this issue: essays in the history of philosophy trace the dialogue between books; deeply committed poetry and criticism extend that dialogue into the public sphere.

One could take "productive obscurity" to be a special case of literary anarchism: a pluralism of poetical, narrative and interpretative means. This notion is loosely based on the theoretical dissidence Paul Feyerabend advocated for science in his 1975 book *Against Method*. There Feyerabend argued that the lesson of the history of science is merely "anything goes": "theoretical anarchism is more humanitarian and more likely to encourage progress than its law-and-order alternatives." The force of *Against Method* was in part due its status as the final position in Feyerabend's move away from logical positivism, the doctrine of a single observation-based structure for all knowledge. Coming from within philosophy of science itself, *Against Method* was one of a number of studies that attacked the stronghold of positivism, and so undermined its catastrophic extension into the humanities.

Conflating Geuss's and Feyerabend's work links "productive obscurity" to generous pluralism, and the common ground here is linguistic. For Feyerabend, because theories inform our observational *language*, holding only one theory or kind of theory to be valid at any given time limits our ability to evaluate, living, as we are bound, well within its confines. Geuss's emphasis is political, but his gesture away from linguistic constraint is the same: the sheer difficulty of speaking *outside* a vocabulary suddenly found to be inadequate would likely lead to obscure utterances.

These concerns—methodological and political—weigh heavily again now, long after the first wave of arguments against positivism and its totalizing strictures. The old positivism preached the 'scientific method' as the model for every discipline, thereby effecting a theoretical eradication of the substance of the humanities; the new brand of positivism that is creeping into academia proposes to cut them off at the root. It is precisely *not* an intellectual movement, nor a philosophical doctrine. Rather it is a policy statement, an invasion of the funding of the humanities by those who would base their assessment on a direct analogy with the sciences, by metrication and a brute analysis of economic "impact."

FOR THIS IS A LAND OF ACRONYMS and the semantic butchery of business-speak. Issue 2 appears in the lacuna between the consultation deadline for the Higher Education Funding Council for England's "Research Excellence Framework" (HEFCE's REF) and the subsequent clampdown on academic integrity. An entire quarter of the assessment criteria for Higher Education funding is to be based on "impact." There are a number of things to say about this. First, as Stefan Collini has pointed out, the OED gives the etymon "impinge," and the meaning "the striking of one body against another; collision." If this is *social* impact, it'll hurt. After the battle, "impact" will translate roughly as "economic benefit." "Dear Tim," writes Peter Mandelson, in his frankly terrifying letter to HEFCE, "the economic situation is extremely challenging, and across the public sector we are all facing difficult choices." Like Tim, we should be in no doubt that the REF's aim is

to encourage the clammy embrace of big business. In politics, a “difficult choice” = “no choice.” Meanwhile, back in academia, the usage is derived from “Impact-Factors,” formulae for ranking scientific papers. It is the equivocation on these three notions—and particularly the last two, giving both inappropriate meaning *and* method—that is troubling.

This has been a long and slow gestation: in 1997 the Conservative-commissioned Dearing Report advocated the introduction of tuition fees based on the Student Loans system, alongside piecemeal university expansion. With typical cynicism, New Labour distorted both suggestions, setting the absurd target of 50 percent of all 18–30s into HE, and therefore making inevitable a *volte-face* on the matter of the initially resisted loans. The dual forces of increasing attendance and marketization are the REF’s ugly begetters; universities only remain in any segment of the public sphere insofar as *Introduction to English Literature* can tot up 40 credits, to be cashed in, transferred to another department, another university, bartered for higher entry-level salary and ultimately dropped into the deregulation deficit.

Before Dearing, the 1963 Robbins Report on Higher Education was deeply influenced by C.P. Snow’s brittle Two Cultures thesis. Thus the rhetoric of permanent economic expansion (in which the ‘information economy’ is nothing more than imperialism by other means) was brought into unholy alliance with Snow’s anti-modernist/neo-positivist stance on the sci-tech complex and politics made bureaucracy. Taking in the *longue durée*, the recent encroachment of scientific terminology and apparatus into the humanities appears grimly inevitable.

THE CLR IS APART FROM THESE CONCERNS and yet wholly invested in them. Because HEFCE is in such disarray over the REF and how it might actually work—“Other quality of life benefits: Please suggest what might also be included to this list”—it is tempting call for the CLR to function as the very “impact” we are criticizing. But on our reading of their proposals, a journal of poetry, stories and essays from

those within, outside and on the boundaries of academia is precisely the kind of subversive activity HEFCE would like to see stamped out, either because they believe it literally worthless or because there is no simple way of quantifying its effect on ~~people~~ the economy.

Against the debasement of language in HEFCE's documents we would raise etymology to its most vitally abstracted: the violent fracturing of our poetry is a result of an urgent need to communicate and take a stand, and this quality can happily be called *impacted*. In the multiple views offered to the reader, we see that term translated into an apt metaphor for the striking of one body against another: visual or perspectival impact. This seems to us a valid counterblast to positivism's singularity of viewpoint: anarchism of vantage point; anarchism of method. For example, Simon Jarvis, Marina Frasca-Spada and Emma Gilby offer sharply divergent ways of reading philosophical texts. And the conventions in these pieces (the learned footnote, indented quote, dates of publication, or their conspicuous absence) point to another of our concerns: the careful consideration of poem, essay, story as physical objects. This, the study of *mise-en-page*, is taken up by George Reynolds and Gerry Bruns, and finds expression in the apparatus of the poems by Andrea Brady and Ian Heames. It is a case-in-point for the would-be anarchist: rather than adding typography as a valid supplement to study, why not start with it, working toward the text from initial concern with its appearance? Feyerabend argued that not only do we have to tolerate divergent points of view, but we also have a responsibility to raise them to their most sophisticated. Anarchism is not a debasement of some standpoints, but rather a celebration of many.

Another example of this pluralist approach emerges from the fact that, traditionally, poetics of the "words on the page"—the poet as a sculptor—have been the concomitant of clarity and plainness. So it was for Ezra Pound, in his rejection of the idealist abstractions of French symbolism. But that tradition itself was deracinated by the drab and stultified ordinariness that has claimed much contemporary poetry, in which Pound's "luminous detail"—one image standing for a network of others—is replaced with the last-line epiphany. In response we would

reinstate the abstract to the concrete: hence Baudelaire's "delicious obscurity," which stands for the semantically incomplete or fragmentary, the oppositional or contradictory—a further (final) rejection of the positivist ideal of infinite transparency. This again is a matter of "productive obscurity," the darkening of language as it outstrips its means.

It was precisely this feature of Baudelaire's prose-poem 'The Double Room' that Paul de Man wrote about in his 1956 essay 'Process and Poetry'. de Man casts the poem as striving for the eternal, but doing so with such a feeble tool, language, that it fatally undermines its own object. And so the poem is trapped between recognising the failure to attain truth and subsuming itself to the *process* of attaining truth. Baudelaire's room is a space inside which repose in truth has been found, amongst lush furniture and pink-blue oneiric clarity—but it is a room without "blasphemous" art, a room in which the very medium of poetic communication is banished. The poem denies itself and is subsumed into the permanent "process" of attaining truth at the cost of itself. This steady gaze toward failure might be deemed "apocalyptic," but because it gives and requires such an abundance of perspectives it instead opens up innumerable fields of poetic inquiry.

The trope of the sealed room, and de Man's interpretation of it, are dialectic in that they engage us and present themselves as open to multiple readings. Baudelaire's naked walls and uncanny precision, for example, are the precursors of Beckett's locales, which are utopias in the literal sense of 'no-spaces'. And the dialogue between books—the impinging of one writer upon another—*impact*—continues here: in Keston Sutherland's 'Song of the Wanking Iraqi', the peopled "void" forces us to turn our eyes away, and back to an intermediary, brought into new light: "Inside the tight closed box off it was it was out"¹

Cambridge & Berlin, January 2010

1 J.H. Prynne, 'from *Streak Willing Entourage*', CLR 1.1, p. 36.
Artesian