

human interventions into nature. This is not poetry of conceptual ‘wilds’; instead it is most commonly grounded, with the subject moving through an elusive terrain. As Ian Davidson notes in ‘Human Remains & Sudden Movements’:

I wrote specifically as if I could do otherwise
the totality escapes me the folds that matter makes up

This escaping totality is a resonance that builds up across the anthology, with examples ranging from Peter Larkin’s compressed intensity to Thomas A. Clark’s more minimalist, almost koan-like, stanzas:

you are the one
walking alone
intermediary between
earth and sky

(‘The Grey Fold’)

It may be worth reframing the concept of the grounded subject as already laid out. *The Ground Aslant* produces several instances where the text treats that subject with ambivalence or wariness. Wendy Mulford’s punchy and fractured syntax gives ‘December – Anemone rising’ an almost telegraphic quality, the ideal medium to deliver the observation, “how we trash / our circumambient beauty.” Elsewhere the claiming of the rural as holiday destination, a retreat for those seeking escape from the urban, is rendered elegiac:

The condition of paradise is loss
on a shrinking coast
when you can’t afford
auctioned solitude or
the steep subscription for the
orchid tamped with officious
solicitude & creatureliness
retreats
leaving the land to new leisure

(‘Salthouse, 1986’)

Across the whole of *The Ground Aslant* the political is an aspect that feels fidgety and difficult to centre. The landscape, or rather the land (Tarlo’s introduction makes a strong case for that distinction in this instance), is apolitical in the sense of its very indifference to politics. We are the ones who enact its enclosure in those terms.

It is in this way that the poems engage with politics, politics embedded in labour, notions of containment and human presence. This can raise some interesting areas for further thought and exploration, in terms of the tensions between our dependence on rural landscape for nourishment, the changing nature of rural labour and our impact on both.

The anthology’s presentation of that labour is resistant to romantic idealisation, for the most part. This is field-work in a post-industrial world, where the impact of over-farming and over-consumption looms at the edges. The work of Carol Watts in the anthology leans into these questions with compelling grace:

the feeding of one into the landscape results
in a climbing to infinity this opens the labour of a day
the task is to find a distribution of fields
and from these the truth of this place

(‘Zeta Landscape’)

The poem invokes toil, but also a radical subjectivity that works with lyric resonance to explore our wider relationship with the landscape. It is amongst the finest pieces within the anthology, and demands close reading to draw out its complex detail.

Tarlo’s anthology is one of works compiled sympathetically, while also setting out a range of different approaches to radical landscape poetry. It is sensitive to legacy, with frequent reference back to Barry MacSweeney and Basil Bunting, but also progressive in outlook. As an editor Tarlo is to be commended for resisting the common temptation to turn anthology into manifesto. Instead she has found something simultaneously grounded and ungrounded, a thrilling representation of the landscape and the works that engage with it in all their rich strangeness.

Poems of Frank Rupture

by Peter Manson (Sancho Panza, 2014)

Reviewed by Greg Thomas

the poem’s father died when it was one
the poem was acquiring language then
the system with no positive terms won
from rack to lack to cack and back again

(‘The Baffle Stage,’ 6)

It's typical of the narrative persona conveyed in much of Peter Manson's previous work that 'The Baffle Stage,' the second of the *Poems of Frank Rupture*, should offer a kind of pre-emptive piss-take of the compositional techniques underpinning the collection's subsequent and most significant piece, 'Sourdough Mutation,' defined as it is by verbal shuffling of the "rack/lack/cack" variety (though far more myriad and pleasurable). It's equally typical that this punishing self-appraisal should be fleshed out – as it were – with an extended simile involving a crotch-thrusting "post-op John Wayne Bobbitt," doing the "hard-on shuffle to finance // the written word's dysmorphophobia" (6). On the one hand, the formal invention of this poetry occasionally seems powered by a veritable dynamo of masochism; on the other, and not unrelatedly, it's often hilarious.

The tragicomic persona which appears here and there in the background of this collection might tempt us into a sketchy biographical analysis, but somehow it doesn't seem appropriate to fetishise the apparent byplayed display of personal trauma in some of this work, however palpably that dumb show carries on in the wings. Indeed, it's worth pointing out that the book's title, despite its apparently confessional bent, with its frank avowal of rupture, breakdown – and as well as sounding like a Fall song, in an 'Impression of J. Temperance' vein – is actually based on a line from Mallarmé's 'Canticle of Saint John,' which serves as the collection's preface: "...Comme rupture franche..." ("Like frank rupture," or "clean rupture"). That poem is narrated by John the Baptist seconds after decapitation – frank rupture indeed – but is more of a meditation on the celestial and transcendental connotations of the arcing and soaring flight of his own head than an autobiographical (auto-hagiographical?) whinge. Similarly, throughout this collection, but especially in the 'Sourdough Mutation,' Manson seems to extract the cognitive logic of the paranoid episode – a kind of excoriating self-scrutiny – and explore its creative possibilities when turned on language itself: words and phrases attack and rebuild themselves, in an impersonal yet rejuvenative-seeming verbal play.

'The Baffle Stage' predicts this cycle of linguistic destruction and regeneration with its visions of self-perpetuating biological systems: digestion, excretion, genetic heredity, mutation, parasitism; all the pre-conscious and unwittingly grotesque processes by which organisms sustain their genus, often by destroying other organisms. Things get eaten by other things which shit out other things, which body-snatch and feed off other things (7):

a tapeworm munching through a lonesome toalie
distilled a richer shit from that rich shit
and in that tapeworm's shit a young E. coli
seized by nostalgia for the infinite

implores the self same sun that terminates
its one attempt at photosynthesis
to warm the cell wall till it levitates

encysted to a wind-borne chrysalis

Incidentally, the E. coli ends up blinding a one-eyed baby, who resurrects in shock a dormant gene enabling flight, in what turns out to be the first stage of an extended mythopoeic sequence culminating in the birth of the lyric 'I' out of the scream of its fifth hallucinated sextuplet upon seeing its reflection in a pane of double-glazing. Lacanians will no doubt chew over that imagery for some time, encouraged by the titular pun on the "mirror stage." Putting that aside, as well as offering a metaphor for the cycles of linguistic self-consumption in the impending poem-sequence, the scope of some of these metaphors seems to encompass naturalised economic cycles: hard-wired systems of competition and exploitation which malfunction but seem to have the capacity to endlessly repair themselves; indeed, this seems like a post-global-financial-crisis collection on various levels.

'The Baffle Stage' is funny and macabre – some people might be mildly fatigued by its scatological preoccupations – as are the three other poems that encase the 'Sourdough Mutation.' But the most extraordinary part of the collection is that sequence itself, almost a hundred pages of (initially) very short poems, which function in isolation or as a multi-cellular organism, divided by bullet points which eventually start to seem like the poems' mother-cells, the sources from which each new text-fragment buds off. The size and complexity of these fragments gradually increases across the sequence – climaxing in the following and penultimate poem "Fragments of a Narcissus" – granting it something of the quality of an evolutionary process, or, indeed, a mutation, sustained by restless reformulation of the grammatical, sonic and visual characteristics of its constituent phrases. Given the equal use of optic and auditory techniques, one gamut of effects would be lost to both the silent reader and the textless listener, which is presumably why the imagined audience is of "*speakers reading*" (9).

For the sake of taxonomical precision, let's consider these three sets of features – grammatical, visual, sonic – in turn. One of the most striking and recurrent grammatical tricks is the re-grafting of cut-out sections of words onto other words further down the page, the remainder finding another host-word further down still (34):

•
arsenide
gall

white
asp

iron-on
pirates

extirpate
kin

in
ink

•

In one sense, the jarring semantic associations are the by-product of the compositional process, which primarily involves a kind of grammatical splicing. Starting on the fifth line, for example, “iron” is broken up to make *ir* and *on*; the latter is re-attached to make “iron-*on*,” while *ir* finds a host in “pirates”; *p-ates*, introduced to the letter-pool for the first time, is now subjected to the same process, reconstituted in “extirpate,” with an *s* left over; *extir* perhaps mutates, by implication, and by thematic association with “extirpation,” into “extinct,” from which “kin” emerges as a scrambled version of the second syllable; “kin” itself is then extirpated and reanimated in “ink,” though that floating *s* from earlier also hints at “skin,” a surface into which ink can sink. Elsewhere, word-sections are reversed before reinsertion, as in “o useless semen / nemesis is blind,” reading which we realise that “nemesis” backwards contains “semen” (35); or “noiseless trilemma // ameliorates,” in which “ameliorate” is a mangled “trilemma” in reverse (36); sometimes the two halves of a word are swapped and reprinted: “alpine [...] pineal” (14); “scotoma mascot” (66).

At other times, what re-emerges in a later word is the sound rather than the spelling of an earlier section. At a basic level of course, this is what rhyming is, and lots of the collection has an almost doggerel quality to it: “delivered adrenal cortex shots / to evident shaved xerox Scots (42); “emetic ketamine enamatheque” (64), etcetera. Sometimes the sound permutations are more complex and mesmeric, as in this little two-liner (44):

•

aphorist fog hat

a fat forest hog

•

Or this snippet from one of the denser, climactic episodes (84):

to order each obdurate border or deracinate
earache in a spider’s eye soap scandal dialled edge

greet cheered us salps to climb from limber amber geese
to barn acclimatised to set a milk-can robot to the manger
born

Occasionally, by contrast, there’s a more pronounced kind of visual play at work, whereby words and letter-fragments don’t seem like grammatical reshufflings but like literally flipped or mirrored versions of each other; the reversible poems of dsh’s *Begin Again* (1975) are a notable influence in this sense. In the phrase “debriding / no outward pram,” putting aside binding associations of birth and motherhood, *pram* seems like *ward* rotated 180 degrees clockwise (45). In a slightly different vein, let’s take a line like “bigger splash pool // =stye at the lash root”: *lash root* seems like a visually evolved or mutated *splash pool*, its frontal *sp* dropped off and the second *p* reduced to vestigial state in *r*, while a cross-bar sprouts from the final letter, turning *l* into *t* (53).

Perhaps the most obvious question to ask of this work is what it is supposed to *mean*: narrowing the scope of meaning to the semantic, that is. Certainly, semantic associations both literal and implied often provide the sonic or graphic kernel around which new layers of language bind themselves. But once these associations are extracted they can occasionally seem wilfully superficial: familiar terms, phrases or clichés; as when “police car” is elided in “police caliper” (33); or when the piece below gravitates around the unstated phrase “opposable thumbs” (47):

•

many womanly
poseable contraries

permanently opposed
to all thumbs

Why “opposable thumbs”? Why anything? In this case there might be an evolutionary subtext – men and women, poseable contraries – but at times it’s hard to say; in that sense, the piece might start to seem like Surrealism without the unconscious. The collection’s narrative voice, of course, acknowledges the apparent dearth of underlying value systems or symbologies in typically self-flagellating fashion: “the poem never wanted to mean shit / the formal backflops were the whole performance” (“The Baffle Stage,” 6). In a related spirit, the opening poem “My Funeral,” a set of instructions for the preparation of the author’s pyre, implies the perverse extent to which the neo-Symbolist poet has deferred communication with the reader: direct assertions will be issued over my dead body.

But there *is* something deeper stirring here. Some of the most striking effects in ‘Sourdough Mutation’ are created when the insentient pullulation of language is interrupted by a strange, first-person voice of faux-religious

testimony (49):

[...]

when first I saw
the mushroom head

dead though I was
I saw that my caul be tanned

and shade in the flash
my gingko

a poet
tattooed

Sections like this, despite their comically arcane quality, have a directness of address and a near-earnestness of tone which cuts through the pre-rational surface of the poem, suggesting a half-serious yearning to speak in a voice of absolute truths, in a medium that will not allow it. This is somehow borne out in the closing vision of the poet tattooed, of inks pressed into skin: the image suggests a drive to cultivate some uncorrupted language of the body – the word made flesh – typifying the only-half-ironic impulse towards transcendent communication.

There's a bit in George Orwell's essay "Inside the Whale" – said the guy who's just finished teaching a course on George Orwell – where he talks about *Ulysses* as a book which makes you feel not that you understand it, but that you are understood by it: it shows you the complexity of your own thought process in ferment. This is what 'Sourdough Mutation' feels like to read: like someone has extracted the hypnagogic voices from your supine head and played them back to you, algorithmically shuffled into pleasing patterns of sound and shape. It's an act of generous communication to allow a poem to speak a reader like this: to show them that the most primordial aspects of their cognition are shared and understood. It also seems like it could have been an indirectly rejuvenative process for the poetic voice itself. At the close of that creation sequence in 'The Baffle Stage,' Manson offers an almost-potty-mouthed reworking of Rimbaud's "Je est un autre" – "I is this constellated cupid stunt" – which seems to get to the heart of the matter (8). The compositional logic may in essence be a logic of self-punishment – "I am a stupid cunt" – but embraced and played out in language, it yields a childlike, celestial play: a constellation of cupid stunts.

PART II

'HAPTIC'

by Sarah Hayden

Response by Tom Betteridge

'HAPTIC' is the penultimate poem from Sarah Hayden's 2013 chapbook *Exteroceptive* (Wild Honey Press). It's in six aerated fragments of steadily increasing length, each delimited by a single full stop. In lieu of any firm grasp either of the poem's arc or the argumentative force of the theoretical tensions it deploys – the persistent exploration of the relation between language and haptic landscape, for example – my pleasure in returning to it is bound most often to small patches of sustained ambiguity.

This is the centre of the poem, its fourth section:

under a cap of tinnabulating pondweed
stomachfooting
tightsuckingly hanging
and unconcernedly inverted
watersnails hum the conspiracies of a society unsurveilled

innerear migrants
they spin
lang'rously
from stalk to stem
propelled by (im)pulses undivined
and agglutinative

Clinging to the pondweed's underside, the watersnails are the source of the rising bell sounds. Their "hum," barely audible, is transmitted visually by their steady production of carbon dioxide bubbles, some caught in the fronds