

CAM BRIDGE RELITERARY VIEW.

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Dear *Cambridge Literary Review*,

Reading Raymond Geuss's fascinating essay on obscurity and intelligibility ('*Vix intellegitur*'), I was struck by its relation to Popper's derisive dubbing of Hegel's "oracular philosophy," half-thinking that Geuss must have had this insult in mind. Certainly the essay casts doubt on the force of the slur, suggesting as it does the response, "What's wrong with being oracular?" The implicit defence of oracular philosophy is that it can serve a pedagogical project of shifting our attitudes and ways of thinking and living through obscure speech; and Heidegger is given as an example of a philosopher who attempts to do this. As Geuss says, the oracular writer will not be deliberately obscure, because she will likely take her words to be the clearest expression of her thoughts (this is perhaps clearer in philosophy than poetry); but still she will deliberately use unfamiliar and thus obscure-seeming expressions to try to break free of the restrictive structures of ordinary language. If so, her obscurity will be necessary for her goals, and so not deserve to be disparaged.

There are, however, two caveats. Geuss, whilst gesturing towards the philosophical application of his ideas, only explicitly defends oracular obscurity in poetry; is this just a question of focus, or does he see an important difference between the cases? The second concern is that the oracular mode in philosophy looks like a retreat from a certain ideal of reason, according to which we can be convinced by argument to abandon incorrect views. If we resort to trying to change entrenched views by a shift in language rather than argument, we might be criticised for choosing a kind of force over reason. That retreat might be justified, if the existing language is so badly corrupted that an internal critique is possible, but it still makes suspicion of the oracular comprehensible as the rejection of that pessimism, rather than as a mere irritation at difficulty in comprehension.

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Dear *Cambridge Literary Review*,

I was gladdened to read Robert Archambeau's essay in *Cambridge Literary Review* issue 1. It is an intelligent and serious engagement with the poetries erratically gathered under the name "Cambridge School," and with their most significant and problematic contention: that they are committed poetries, with political aspirations beyond the simple plundering of domesticated interiority for its symbolic potential. It is also offers, in spite of itself, a kind of reassurance that there are indeed readers for this poetry, readers gathered far from Greenwich Meantime, on the shores of Lake Forest Illinois, into the nanosphere of the British micropresses.

I am certainly aware of the problems with that contention. The poetries are too, and deal with those problems in very different ways. I want to hold onto the distinctions among their strategies and qualities, to the point of questioning the validity of the term "Cambridge School." But I also know that protesting about the designators is something of a cliché when it comes time to respond to synoptic pieces like Archambeau's, and that in introducing a large, various and sometimes grotesquely self-aware body of works to new readers it is helpful to be able to assert some continuities or shared aspirations, just so we have a starting line.

So I'm not going to go into the particularities of what I view as the most important differences between the poetries of Prynne, Sutherland, Wilkinson, Jarvis, Riley and myself—to say nothing about the countless others who we could associate with "the cs"; I'll simply say that the term remains a pretty coniferous lump for me to swallow. Personally, I feel like I'm forever being tagged "Cambridge School," even though I've lived in London for twice as long as I was a gownie, and my time in the UK still adds up to far less than half my life. When I did live in Cambridge I felt distinctly female and distinctly American. I've always said that I was influenced less by Prynne than by Frank O'Hara; my commitment to a politicized art predates any serious reading of Prynne, and even now I have profound misgivings about the political methods of Prynne's late poetry. During my five years as a student and one as

a worker in Cambridge, I was seriously afflicted by the gentility and ancientness and patriarchy of the place. I guess it was no accident that I ended up writing a chapter of my doctoral thesis on the way that seventeenth-century literary coterie preserved the authority of patriarchal poets through agonistic self-definition and fantasies of all-male reproduction. I didn't see the resemblance at the time.

So now I find myself teaching early modern literature at Queen Mary University of London, and this week we were working on exactly one of those patriarchs, rare old Ben Jonson. We were thinking about the stigma of print, and how Jonson reviled coterie literary styles and sought to dignify professional authorship through the publication of his ridiculously monumental 1616 *Works*. We discussed his first epigram, 'To the Reader', with its behest "To read it well—that is, to understand." We recognised that this plea for understanders, for readers who shared social, political, ethical and literary values, was an attempt to replicate in print the conditions of manuscript circulation—exclusivity, similitude, privilege—but that Jonson was trying to use his poetry's moral and aesthetic authority to create his readers while still prospering from commercial circulation.

Sorry for the history lesson. I suppose you can see where I'm going with this. It suddenly seemed like a familiar predicament: the construction of print as a democratic and politically progressive medium, but one which many authors experienced as subject to internal and external censorship, stylistic constraints and the pressure to dumb-down; the struggle to maintain private values and still recruit a public audience; disdain for readers who had failed to prove their qualifications (as anyone who disagreed with or disliked the poetry did fail, by definition); the need to trade the exclusivity of manuscript for the public authority to be garnered from print. Many of these characteristics are attributed to "private" and "public" forms of circulation in Archambeau's essay. While his terms are open to question—not least because the limited circulation for all poetry, distributed by micro- or macro-press, by internet or letterpress, is so incredibly small—the comparison with early modern publication systems might help open the discussion up a bit further.

Scholarship on that period understands manuscript to be a form of publication, with political and social influence and efficacy. Like even the most “prominent” (Archambeau’s term) of contemporary poetry books, early modern printed editions usually ran to less than a thousand copies; so it is inaccurate to claim that print *qua* print was especially effective in inducing political change. But most importantly, the networks of readers established by what Archambeau might decry as circulation in “private comforting confinement” did more than challenge early modern politics: these networks completely transfigured European thought and society, and were the engineers of the Renaissance.

Obviously, there’s been a lot of water under the Bridge of Sighs since then. These coteries were for the most part privileged elites in stratified societies—much as we academics are now—but they were a lot closer to the seats of power than we are. I’m not saying that Prynne is our Erasmus. But I wanted to use this example as a way of outthinking the rather crude equation between publication in the “larger academic and commercial presses” and the authenticity of a poetry’s claims to political efficacy. Certainly I see a problem with any poetry’s (“messianic”) claim to change the world, to flatten instrumental reason with the hammer of *détournement*. But it was telling that Archambeau found that claim (also, to an “incidental political potency”) in critical essays by John Wilkinson – or, more importantly, in a controversy he was having with Peter Riley. It would be much harder to find it in any of the poems, which are more likely to be awash with self-criticism for their impotence than boasts about smashing the state.

I’m perfectly aware that my poetry isn’t going to change the world because it is “far from a mass movement,” as I wrote somewhere: it’s not part of the class struggle, energized by direct action or likely to inspire it. I can carry on writing it if I think it will be available to future readers as a record of a peculiar dissidence. At times that in itself has seemed like a major accomplishment. At my most optimistic, I hope it encourages its readers—who, as readers seeking out this kind of work, aren’t likely to require encouragement—to think critically about politics, or perhaps to be inspired by such thinking to participate in collective efforts to over-

come the tyrannies of capitalism. As a reader myself, I've been inspired by poetry to do what else I have done; and I would include, among my political acts, teaching, conversation, and collaboration. I think I share with other Cambridge types the belief that engaging with 300 or more students every week in debates about literature, politics, rights and forms and language, is a political and ethical activity. When I teach difficult late modernist poetry (including the most recent poetry written by my peers) alongside the tweedy canon, I hope I am not being a hopelessly narcissistic self-advertising git. I consider it my pedagogical duty to those students, to examine with them the full range of alternatives to the regal discourses of jargon and bathos and greed. They can take what they want. I say this not because Archambeau has thrown the typical stink-bomb at the politicized poets who are also ghosts in the universities' ivory machine, but because lecturers, who spend their working hours immersed in critique and negativity, can be a very masochistic bunch when it comes to describing the politics of their work. I think it's worth proclaiming publicly that that work is a kind of activism, which promotes creative, intelligent, belligerent... well, yes, resistance.

That's Prynne's word for it, of course. I hope that as the large and various body of work which has had some connection to Cambridge in recent years is read and matures, Prynne will become less important as a totemic figure, the TLS anti-celebrity, and more important simply as a poet. In my view the existence of a Cambridge School should not be predicated on Prynne's example: not on the example of his poetry, or of his attitudes to its circulation and promotion. If the Cambridge School did exist, then it existed between the years of the publications of the *English Intelligencer* and *A Various Art*. But these days there's a great deal of obscurity around, in Manchester, London, Newcastle, Glasgow, and Totnes; is all this poetry not "Cambridge School" unless it is branded with the mark of Prynne? If Barque is the modern home of the cs, then that field stretches also to Paris, Berlin, China, New York and Winnetka. If it's all about geography, would we say that Dell Olsen is now Cambridge School, because she lives in the episcopacy? Do the most recent Yankee immigrants Justin Katko and Ryan Dobran know what they're in for?

Neither is it correct to claim based on Prynne's example that others of that 'school' are perversely or morally inclined to refuse invitations. So Prynne demurred when *Poetry Review* came calling? Keston and I didn't. We've been on the radio. Keston was the poet-in-residence for the bloody Newbury Spring Arts Festival!—as you can see on a flier headlined "Mickey Salberg's Crystal Ballroom Dance Band to play at the Lambourn Centre." We're not refusing a mass audience or a university press on principle, we're just waiting to be asked. The new generation is full of fame whores.

But Archambeau's article among others shows that there is some kind of notoriety slowly building up out there; the nasty sniping which Jeremy Noel-Tod among others has rebuffed shows that the poetry is public enough to get up the nose of Craig Raine. We can blame that on the internet. The digital age has much more powerful powers of distribution at its disposal than the early modern republic of letters—which is another way of saying that even poetry which is micro-published by a fly-by-night outfit like Barque can get halfway around the world, thankfully, to our comrades in Illinois. The Archive of the Now, the free digital repository of recordings of contemporary poetry which I run at QMUL, has a fanbase on Facebook that extends to Japan, Finland, Brazil and Idaho. Perhaps inevitably, distinctions such as I've been making about collegiate membership are going to get lost in transit. The problem with shipping everything under this Cambridge School bill of lading is that a great deal of really important poetry gets lost too, because we feel we know where the poetry is happening, and from there it's easy to assume we also know who is making it. On the other hand, maybe "Cambridge School" is a smart branding exercise: it's contentious enough to generate lots of valuable publicity.

I don't mean to attack Archambeau's piece, though I recognise I'm quibbling about terms and affiliations, rather than mucking in with the analysis and detailed close reading of the poetry. That work is the most interesting and most valuable, and Archambeau's essay is an important example of it. To defeat the expectations which come along with the name "Cambridge School," the deeply various poetry published in the

Cambridge Literary Review needs intelligent readers and critics; I'd even go so far as to say that it is written in expectation of them. I've seen critics from beyond the blood-soaked Trumpington perimeter stick their heads above the parapet, only to be shouted down by the defence forces entrenched in their tiny garden plots—and so decide to stop caring. I don't want Archambeau to stop caring. I'm grateful to him for paying attention to this work, and for contributing to the important debate about how a poetry can be actively and effectively political.

Andrea Brady
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Robert Archambeau responds:

I'm grateful to have such a thoughtful response to my essay, and I certainly understand the wariness about the term "Cambridge Poetry," even when it comes with a string of disclaimers attached. It was the much the same when people started talking about Language Poetry. When you write that you're "forever being labeled 'Cambridge School', even though I've lived in London for nearly twice as long as I was a gownie," and when you ask "would we say that Dell Olsen is now Cambridge School, because she lives in the episcopacy," I suppose you're objecting to the geographic nature of the term. I get it. But I suppose what's happened is that geography has become incidental, just as publication in *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* became incidental to what was meant by Language Poetry.

I use the term because it seems to be the term that is coming into general use. One might—one should, I suppose—ask whether the term is, in the end, a good thing. I'm inclined to think that, like most words, it both reveals and conceals. Everything you say about differences between individual poets is true, and everything you say about periodization sounds right, too. I understand your idea of that the period "between the years of the publications of the *English Intelligencer* and *A Various*

Art” may constitute a distinct moment—but even making this distinction would probably bring down a rain of bile on your head if you made it loudly enough. Someone would come along and quite rightly insist on the variety of poetic activity in the Cambridge orbit at that time. Still and all, I don’t think all generalization is always bad. If any of us really thought that, we’d be left with nothing to say but proper names, if those. And I do think there are a cluster of techniques, ideas, publication and reading venues, influences, and the like that we can speak of as related phenomena. I’m interested, for now, in what the term can reveal; while you seem more concerned with what it conceals.

The other thing I take from your response is the question of the political claims made for the poetry, and the relationship between public presence and political ambition. Some of the claims really have been large. The claims I cited included one from David Shepard, who described a Prynne poem as an attempt to “recombine a language fragmented into technical jargons,” incorporating the vocabulary of specialized discourses into his poetry and thereby “return[ing] this knowledge to the public sphere from its sequestration in the ivory tower.” This would be a hell of a feat, and hugely politically important. The logistics of it, though, would require a huge effort at outreach, at actually bringing alienating kinds of language into public discourse. Shepherd either didn’t quite mean what he said, or, like a lot of us, he substituted a political wish for a political reality. Another claim I mentioned came from N.H. Reeve and Richard Kerridge. According to Reeve and Kerridge, the kind of poetry they discuss can “collide with the powerful instrumental discourses of the culture” with the effect of “smashing them into pieces.” Poetry can certainly depict such a smashing. But the gulf between depiction and actuality gets glossed over here. The instruments of power continue on their way, despite the poets’ interventions. John Wilkinson makes some big claims, too. He says that you and Keston Sutherland are writing at “a point of historical convergence” where your poetry might exercise “political potency.” Either Wilkinson’s sense of what political potency looks like is very different from mine, or he’s making claims that are quite unlikely to be supported by events. I’m actually much more inclined to agree with your own sense of the political reach of poetry (or

at least the political reach of poetry at this point, and in the first world), when you write that you “see a problem with any poetry’s (‘messianic’) claim to change the world, to smash instrumental reason to bits with the hammer of *détournement*.” This isn’t the sort of claim I was taking issue with in the article.

All of this brings to mind some comments made by Reginald Shepherd, a fine poet and critic who died last year. As a gay black man from the Bronx, he knew a thing or two about the need for political change. Here’s something he wrote about politics and poetry:

Those who wish to change society might better turn their energies toward society itself, to the real areas of oppression and suffering, economic, political, racial, and sexual. [...] To blame literature, or culture as a whole, for social, economic, and political woes (or even to see it as central to their perpetuation) is evasive at best, dishonest at worst, a kind of posing as politics. [...] George Oppen gave up writing poetry for several years in favor of political activism, because he believed neither that poetry could change society nor that it should be subordinated to an agenda. In Oppen’s words, “If you decide to do something politically, you do something with political efficacy. And if you write poetry, you write poetry, not something you hope, or deceive yourself into believing, can save people who are suffering.” Several years ago, I was asked by someone I had just met whether my poetry was Afrocentric. I told him that I didn’t know what he meant by that term, and he said, “You know, dedicated to the liberation of black people everywhere.” My only answer was, “I don’t think that poems can do that.”

I found that convincing when he wrote it. I find it convincing now.

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