

## You'll never get a result out of me

Emily Critchley, ed., *Out of Everywhere 2: Linguistically innovative poetry by women in North America & the UK* (Reality Street, 2015)

REY CONQUER

It has been an eventful year for “linguistically innovative poetry”; although such poets are often seen as remote, disdainful of fame and popularity, there have been significant incursions not only into the mainstream of poetry **and its prizes**, itself still a small and self-enclosing world, but also into the comment pages of national newspapers and **the bestseller lists**. This has been, of course, at the cost of a proper engagement with the innovative character of the poetry at issue; Claudia Rankine’s *Citizen* has often been discussed in terms of its politics and divorced from questions of form, which, if addressed at all, seem to reach a dead end in banal, inevitable, cries of “but is it poetry?” It is exciting, then, and timely, and good, that we have *Out of Everywhere 2*, edited by the poet and academic Emily Critchley, which, 19 years after its namesake, brings together nearly 50 contemporary “formally original, politically and philosophically engaged” poets. For all that this small subset of poets has flourished, proliferated even, since 1996, their work, often printed in chapbooks or through small presses, is still difficult to get hold of or stumble upon, and this anthology offers us a guide—or set of starting points, at least.

Where, then, to start? Through alphabetical coincidence the collection begins with Sascha Akhtar, whose poems suggest curious relationships between everyday things, rendered in short, syntactically opaque lines:

Water, yellow-green oblong  
transparent legs  
running through (“Evolution”)

We might skip forward at this point to Jennifer Moxley, where, in “Possessed”, we reach a line around which the concerns of many of the poems in the collection, including those of Akhtar, circle:

At dinner you accuse your lover of gross inattention to detail.

We feel, perhaps, implicated—not, despite the second person, in the act of accusing, but as the accused. Have we been paying attention? Can we pay attention? This is a dense, generous anthology. This is poetry which often seeks to avoid being what Andrea Brady has called “eligible for interpretation”; these are poems which each require distinct and often novel modes of reading, and the anthology form offers an extra barrier to

engagement, forcing the reader to chop and change between modes, one poet leading abruptly to another. Our ability to pay proper attention is tested by this quick succession and by the poets' own experiments with repetition, fragmentation, verbal collage, lists; experiments, that is, in what constitutes attention in poetry.

This attention might be paid to things, such as in Mairéad Byrne's excellent centipede poems—and for all that this attention to things has become a fairly tired staple of 'mainstream' poetry, it has precursors in the experimental tradition going back to Gertrude Stein, who makes her presence felt here in lines such as "A bed is a bed is the smallest of bedsores" (Carrie Etter, "Paternal"). What distinguishes the objects of this attention from the objects of what have been called 'magazine' or 'competition' poems is the instability of the thing, the impossibility of direct access: "If I zoom in on the centipede in my mind's eye, the image disintegrates. There are not enough pixels."

As Stein made clear, attention can only be paid through language—which requires us to pay attention to language, hence the emphasis on linguistic innovation. (Critchley uses the words "avant garde", "experimental" and "innovative" interchangeably and without comment, which is probably just as good a way of dealing with terminology as the endless fretting encountered elsewhere, although the introduction to the first *Out of Everywhere*, edited by Maggie O'Sullivan, dedicates useful space to a delineation of both the sorts of things at stake in the poetry she has chosen and the tradition within which it is working.) The poets are constantly worrying out loud about the inadequacy of language, the totality of language. Jean Day's "Composability" begins:

I myself am lyric but  
the problem is  
are words  
any more  
than what will happen?

This is a worry hardly new to avant garde poetry; and in fact much of the first *Out of Everywhere* was given over to poets coming out of the 'language' tradition for whom it was axiomatic that language helped constitute the things it described. Here, this picture of language—and the concomitant foregrounding of language as material—can no longer be straightforwardly innovative in and of itself, and finds itself quoted, as if it has itself become a cliché: "[Language is] a constant / Deconstruction; Language cannot be / Authentic" (Corina Copp, "The Flatbed").

Critchley rightly points out that these are works taken out of their contexts, many of which are longer poems or poem sequences, or rely on their being printed in particular ways, in particular little magazines or pamphlets, or come out of particular, often collaborative, situations or events. (Reality Street have also produced a set of recordings of a number of the poets available separately, and somewhat anachronistically, on CD.) The anthology series

“Best British Poetry” has imported from its American counterpart a section in which the poets anthologised can describe how their poems came into being, which, in the case of the sorts of work usually chosen, is often unnecessary or detrimental, even, to an enjoyment of the poems; here, however, it might have been useful to have some sense of what we are missing, how the poem might have changed during its conversion to anthology piece.

One notable case is Andrea Brady’s *Wildfire*, a long poem exploring among other things the history of incendiary devices. Brady has characterised the poem as “an exercise in concentration”, and it started life as a hypertext poem, *Tracking Wildfire*, a link to which is given, exceptionally, in the anthology. In interviews, Brady has discussed the kinds of distraction and interruption involved in reading this sort of poem, in which the background material is offered as a digital footnote, breaking any sustained attention. It now exists in these two forms, making it a useful test case, an experiment in attentive reading; and the discrepancy between the two is not just in terms of the subjective experience of reading but also in terms of knowledge. *Wildfire* is subtitled, “A verse essay on obscurity and illumination”, and it is unclear whether we achieve greater illumination with or without the notes and sources. And what, exactly, are we to do with the knowledge that we gain? Our diligence, our attention, may augment our surface-level comprehension but serves to undermine aesthetic engagement.

Brady, who is not only a poet, but also an important node within the British avant garde poetry world, running, among other things, Queen Mary’s Centre for Poetry, can be seen as the archetype of Critchley’s “politically and philosophically engaged” poet, and Brady’s work draws on figures such as Adorno, Augustine, Theophrastus. Throughout *Out of Everywhere 2* are references and allusions to ‘big names’: Judith Butler, Nietzsche, Heidegger, Descartes. There are Lacan jokes. It is not always clear to what degree these are there in the role of an interlocutor, or as a reference to a particular metaphysical picture, and to what degree they are there merely to act as (varyingly satirical) intellectual scenery. Similarly, the use of ‘long’, technical or *recherché* words varies across the anthology; for someone like Copp it seems one among many registers and forms of discourse to which the poet stands at a distance; in a poem such as ‘Fed on Scarlet Hips’ (Francesca Lisette) it seems closer to a form of ornamentation: “Decorticated, time is deliquescent/ echolocation.” To find the poems of *Out of Everywhere 2* beautiful seems, often, to miss the point, to shirk on one’s duties to difficulty. Critchley’s own contribution seems at points deliberately ugly (“Correlates of the law of identity which is the first principle of feeling-thought”). The things attended to in this anthology are not, often, seen as ‘objects’ per se but in fact ‘subjects’ or samples isolated in the sterile laboratory of language; and the experimenters must be very serious: “Now do not experience joy till you have collected those numbered & organised” (Critchley) or are themselves put under the linguistic microscope: “The females can be seen to have shorter sentences./ The male has a longer memory” (Elizabeth James & Frances Presley). In the poem, “I’m total I’m

all I'm absorbed in this meatcake" (Catherine Wagner), which could to some degree have stood as the epigraph to the anthology, the speaker crows, defiantly, "I'm the control and the experiment bothly/ you'll never get a result out of me".

We could imagine the anthology as a sort of experiment in this stricter, scientific sense. I had initially intended to write this review without mention of the word 'women.' For that is one understanding of the book's project: that we attend to the poets featured, on their own terms, and do so without the 'noise' of their male counterparts. The idea would be that by restricting the sample size we might better focus in on what exactly the sorts of innovation in contemporary poetry look like; that by controlling for gender we might better see the similarities, but more importantly, the variety, across the anglophone avant garde poetry world. But is this what it is for? Even Critchley herself seems unsure as to what the book can, and wants to, achieve: after acknowledging, in the introduction, that one might doubt that there is "still a need for an all-female anthology of avant garde poetry" her justification begs—or avoids—the question. The situation is, in terms of brute numbers, superficially better than 1996, she says, but misogyny "still lurks not far beneath the surface" of "what are meant to be some of our most advanced experimental writing and thinking communities". She alludes somewhat coyly here to "events in the 'alt lit' scenes" without spelling out what these were, and while it seems fitting not to waste further space on these "events", the use of enigmatic shorthand—along with the self-congratulatory description of the communities in question—gives the reader the unfortunate sense that this is a book not just of linguistically innovative (women) poets, but also, exclusively, for them: an echo chamber re-configured, but an echo chamber nonetheless.

And it is also unfortunate that the only justification for the book once we have "bracket[ed] the politics of these writing scenes" is a repetition of Maggie O'Sullivan's original claim that "much of the most significant work of recent years [...] is made by women"—without making it clear, if this is the case, why it makes sense to isolate these women. *Out of Everywhere* was a direct response to the fact that innovative women poets were shut out of two canons: that of 'poetry by women' (specifically the Gilbert and Gubar Norton anthology) and that of 'innovative poetry'. It was thus intended as an exercise—in the tradition of (and against) such other oppositional anthologies as *The New American Poetry, 1945-1960* or *Out of Everywhere*'s exact contemporary, *Conductors of Chaos*—in canon-correction, if not formation. This is not the case in *Out of Everything 2*, which is intended as a "partial snapshot", its partiality explicitly quantitative, but also, obviously, qualitative—but why choose gender? "Imagine something," the reader is asked in Mei-mei Berssenbrugge's "I Love Artists", "which distinguishes itself, yet that from which it distinguishes does not distinguish itself from it." Reading *Out of Everywhere 2*, this is not hard.

It is worth mentioning at this point that ‘woman’ is being used in this review—and, I assume, in the anthology, although it is not made explicit—in an inclusive sense; inclusive, that is, of anyone who would not meet the entry requirements of a ‘boys’ club’. A different way of understanding this book’s aims, then, might be as a form of girls-to-the-front-ism: while women are more than represented within contemporary avant garde poetry, men are blocking the view. The desire to combat this seems better served, however, by a format, such as a reading series, which would make women poets more visible without being seen to make particular claims for coherence or unity, and which, crucially, would allow people to present their work on their own terms. This might mean an adaptation of their work in response to a particular audience, as, for instance, at a recent reading by Lisa Robertson (a poet included in the first *Out of Everywhere*). Noticing that it was a bit of a sausage fest, Robertson changed the reading to include parts of her earlier book, *The Men* (a representative line: “The funny pathos of men—I salute this.”).

In Mairéad Byrne’s “Three Irish Poets” the poet presents the “3 guises” under which she is “available for inclusion in [...] anthologies & special features on Irish poetry”: “Irish Woman Poet”, “Innovative Irish Poet”, “Ireland’s First Concrete Poet”; she is working, she goes on to write, on a fourth: “A Remarkable Poet In Her Own Right.” Critchley may hedge her bets as to the value of such a collection, and the poets may be ill-served by the demands of the anthology form, but each is certainly “remarkable poet in their own right.” Is that enough? I’m not sure; but if we are looking for something more, something more like an argument, the following lines from Rachel Blau DuPlessis’ “Draft 39: Split” could serve as its conclusion:

No way seeing is-ness  
 no way saying it-ness  
 except resistance.