# INNOVATIVE POETRY IN BRITAIN TODAY

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ABSTRACT

Innovative Poetry in Britain has undergone considerable change in how it is published and read in recent years. This article examines Richard Caddel and Peter Quartermain's 1998 introduction to their anthology *OTHER: British and Irish Poetry since 1970*, to derive concepts useful in surveying the field. These concepts include: the poetics of displacement, the politics of British identity, and the tradition of dissent. The article introduces the work of three innovative poets: Robert Sheppard (b. 1955), Caroline Bergvall (b. 1962) and Andrea Brady (b. 1974), in order to illustrate the dynamic range of this writing.

KEY WORDS: Andrea Brady, British poetry, Caroline Bergvall, Innovative Poetry, Richard Caddel, Peter Quartermain, Robert Sheppard, poetics.

RESUMEN

En los últimos años, la manera de publicar y de leer la poesía innovadora en el Reino Unido ha experimentado cambios considerables. Como punto de partida para examinar conceptos útiles en este campo, el presente artículo estudia la introducción de Richard Caddel y Peter Quartermain de 1988 a su antología *OTHER: British and Irish Poetry since 1970*. Entre tales conceptos se incluyen: la poética del desplazamiento, políticas de identidad británica y la tradición de la disensión. El artículo presenta el trabajo de tres poetas innovadores con el fin de ilustrar el dinamismo y la variedad de esta poesía: Robert Sheppard (n. 1955), Caroline Bergvall (n. 1962) y Andrea Brady (n. 1974)

PALABRAS CLAVE: Andrea Brady, poesía británica, Caroline Bergvall, poesía innovadora, Richard Caddel, Peter Quartermain, Robert Sheppard, poética.

Innovative Poetry in Britain is changing. Over the last ten years, it has undergone a huge transformation in how it is published and received. By Innovative Poetry, I refer to the poetic writings which have appeared in Britain and Ireland under a host of guises: avant-garde, experimental, formally innovative, linguistically innovative, neo-modernist, non-mainstream, post-avant, postmodernist, and the parallel tradition.[1] Of these multiple epithets, "linguistically innovative" has been most widely used in recent criticism. It was first coined by the poet Gilbert Adair in *Pages* magazine in reference to Robert Sheppard's assertion that a new

poetry had emerged since 1977[2] (Adair 68) which was distinct from the period which poet and critic Eric Mottram had celebrated in his essay "The British Poetry Revival 1960-1975." The significance of 1977 partly derives from notorious events at the Poetry Society. For the six years preceding, the society and its journal *Poetry Review* were run by radical and experimental poets including Mottram, Bob Cobbing, Allen Fisher, Lee Harwood and Barry MacSweeney. However, at a General Council meeting on 26th March 1977 the avant-garde group walked out *en masse* in protest at interventions by the Arts Council. Peter Barry in his account of the events leading up to this event has argued that:

> The conflict at the Poetry Society was a key moment in the history of contemporary British Poetry, polarizing the rift between the "neo-modernists," who sought to continue the 1960s revival of the early twentieth-century's "modernist revolution," and the neo-conservatives, who sought to further the "anti-modernist counter-revolution" of the 1950s. (Barry 1)

The traces of this "rift" continue to be visible to the present day and, although I will not excavate this history pre-1977, I will examine Richard Caddel and Peter Quartermain's 1998 introduction to their anthology *OTHER: British and Irish Poetry since 1970*, as a means of illustrating some of the ongoing issues at stake from the perspective of the innovative camp —the "neo-modernists" of Barry's account.

In setting up the first academic journal dedicated to this field in 2009, Robert Sheppard and myself decided to use "innovative," rather than "linguistically innovative," as a more economical way of pointing to the history of this writing. The earliest outlets for this poetry began in the eighties with little magazines like Sheppard's *Pages*, *Reality Studios* and *Angel Exhaust* followed by *First Offense*, *Fragmente* and *Parataxis*.[3] More recent magazines are predominately online such as *Shadow Train*, *Great Works*, *Terrible Work* and *Intercapillary Space*. Some of the key small presses publishing the innovative work throughout the period include: Writers Forum, Equipage, Object Permanence, Stride, Salt, Shearsman, Etruscan, Reality Street, Oystercatcher, Veer Books, West House, and Barque, all of which remain active.

Anthologies have also had a key role in establishing the field. The first to appear in the late eighties were *A Various Art* (1987), and *The New British Poetry* (1988), which were followed in the nineties by *Floating Capital* (1991), *Out of Everywhere: Linguistically Innovative Poetry by Women in North America & the UK*



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[1] A term used by poet-publisher Ken Edwards in his article "The Two Poetries," *Angelaki* 3.1 (April 2000): 25-36.

[2] Gilbert Adair began the letter: "Linguistically innovative poetry (for which we haven't yet a satisfactory name) has been operating since 1977" (Adair 68).

[3] Other notable magazines would include: *Object Permanence* (now operating as a small press publisher), *Quid*, *Shearsman*, *Oasis*, *Folded Sheets* and *And*.

(1996),[4] *Conductors of Chaos* (1996),[5] *OTHER: British and Irish Poetry since 1970* (1999), *Foil: Defining Poetry 1985-2000* (2000) and *Anthology of Twentieth-Century British and Irish Poetry* (2001). The most recent is *Vanishing Points: New Modernist Poems* (2004), which includes innovative poets from North America, Canada, Australia and New Zealand as well as the UK.

The developing critical literature on Innovative Poetry includes the Barry and Hampson edited collection *New British Poetries* (1993) and Barry's *Poetry Wars* (2007) alongside Sheppard's *The Poetry of Saying* (2005). Other important works include Andrew Duncan's trilogy of books: *The Failure of Conservatism in Modern British Poetry* (2003), *Centre and Periphery in Modern British Poetry* (2005) and *Origins of the Underground: British Poetry between Apocryphon and Incident Light, 1933-79* (2008); Tony Lopez's *Meaning Performance* (2006), Anthony Mellors' *Late Modernist Poetics* (2004) and Ian Davidson's *Ideas of Space in Contemporary Poetry* (2007).

Many critical accounts of Innovative Poetry tend to construct it in opposition to "mainstream" or "official" poetry in the UK, or what Robert Sheppard has called the "Movement Orthodoxy."[6] In their introduction to *OTHER*, Richard Caddel and Peter Quartermain offer a view of British culture and society as "pluralistic, fragmenting and evolving" and yet containing within itself a "unitary, closed-system approach to culture, an insistence on a single 'great tradition'"(xv). Whilst this view might seem slightly contradictory, Caddel and Quartermain claim that it is not their intention to describe in detail the development of "this 'mainstream'" nor to "dismiss it as devoid of worth" (xv). Nevertheless, they do attempt to define it as a "narrow lineage of contemporary poets from Philip Larkin to Craig Raine and Simon Armitage" and their "attendant collectives (Movement, Martians, New Generation)" (xv).[7] Although Caddel and Quartermain qualify their argument again in the statement "generalisation about such (often nebulous) groups is fraught with difficulties," it does not prevent them from characterising the typical mainstream poem as "a closed, monolineal utterance, demanding little of the reader but passive consumption" (xv). They also argue that such work has been privileged by the "major publishing houses [...] reviewing journals, 'literaries" and other elements of

[4] The editor, poet Maggie O'Sullivan, uniquely who applied the term "linguistically innovative" both to British writers and the American writers associated with Language Poetry.

[5] Edited by poet and novelist Iain Sinclair, this anthology also rehabilitated some important Modernist precursors of the innovative work in sections devoted to Nicholas Moore, J.W. Hendry, C.H. Sisson and W.S. Graham.

[6] "The Movement Orthodoxy, or its norm, privileges a poetry of closure, narrative coherence and grammatical and syntactic cohesion. [...] Its poetry favours an empirical lyricism of discrete moments of experience. Its insistence upon tone, and the speaking voice, strives to maintain the effect of a stable ego" (Sheppard, *Poetry* 2).

[7] Some other contemporary mainstream poets are: Andrew Motion, Wendy Cope, Carol Ann Duffy, Tony Harrison and Don Paterson. This list includes the current and previous poet laureates (Duffy and Motion)—the most prestigious official post in British poetry.

the media," to which list might be added mainstream literary criticism, educational syllabi and major literary awards (xv).

Caddel and Quartermain make no explicit claims for innovation per se in their introduction but present the alternative or "other" poetry as a kind of counter-force: "oppositional to much of that mainstream" (xv). With the qualification that "there is no common politics of poetic form, nor is there of opposition," they extend their argument to encompass a poetics of national identity (xviii). Re-asserting their view of the plurality of contemporary British society, they argue that

> if an older experience of identity can no longer be affirmed, if an earlier distinctness of unified "culture" can no longer be asserted, then the artistic as well as linguistic, ethical, and religious traditions associated with them can no longer serve as indices of national identity and authenticity. (xix)

This state of affairs therefore starts to complicate the connotations of terms like "British," "English," or "Irish" so that they "transcend ethnic origin or significance" and their meaning becomes "local rather than 'cultural'" (xix). Caddel and Quartermain argue that identity has now become a matter of "personal necessity" and thus "conjectural, invented and inventive, not intrinsic" (xix). At this point they make a crucial identification between this poetics of identity and the poetics of the innovative work, arguing that this complex cultural situation calls for a "poetics of displacement" that takes multiple forms including "dislocated language and reading praxis" (xx). Such work may look fragmented and incomplete, and be "unsatisfying because it shuns reaching conclusions or adumbrating a wholeness of vision [...] It is a poetry of dislodgement" (xx). Ultimately they argue that the task of the poet is to

> tell it as it is, not so much claiming an identity for political reasons (though clearly the political has an important role) as positioning the self in a shifting world of continual change, of complex and intensely problematised hybridities and polyglossia, characterised by a kind of voluntary tribalisation that is suspicious of all external claims to authority or authenticity. (xx)

In a way comparable to the rhetorical strategies of the early phase of American Language Poetry, Caddel and Quartermain reiterate the political impulse underlying this poetics by identifying how

> the normative impulses of literary and linguistic tradition reinforce notions of intelligibility (and of syntax) that themselves constitute the intellectual legitimation of political rule, of the hegemony, whose very existence resides in and relies upon its moral and cultural legitimation by tradition. [...] They thus iron out diversity and multiplicity by dividing the world into such binaries as us and them, real and unreal, authentic and fake [etc.] (xx)

This analysis establishes the position of the innovative work as resisting the "centrality" of tradition and focusing instead on local dissent around the margins. Whilst there is a danger that this argument runs the risk of reproducing the binary oppositional view of the world that it attributes to the mainstream, it nevertheless

positions innovative poetics within a historical context of a tradition of dissent which stretches back to "Clare, Blake, Smart, and the two Vaughans, Henry and Thomas" (xvii) as well as the twentieth-century precursors of David Jones, Hugh MacDiarmid and Basil Bunting. This tradition is what in part licenses the conjectural, inventive and disruptive poetics that Caddel and Quartermain value as a way of negotiating the complexity of the current reality and of resisting hegemonic power structures.

I shall explore the work of three poets currently writing in the UK in order to illustrate the poetics of Caddel and Quartermain"s provocative manifesto: Robert Sheppard (b. 1955), whose work is anthologised in *OTHER*; Caroline Bergvall (b. 1962), whose name is mentioned in the introduction to *OTHER* but whose work is not included therein; and Andrea Brady (b. 1974), whose first published work did not appear until after the anthology was complete. Taken together however, these writers offer a representative sample of the dynamic range of Innovative Poetry today.

Robert Sheppard, as indicated earlier, is a key figure in the development of Innovative Poetry in the UK through his work as a poet, critic, editor, reviewer, publisher and lecturer. His critical study *The Poetry of Saying: British Poetry and its Discontents 1950-2000* (2005) offers the most theoretically sophisticated account of the history of Innovative Poetry, including detailed examinations of the work of Roy Fisher, Bob Cobbing, Lee Harwood, Tom Raworth, Allen Fisher, Adrian Clarke, Ulli Freer and Maggie O'Sullivan.

In *The Poetry of Saying* (2005), Sheppard structures his analysis on three levels: the technical, the social and the ethical. The technical level concerns "techniques of indeterminacy and discontinuity, of collage and creative linkage, of poetic artifice and defamiliarization" (1), thus compatible with Caddel and Quartermain's interest in a poetics of displacement, although Sheppard's term "creative linkage" is, in a sense, a more positive term for accounting for discontinuity and one I will focus on later in relation to Sheppard's poetic writing. In terms of the social level of Sheppard's analysis, this concerns what he describes as, after Bakhtin and Vološinov, "the necessary dialogic nature of all utterance" and, on the ethical level, an "understanding of the varieties of openness to the other implied by the techniques and social orientation of the work" (1). The notion of the openness to the other derives from Emmanuel Levinas' concept of the distinction between "the saying and the said" and, in this way, Sheppard's interest in a social and ethical poetics seems responsive to Caddel and Quartermain's analysis of the state of contemporary British identity, albeit in a less overtly oppositional way.

Aside from his critical work, Sheppard has also been influential in the use of the term *poetics* in literary-critical work and the development of the pedagogy of creative writing teaching.[8] In his essay "The Poetics of Writing: The Writing of

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[8] See, for example, "Supplementary Discourses in Creative Writing Teaching: An English Subject Centre Report," viewable at: <http://www.english.heacademy.ac.uk/explore/projects/archive/creative/creative2.php>.

Poetics" (1999), he produced over seventy definitions of poetics under the heading of "Metapoetics." Sheppard's foundational opening definition is:

> Poetics are the products of the process of reflection upon writings, and upon the act of writing, gathering from the past and from others, speculatively casting into the future. (99)

By poetics, Sheppard is referring to the history of "writings about writing" which might include, for example, the famous essays and prefaces of British Romanticism by Shelley, Wordsworth and Coleridge. What is crucial for Sheppard throughout his manifold definitions is the importance of poetics as a "writer-centred discourse"—provisional and contingent—which lets writers "question what they think they know" and allows creative writing "dialogue with itself" (100). This awareness of the self-reflexive, constructive nature of literary poetics is comparable with Caddel and Quartermain's view of the "conjectural, invented and inventive" poetics of identity. Sheppard has not only written critically on poetics, but has also produced his own texts of poetics, some of which I will consider below.

Sheppard's major achievement as a poet is his long work *Twentieth Century Blues*, published in several volumes throughout the eighties and nineties and now collected as *Complete Twentieth Century Blues* (2008). Sheppard describes the project as a network or "net/(k)not-work(s)" of texts "interrelated by multilinear 'strands'" (389). These strands are indicated by a numbering system which appears at the opening of each text. For example, the poem "Re:Entries" is also titled: "Dialogue 10," "Entries 3," "For Patricia Farrell 4" and "Unwritings 6." (284). As Sheppard describes in an earlier poetics text, "Poetic Sequencing and the New" in *Far Language* (1999), written whilst *Twentieth Century Blues* was ongoing:

> I wanted a title that would allow me to order, re-order and disorder a text or a series of strands of texts in sequences, something that could be read in a number of ways. [...] *Twentieth Century Blues* is essentially not about anything; it is a form to hang things on, to weave things through, albeit knottily. (35-36)

Thus the network is a writer-centred structure, which has allowed Sheppard not only to proliferate texts, but to proliferate the links between them, a "schema organising continuities I've often sensed between texts of mine" (36). Strands can therefore be determined retrospectively *and* as parts of ongoing sequences, and can link works which are "stylistically dissimilar," thereby fostering "a difference born of identity (they use the same materials and share something of the same poetic focus)" (36).[9] However, Sheppard also anticipates this structuring affecting the reader's experience:

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[9] The process of making strands extends even with this poetics work into another titled "The End of the Twentieth Century: A Text for Readers and Writers," which is subtitled "Poetic Sequencing and the New 2" and which appears in *Complete Twentieth Century Blues*, 331-350.

> The satisfaction of closure might be delayed as effectively as in an indeterminate text: the principle of discontinuity hangs between the texts not, necessarily, within them, though that's often still the practice. The aim, however, has not changed: to activate the reader into participation, into relating differences, to sabotage perceptual schema, to educate desire, not to fulfil it in a merely entertaining emptying of energy. To create, above all, new continuities. (37)

Sheppard's position here can be linked to Caddel and Quartermain's poetics of displacement and dislodgement to the extent that it is interested in a principle of discontinuity that works against the implied closure of the mainstream poem. He also extends this poetics to encompass a desired effect on the reader of encouraging his or her active participation in the process of making meaning, an alternative to the "passive consumption" that Caddel and Quartermain argue is the *raison d'être* of the mainstream poem. Sheppard's intention to create "new continuities" however, seems to go beyond the more negative poetics of Caddel and Quartermain and prepares the ground for his notion of "creative linkage," a principle, as he hints, that operates at the textual level as well as at the structural level in *Twentieth Century Blues*.

In another text of poetics entitled "Linking the Unlinkable," a response to the work of Jean-François Lyotard in "Discussions, or phrasing 'after Auschwitz'" and Jacques Derrida's reply to this lecture, Sheppard sketches a poetics of the "creative linkage" of phrases (as opposed to the "authority of the sentence"), as a model of ethical writing which argues with Adorno's notion that poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric. As Sheppard quotes Derrida: "If there is somewhere a *One must* it must link up with a *one must make links with Auschwitz*" (Sheppard, *Far* 54). Creative linkage therefore is a means by which disparate materials may be yoked together. This is not the same as juxtaposition —the links must appear both more *and* less disruptive, so that they persuade by the new connections that form.

In Sheppard's poetry, the effect of creative linkage feels pervasive but is difficult to demonstrate precisely because of its subtlety. The effect lies in a simultaneous awareness of both similarity *and* difference within a text's development, both continuity *and* discontinuity. In Book 4 of the *The Lores*, for example, a narrative describing a sexually engaged couple is traversed by reconfigured political slogans and phrases discussing the poetics of the work underway:

> Investing in people damaged history a
> diversation to link to sketch to
> match perception her services surrendered she
> listens to Braxton, reads Adorno, judges
> the moment; the familiar breaks anew (Sheppard, *Complete* 181)

A few stanzas later, the phrases which argue the case for creative linkage in "Linking the Unlinkable" are themselves reconfigured and linked with other materials:

> To make links of contractual obligation
> ethically with her name walking puns
> off maps which absolutely refuse linkage—

no sin intervention bless'd in external
lores, virtual times Are a Terror. (Sheppard, *Complete* 82)

One can trace an almost continuous statement here of "To make links [...] ethically with her name [...] which absolutely refuse linkage" which might have come straight from "Linking the Unlinkable" but here is broken up and linked with other phrases such as "contractual obligation" and "walking puns / off maps." The legalistic overtones of "contractual obligation" and the linking of walking, language and mapping thus start to develop a more complex texture of association around the other phrases. The words "sin" and "bless'd" add a pinch of Christian discourse to the text, ambiguously suggesting that "intervention" is "bless'd in external / lores," where intervention might be, for example, military intervention or State or even religious control over sexual practices. In the concluding line the capitalised words "Are a Terror" suggest a phrase that has been torn from another context, to be linked together here with "virtual times." This latter phrase on its own might evoke the online version of the British newspaper *The Times*, yet creative linkage here reinforces the sense of "times" as epoch or age and yolks it to a more sinister conclusion —how information technology can facilitate terrorism.

The text "Variation and Themes"—a prose poem dedicated to the memory of William Burroughs—enables a kind of reading between the lines, where one is constantly being invited to create contexts which resolve discontinuities between the unfolding sentences:

> Grunting at her head resting on a copy of Blake's poems, the wrong proper noun was another affair altogether. Somewhere I hear the murmur of *book thirteen*, which skids the interpretations, this history of the last soaked stage. Particulars matter, fall invisible to earth, and blow in the sand: alter ego dust. The Other, invisible, was startled by the light pouring contaminated responsibility or its lack through the suddenly open door, erotic or thanatognomonic. (Sheppard, *Complete* 251)

In this extract, local contexts are rapidly set up and moved on from: a description of a domestic scene gives way to more abstract reflections and then statements which appear more theoretical. However, despite the differences, these modes of thought can be resolved into an integrity which makes the movement of the text capable of constituting new continuities. In such a reading the reference to Blake could connect to "*book thirteen*" as a unit of literature. Words such as "noun," "interpretations" and "history" all suggest a context of reading and thinking about literature and language. That "particulars matter" yet ultimately become "dust" might also be a reflection on the future of literary endeavours. The final sentence of this extract constitutes a significant shift in register to the psychological/medical, with terms like "The Other," "erotic" and "thanatognomonic," and yet frames this encounter through the "suddenly open door" which suggests a more concrete context for these abstractions being felt by a narrator.

Creative linkage might be said to have its roots in Burroughs' famous fold-in and cut-up techniques, or more persuasively, the non-sequiturs of the "new sentence" of Language Poetry, and yet, whilst it takes advantage of the parsimony

principle to invite the reader to make new connections, it is unlikely that a "good" reading will insist on constantly searching for ways in which to make the poem cohere despite its discontinuities. Instead, the reading process is likely to involve a kind of negative capability in which meaning is both made and undone in the movement of reading. Ideas and situations are created, linked and developed but the procedure is ultimately open-ended—we are not invited to draw any final conclusions. However, at the same time, we are also not encouraged to dismiss the poem as merely arbitrarily and perpetually open to interpretation—its ideas and images feel deliberately poised, calculated and argued: precise fragments of a world we can still recognise. The poem therefore forces us to confront and engage with our most fundamental approaches to making sense of the world at the same time as it urges us to attend to the images, situations and problems of that world.

Sheppard's work invites a link to the dissenting tradition that Caddel and Quartermain trace back through writers such as William Blake—a key influence for Sheppard—and a resulting shared suspicion of authority. Caroline Bergvall's work, whilst it can also be thought of as dissenting in various ways, can be compared to the radicalised poetics of (national) identity that Caddel and Quartermain describe, partly because Bergvall is of French-Norwegian nationalities and has been based in England since 1989. Bergvall works across what she calls "sited textwork" and "mixed-arts performances" as well as generating visual and written texts for the page. In one of her most comprehensive statements of poetics to date, "Social Engagement of Writing,"[10] Bergvall sums up the concerns of her practice as a poet in the first decade of the twenty-first century as "performativity/linguistic & bodily identities/ poetics" and goes on to list the questions that have motivated her work as:

> The question of multiple languages. [...]
> Use of multiple forms and spaces of inscription. [...]
> Body representation as a space. [...] Restrictions and actions of social readings of bodily space on what I call my own body. Or my bodies. My sex. My gender. My ethnicity. [...]
> Exploration of ephemerality traces/sites.
> Space itself becomes a field of work. (Bergvall, "Social" 4)

For Bergvall, questions of language, body and identity, and the space-times in which existence and the making of art take place are inseparable. Her 1996 work *Éclat*, which has since been republished as a digital chapbook, was originally presented as a "guided tour" around a house in London to be listened to on headphones, rather like many conventional art gallery exhibitions use. In the digital publication of the work, Bergvall has designed each page with a large square text box in order to stage, as it were, the actual spaces of the house in which the text was originally intended to be encountered. As the piece develops, text appears in each

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[10] Originally delivered as a conference paper at the University of Arizona Poetry Center, 30 May 2008.

"room" with considerable variation in the size, style and arrangement of the words. Thus language appears in some way to be acting in space, as well as within the temporal arrangement of the sequence of room-pages. The third page for example, presents us with a text which almost fills the "room":

> WEL is an occupation COME to
> the foreign guided a short round
> of observations. Now yo. s... now
> y... don'. What not assumd... be
> not hr since forver pleased are
> we by and large to kindly be
> stuck to instructs or what kind
> of langu would we otherwise be
> left wit. (Bergvall, *Éclat* 7)

Notice how, even in transcribing this from the carefully-presented layout of the original, that the text forms a near regular square shape on the page. The capitalised words, spelling a fragmented "WEL [...] COME" also demonstrate how we are being invited to read in a non-linear fashion from the outset. This introduction gently parodies the conventions of the guided tour and even the magician's performance (now you see it, now you don't). There is also a hint that the tour is something which implies a kind of "foreign" "occupation," as if the speaker is acknowledging her own "foreignness" as she occupies this particular space for a "short round of observations." The extent to which vowels are dropped out of some words and others curtailed abruptly, most tellingly with the fragment "langu," constructs a slightly ironic narrator who commands "What not assumd ... be not hr" as if reinforcing the notion of a social and linguistic space that proceeds on shared but hidden assumptions that exclude others. The narrator also suggests that the collective "we" she speaks for are "pleased [...] by and large to kindly be stuck to instructs or what kind of langu would we othrwise be left wit"—somewhat archly implying a capitulation to instructions that might constitute the grammatical rules of a language or the social rules of a culture, as well as the instructions of a tour guide, whilst also simultaneously flouting these rules by the nonstandard orthography and knowing tone.

The "langu" that we are "left wit" throughout *Éclat* only becomes stranger and more disruptive of an implied linguistic decorum as the text develops. Language acts inside and outside the space delimited by the text box, and some pages carry exclusively visual interventions with no words at all. A fractured narrative concerned with sex and sexuality develops:

> She (how appears to be) says "yeah why not" who proceeds to suck out my interiors, skinning me softly with her, skinning me softly, then says "some things best not be thought in the dark", who stretches me across the room. (Bergvall, *Éclat* 13)

The piece might be thought of in Caddel and Quartermain's terms as offering a version of identity as "conjectural, invented and inventive, not intrinsic."

Each page of *Éclat* creates a new situation—simultaneously populating the rooms of the imagination as it constructs its addressee—and in this way foregrounds a question that it also asks itself: "Wonder about the long-term social arrangements of our reconstructed flesh?" (Bergvall, *Éclat* 14). To participate in making *Éclat* one has to be present in each "room" whilst also accepting how one is in turn made by the room and what is in it: "I'm beside myself," "the construction work on this here face took far longer than expected" (Bergvall, *Éclat* 31, 42). The question of identity for Bergvall is inevitably bound up with gender and sexual identity and, following a climactic sex scene, the poem concludes: "girls make a gorgeous margin [...] now that's what I'd call morphing"—again seeming to advocate a protean model of identity that sees marginalisation as potential rather than as restrictive (Bergvall, *Éclat* 55).

As a pluri-lingual speaker of French, Norwegian and English, and brought up as bilingual in French and Norwegian, the role of language in constructing identity has put Bergvall in a critical relationship to monolingualism. Citing Gayatri Spivak's "'you must clear your throat, clear your own space, spit out the mother tongue'" as a starting point, Bergvall glosses this statement as signifying "the refusal or impossibility of monoglossic possession by one naturalised language, one naturalised speaking body" (Bergvall, "Social" 1). Bergvall develops this analogy to describe how in French, one does not clear one's throat, but one "has a cat in the throat" (Bergvall, "Social" 1). She asks "what if I were to decide to talk with a cat in the throat? [...] Cat is my speech's accent" (Bergvall, "Social" 1). In an interview I conducted with Bergvall in 2008, she spoke of her concerns with the question of accent:

> How do you yourself assume a number of things in relation to identity, that you're supposed to speak like this, this idea of having an accent and that having an accent is going to place you always as this and that. (Bergvall and Thurston)

This registering of the role of accent in speech—something which makes one very much aware of the body's role in articulating language —is part of Bergvall's broader concern with "the examination of identity and of the frameworks in which power sits, also in and through language":

> One of the starting points is to investigate identity, its framework, its prison, as well as its potentially liberatory aspects. If you're gay, the liberatory aspect of identity is not so clear, on the contrary, it can seem more like an imposed framework. So I thought all that was really very important to my writing. Nothing is a given and yet I might be taken for granted. When we present ourselves we take it for granted somehow. (Bergvall and Thurston)

Many of these themes are explored most directly in Bergvall's recent book *Cropper* which in its first section "Croup" announces itself as:

> A sketch, a portrait-outline of myself as a bilingual, binational, dispersd, ssipated, French hyphen Norwegian writer. Someone bordering on, never settld, whos

> changed codes like countries in a free-to-roam White European fashion, not forcd to move by politics or social circumstance, this being debatable at a psychological level, must move on can't move in. (Bergvall, *Cropper* 2-3)

This restless movement is conveyed in a carefully qualified way that does not overtly celebrate this nomadism, nor judge it negatively. As in *Éclat*, Bergvall registers the otherness of her English accent by dropping out vowels, and, as she tells the story of her first engagements with French and speaks about her relationship with Norwegian, words from these languages appear, often exploiting cross-linguistic puns: "Voila she led me to the river, eau eau pressed me down," "a long brisk winter, en lang norsk vinter" (Bergvall, *Cropper* 3, 4). More revealingly, Bergvall's relationship with French is also bound up with sexual awakening and discovery and the trials of finding one's new-found identity immediately under threat: "to flesh out in one lettre then b torn to pieces by the next [...] Nono no body be languaged sexd in this way" (Bergvall, *Cropper* 4). It is however English which offers a language for the next stage of development: "it signs on easily, seems adaptiv, resonant," although the narrator is later more wary of the "somatic and cultural presumptions familiar to standard bearers of a language" (Bergvall, *Cropper* 5, 7). The final part of this section unfolds what reads like an account of various creative strategies in art and writing that Bergvall may have witnessed during this period: "serial or patternd work [...] rugged syntax [...] resist bear witness," although it is the language practice that "creases the bordrs, rules, boundaries, edges, limbos" which seems closest to Bergvall's own practice (Bergvall, *Cropper* 8).

The second section of the book, "Crop," dramatises the relationship between body, identity and language by offering a bilingual text in English and Norwegian, the Norwegian text printed in red:

> Some never had a body to call their own before it was taken away—
> som aldri hadde en kropp de kunne kale sin egen før den ble revet bort. (Bergvall, *Cropper* 10)

The sentences that follow use a parallel syntactic structure which evokes a series of ongoing challenges to the embodied self: "some never had a chance to feel a body as their own [...] some never had a chance to know their body [...] some were never free to speak their body" (Bergvall, *Cropper* 11). The sentences are in fact a series of answers to a question stated at the opening of the text: "how does one keep ones body as ones own [...] could I make sure that what I called my body would remain in the transit from other languages?" (Bergvall, *Cropper* 10). Thus embodiment, language and selfhood are utterly entangled with one another: "Some bodies like languages simply disappear-" and, if they disappear, they nevertheless may "arise in some or many of us" (Bergvall, *Cropper* 12). At this point the poem's telling may not be so much "claiming an identity for political reasons," as Caddel and Quartermain suggest, but certainly Bergvall's poetics in this book are very much engaged with trying to position the self in a "shifting world of continual change" in a way which seems fundamentally dissenting and anti-authoritarian in the stand it makes against oppression (and repression) in its many guises.

Andrea Brady is another internationalist who has made the UK her home—she was born in Philadelphia, USA. As an early Modern scholar she has worked on seventeenth-century English funerary elegy but her contribution to contemporary British poetry lies in her work with Keston Sutherland as co-publisher of Barque Press, and her directorship of the Archive of the Now, an online digital archive documenting audio recordings of innovative poets.[11] As a poet, Brady's work has mostly been published in pamphlet form by small presses such as Barque and Object Permanence and her work can also be read as very much belonging to the tradition of dissent that Caddel and Quartermain identify. As Brady said in an interview I conducted with her in 2009:

> I think the aim of my poetry and my scholarship is to excavate that plurality of discourses from the early modern period. [...] It offers the hope, for those of us working in very obscure ways in our small, not very brightly-lit, corners of British academia, that we are writing into the historical record some kinds of resistance and the envisioning of an alternative that might be excavated by future generations of readers and scholars. (Brady and Thurston)

For Brady, the plurality of discourses that she works on as a critic is both the subject of her poetry and one of its key formal devices. *Tracking Wildfire: A Verse Essay on Obscurity and Illumination* is a long poem presented as an online text with highlighted passages hyperlinked to research material that informed its composition. In our interview, Brady introduced the poem as follows:

> *Wildfire* was really an attempt to focus on these issues [of obscurity, difficulty and transformation] [...], and to think about how metaphors of illumination, of brightness and enlightenment connect the ethereal world of intellectual and artistic endeavour with a much more violent and tortured history of incendiary devices. (Brady and Thurston)

*Tracking Wildfire* makes use of a very diverse range of sources, from Heraclitus to online blog entries quoting from declassified US Defense Department documents, alongside literary references from many different periods. A central image in the poem is Greek fire —an ancient incendiary weapon— which is linked to its modern counterpart White Phosphorous, used in Fallujah during the invasion of Iraq and also more recently in the bombing of the Gaza strip. Brady's argument in this poem therefore proceeds in a manner not unlike Sheppard's creative linkage, in which diverse materials combine and attention to historical material develops in parallel with images and ideas connected to the present. As the poem declares:

> Thumbs the hand bearing
> its light into darkest English, of history

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[11] Viewable at: <www.archiveofthenow.com>.

in decay, to unlock the manufacturing
process and reveal a simple thesis
distilled for strife: that the edges of
of history, past grill and lounger
are eating inward as fire. (Brady, "Pyrotechne," *Tracking*)

The phrase "light into darkest English" is hyperlinked to an account of what Brady describes as a Situationist "derive" she conducted in Bow and Old Ford in East London. This account, illustrated by photographs Brady made on her journey, describes the mistreatment of workers at the Bryant and May match factory in Old Ford, thus inserting the use of different kinds of phosphorous in the manufacture of matches into the ongoing set of connections with Greek fire and White Phosphorous. What also emerges in this process is Brady's awareness of "history in decay" —ambiguously posing that history may be observed in decay as much as it itself decays. That her intent in the poem is perhaps to "unlock the manufacturing/ process" not only of matches, but of poetry, is also ambivalent in that the consequent —albeit ironic— "simple thesis" is one that is "distilled for strife," rather than, as may be heard punningly, for life. Its conclusion that the "edges of history" eat inward, imagines history itself as a destructive, consuming process, like fire, which holds out little hope for the future.[12] In a note to the poem, Brady links "fire's tendency to spread and consume" to "the interconnection of violent innovation and the growth of capitalism," an image of which might be the "grill and lounger" in the above lines—suggesting a prosperous domestic scene of a garden barbecue in which fire is tamed in the grill whilst the subject relaxes—momentarily safe from destruction (Brady, "Creative Method," *Tracking*).



One of the most disturbing passages in the poem offers a list of descriptions of images with viewing figures appended to them, as if they are pictures or videos posted on the internet:

Eaten by dogs. viewed: 36, 560 times.
Eaten by dogs. viewed: 17, 809 times.
Person with disability: prosthetics above body.
Partially eaten by dogs. viewed: 32, 144 times.
Old man killed with daughters; family recognised. viewed 30, 411 times.
Man making "Shuhada" sign: there is
One God, because he knew he was
about to be shot. Viewed 18, 135 times. (Brady, "Chronic," *Tracking*)

The imagined or actual images described here suggest the atrocities and consequences of war. The inclusion of the Arabic word "shuhada" —which may be translated as "martyr" or "witness"— suggests the context of the invasion of Iraq, with which Brady links her research into White Phosphorous. The shock of these

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[12] From the section "Meat": "fire makes itself through destruction."

lines is two-fold. Firstly they shock because, in offering the barest descriptions of an image—almost no more than a title, occasionally a comment—they allow the reader's imagination to generate a horrific picture. Secondly, an additional impact emerges with the large numbers of viewings of these images. We are left to speculate how many of the viewings are by the simply prurient and how many by people seeking to find and identify relations lost in conflict. Whilst one might recognise the human desire to witness and understand death in these figures, one also cannot escape the fact that modern technology allows this widespread, instantaneous and private consumption of the spectacle of death to occur on an unprecedented scale —a phenomenon which it is hard to feel comfortable with, and a potential illustration of Sheppard's "virtual times Are a Terror."

In its attempt to inscribe poetic activity into what Brady elsewhere in the interview calls the "material and political context which makes it possible," *Tracking Wildfire* is self-conscious about how it comes into being through an unresolved tension between illumination and obscurity that is perhaps a key historical trait of poetic writing (Brady and Thurston). At one point the poem acknowledges the "power of obscurity to bring it all / to life"—suggesting that, in attempting to reflect the actual obscurity and difficulty of the world, one is closer to the truth of life (Brady, "Alchemistry," *Tracking*). However, elsewhere it asks: "is obscurity a moral option now?" as if there are dangers in *only* presenting the obscure difficulty of reality without attempting to illuminate aspects of it (Brady, "In Law" *Tracking*). This argument also plays itself out in lines which evoke the project underway as an "experimental / poem dashed onto political density"—the word "dashed" suggesting that the poem is both imposed upon forms of political information and also wrecked by them (Brady, "Thrown Fire," *Tracking*). In the same section the narrator asks:

> have I scored a blinder, or run blind
> myself in all this vapour quickly spending
> its burn I think I'm seeing the future? (Brady, "Thrown Fire," *Tracking*)

These lines pun on the idiom "to score a blinder" which means to achieve something of "blinding" brilliance—which may resemble the poet's hopes for the work—but also evoke the possibility that this narrator is also blinded, as if in a cloud of White Phosphorous or Platonic fury,[13] not sure whether it is the future she sees before her, or something else. The pun on the word "spending" hints that the vapour that engulfs the poet, by consuming its own mass, is akin to economic relations under capitalism that use themselves up quickly—the "burn" suggestive again of the devouring processes of fire and history evoked earlier.

These three writers taken together as exemplars of a British Innovative Poetry certainly provide a challenge to the "Mainstream Orthodoxy," to the extent

[13] In the interview Brady explains Platonic fury as "a flame or fire that threatens to engulf the artistic persona."

that they all employ a poetics of displacement, or creative linkage, to build poetries that are open to the complexity of the "intensely problematised hybridities and polyglossia" that constitute British cultural and political life. Whilst it is Bergvall's work that is most overtly concerned with the way in which identity, in its entangled relations with the body and language, can be seen as "conjectural, invented and inventive," it is the political challenge that she poses that forms a continuity with Sheppard and Brady's work. Within this continuity one can trace a commitment to an historical tradition of dissent that is as crucial for understanding the poetics of Innovative Poetry as is a grasp of its diverse formal means.

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