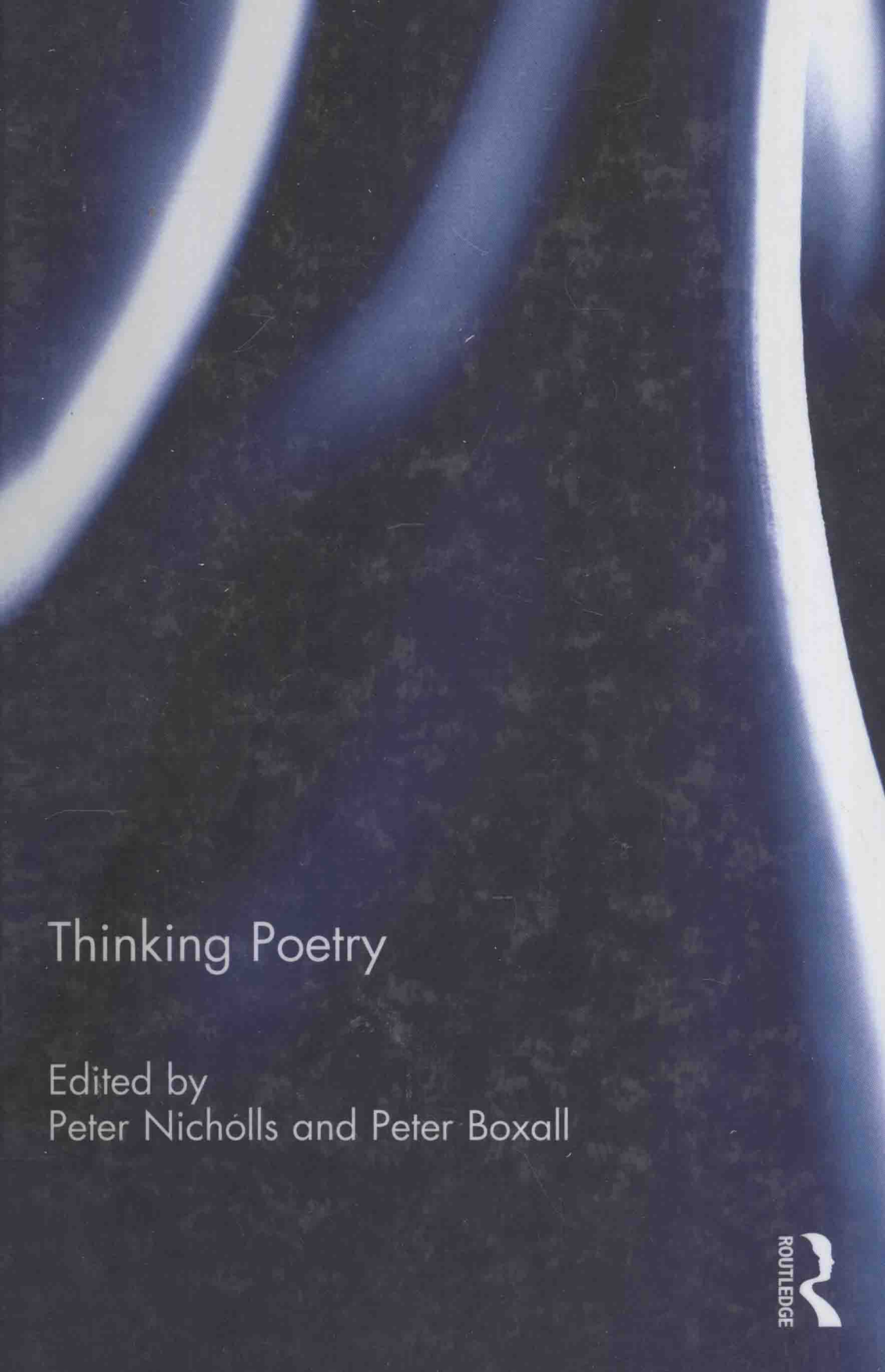
Thinking Poetry
Edited by
Peter Nicholls and Peter Boxall
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Introduction: Thinking Poetry

In his most recent book, George Steiner summarises his central concern as 'the poetry of thought and equally the thought of poetry.'[1] In an account of literature which is profoundly shaped by the thought of Heidegger, Steiner is at pains to demonstrate the inseparability of form and content, of literary style and what it articulates: 'in both philosophy and literature style is substance,' he declares, and 'all philosophy is *style*. No philosophic proposition outside formal logic is separable from its semantic means and context. Nor is it totally translatable...'.[2] This residual untranslatability gives the clue to what it might mean to describe poetry as a kind of 'thinking', for by this we mean not just that poetry provides a medium in which to articulate ideas but that its particular formal features—rhythm, metre, syntax, musicality, image, and so forth—offer a singular potentiality for ways of thinking that lie outside or in opposition to those determined by 'ordinary' propositional language. In this respect, the very notion of literary style becomes deeply ambiguous, signalling at once a model invoking generic expectations *and* a deviation from any such norm. As Antoine Compagnon observes, 'Deeply ambivalent, the word ["style"] designates both the infinite diversity of individuals and the regular classification of species.' With romanticism, of course, the balance shifts sharply from 'genre' to 'genius' as the primary determinant of 'style',[3] and this association of literary form with individual signature persists in the experimental modes of modernism, as free verse supplants conventional prosodies: 'A man's rhythm,' declares Ezra Pound, 'must be interpretative, it will be, therefore, in the end, his own, uncounterfeiting, uncounterfeitable'.[4]

Much contemporary poetry seeks to reverse that move, devising programmatic versions of 'style' to curb the lyric tendency toward expressivism.[5] At the same time, though, avant-garde poetics continues to insist on what had become almost an article of faith for late modernist poets contemplating the 'wrecks and errors' of Poundian voluntarism, that the poem should map the contour of thinking rather than present a thought anterior to its own occasion. George Oppen, for example, emphasises that 'there must be no possible impression of a statement having been *put* into verse', while Robert Duncan proposes that 'the material of a poem is not brought into it but native to it.

Any material gives rise to a poem when you start "making" in the material, seeking its inherent creative form'.[6] For his part, Louis Zukofsky avers that 'Writing occurs which is the detail, not mirage, of seeing, of thinking with the things as they exist, and of directing them along a line of melody.'[7] Poetry, as what James Joyce's Gabriel Conroy thinks of as 'thought-tormented music', summons thinking from its musicality, rather than attaching musicality as some kind of supplement or prosthesis.[8] As Beckett writes of Joyce's 'Work in Progress', 'here, form *is* content, content *is* form'.[9] Poetic form forges a 'medium for the exteriorisation of thought', rather than offering a simple vehicle for thinking that has already been done in another form.[10]

The essays collected here suggest various ways of gauging this present tense of poetic thinking and its potential for bringing new cognitive, intellectual, aesthetic and political formations into being. The collection opens with a landmark essay by J.H. Prynne, entitled 'Poetic Thought'. The essay offers a definition of thinking poetry, and a characterisation of what poetic thought is, which resonates with each of the chapters that comes after it. The conception of poetic thought that emerges from this essay is one that reaches for independence from the author or the poet, the figure of the 'poet supervisor', an 'identified poet-in-charge' (p. 12). This is a kind of thinking that emerges from versification itself, language 'pressing against' the borders of thinking, borders 'discovered and invented by composition itself' (p. 12). Verse, in this conception of poetic thinking, works with and against the limits of what it is possible to think, and in so doing refashions such limits, meaning that the 'new discovered and extended limits of poetic thought form the language-boundaries of the new work' (p. 14). Prynne is clear that this does not mean that the poem is an automatic, independent 'language-machine', operating in 'generative mode'; rather, he sees the poem as a site of struggle, a 'disputed territory', in which the poet puts language to work, in the intensity of poetic composition, so that what 'vibrate on the page' for agreement with 'are' the exceeded limits of the possible itself, language producing 'new poetic thought' (p. 14) by displaying its independence of the thinker, speaker or writer. This thinking can appear alien and opaque, a kind of 'anti-thinking', perhaps, that may register, says Prynne, 'functional self-damage or sacrifice' (p.15).

The implications of this opening essay reverberate through the collection, and find particularly strong echoes in the two pieces that follow, by Simon Jarvis and Peter Middleton, each of which is organised around an examination of the capacity for poetry to produce thought. Simon Jarvis' chapter, 'The Melodics of Long Poems', dedicates itself to an analysis of the ways in which melody, rhyme and rhythm in the long poem are themselves productive of a kind of poetic thinking. Jarvis' chapter proceeds from a distinction he makes between his own conception of poetic thinking, and J.H. Prynne's, particularly the Prynne of the 1963 essay 'The Elegiac World in Victorian Poetry'.[11] In this essay, Jarvis suggests that Prynne tends to undervalue the melodic, musical aspects of verse. For Prynne, as for Viktor Zhirmunsky, Jarvis argues, poetic music is not a vehicle for thought, but a kind of

anaesthetic, a calmative to soothe the troubled, 'gravely thoughtful' (p. 26) mind, rather than a mode of thinking in its own right. 'We find in both Zhirmunsky and Prynne', Jarvis suggests, 'a sharply Platonic consensus about what thinking is and what its relation to sound might be. "Musical" rhyming, however "amazing" its "mastery", is and must be cocoon or stimulant. It cannot itself be admitted to be a kind of thinking or involved in noticing. Instead, it screens those perceptions out' (p. 27). The essay by Prynne collected in this issue, with its attention to the 'fingertip energies of a language' which are able to 'perform the pressures of new poetic thought' (p. 14), may display some differences of emphasis from Prynne's 1963 essay, and may suggest that the differences between Jarvis and Prynne are quite slender; but Jarvis sets out this difference between himself and Prynne in order to examine the ways in which melody, music and sound in poetry are not simply mimetic of thinking, but rather constitute in themselves a kind of argument. Poetic music, Jarvis argues, is not a duvet for the dormant mind, but is instead the 'engine' of the poem's thinking. In offering readings of the musical structure of long poems by Collins, Keats, Wordsworth and Shelley, Jarvis develops a means of grasping the melodic fabric of the poem, not as a sign, not as a species of 'metacommunicative' (p. 35) expression, but as a form of argument rendered with 'almost irrecoverable implicitness' – reading melody as the 'way that verse thinks at the limit of explicability' (p. 35).

Peter Middleton, in his chapter 'Open Oppen', draws on Jarvis' analysis of Wordsworth's 'Philosophic Song', to suggest that George Oppen's poetry offers a singular means of thinking, of 'producing knowledge'. Middleton's chapter takes Oppen's 1972 volume *Seascape: Needle's Eye* as marking a significant moment in the poet's oeuvre, as he moves away from a propositional poetry towards a more open poetic form. Before *Seascape*, Middleton suggests, Oppen is 'concerned to achieve clarity of statement in the form of lucidly articulated, firmly asserted and often strongly felt propositions' (p. 39), but the 1972 volume marks a move to a less propositional, more fragmented form. This move, Middleton proposes, allows for a fresh examination of the way that poetry makes philosophical and other propositions, and for a rethinking of how poetic language works with and against forms of philosophical writing in order to produce poetic thought—what Middleton calls 'the timely reopening of an old debate around the validity of propositions in poetry' (p. 40). Oppen, he argues, read philosophy, and particularly Hegel's philosophy, not in a systematic fashion, but as if 'it too were hinged and open, phrases and words only partially linked to propositions' (p. 43). In a striking resonance with Jarvis' work on melody (both in his book *Wordsworth's Philosophic Song*, and in his chapter in this collection), Middleton suggests that the kind of thinking that emerges from this poetic engagement with philosophy is one that is expressed in the singular poetic utterance, an utterance that cannot be translated into a philosophical proposition, or indeed any other kind of proposition. Poetic thinking is carried out in the

space of the opened proposition, composed at once of music and of philosophy, reducible to neither.

The next three chapters in the collection, by Rebecca Beasley, Ronald Bush and Maud Ellmann, extend the question of thinking poetry through an engagement with the poetry of Ezra Pound. Beasley's chapter, 'Pound's New Criticism', offers an analysis of the ways in which Pound's modernism might be thought of as giving expression to a transnational sensibility; a sensibility in which, to quote George E. Woodberry, the 'parts of the world' are knitted together in 'one intellectual state' (p. 74). The transnationalism of Pound's work, its fluency in such a dazzling range of national literatures and languages, might be taken as a mark of this diversity. But Beasley's aim in 'Pound's New Criticism' is not simply to demonstrate the transnationalism of Pound's work, and of his kind of modernism, but to understand how Pound's internationalism is itself produced by the national contexts—both institutional and stylistic—from which his work emerges. Beasley goes on to suggest that a full understanding of the ways in which modernist poetry reached toward a world mind, and towards a form of expression that 'transcended' the 'necessity for translation' (p. 80), requires us to understand how such transnationalism was produced historically by the national institutional and stylistic orthodoxies within which Pound and other modernists were working. Beasley's chapter sets out to produce a layered understanding of how transnationalism comes to expression in Pound's work, by tracing the persistence of national imperatives into his transnational style.

This set of issues is approached from a rather different angle later in the volume, in Marjorie Perloff's 'Language in Migration: Multilingualism and Exophonic Writing in the New Poetics'. The chapter begins with an engagement with Eliot and Pound, and further pursues Beasley's theorisation of translation in relation to Poundian modernism. Perloff, however, argues that the montage of different languages assembled in the work of Pound and Eliot, whilst marking these poets' transnationalism, nevertheless fails to unsettle the primacy of English as the medium in which the poetry takes place. 'However many language registers Pound introduces into *The Cantos*', Perloff argues, 'there is never any doubt but that the voice that orchestrates these ingenious variations is a well-versed and expert English speaker' (p. 146). The diverse forms of expression that Pound stitches together in *The Cantos*, Perloff suggests, are 'measurable against a norm' (p. 146), and are assembled around Pound's authoritative English voice. A similar relation between a polyglot textual fabric, and a normalised, authoritative English can be found in Eliot's work. But Perloff's focus in this essay is on the transformation in the meaning of multilingualism and translation in contemporary poetry, under conditions in which the normalising effects of English have weakened. 'There is a significant difference', she argues, 'between the function of "foreign" citations in *The Waste Land*, and their role, a century later, in the global context of shifting national identities, large scale migration from one language to another, and especially the heteroglossia of the Internet' (p. 142). Perloff

proposes that the 'writing of poetry under these circumstances calls for a new set of language games' (p. 142), and her essay goes on to follow these language games, particularly as they are adapted in the poetry of Caroline Bergvall and Yoko Tawada. The essay offers dazzling readings of the work of translation in these poets, demonstrating the capacity of their poetry to open language to translation, and to give expression to an extraordinary array of political and cultural encounters in language, without the normalising presence of an English voice.

Ronald Bush's essay also turns around the appearance of non-English languages and characters in Pound's poetry, focusing on the mistranscription of a Greek character in Pound's *Pisan Cantos*. In a compelling essay, which combines literary sleuthing with philosophical archaeology, Bush suggests that the interpretative confusions caused by the publisher's substitution of an omega for an omicron in Canto 81 have helped to obscure one of the philosophical traditions buried within the *Cantos*, a tradition which shapes the question of how poetry thinks, and of what kind of mind it thinks with. Where Beasley is interested in the persistence of national difference in Pound's transnational imagination, Bush sets out to trace the relation in Pound between the differentiated, individual mind, and the collective spirit, the *nous poietikos*. This tension in Pound between an intellect which is 'seated within the human mind' (p. 91), and one which belongs to a collective mind ('mind, apart from any man's individual mind', 'in contact with the luminous world of the eternal' (p. 91)), is held for Bush in the recurring image of a pair of gazing eyes. These eyes appear and reappear in the *Cantos*, where they mark the boundary between the observer and the observed, and the imprisonment of both observer and observed within their individual minds, barred from any kinds of communion in the *nous poietikos*. But Bush argues that the drama of this gaze is informed by Pound's extended research into the work of Cavalcanti and Avicenna, and their exploration of the possibility that love can unite the individual with the common mind, that 'engaging with the intellectual form of Love, the soul lifts itself into the *nous poietikos*' (p. 87). Cavalcanti's great Canzone, 'Donna mi prega' exemplifies in this way what Pound calls 'the radiant world', a world in which 'the thought has its demarcation, the substance its *virtu*, where stupid men have not reduced all "energy" to undistinguished abstraction.'[12] Here Pound discerns a lyric musicality that serves the ends not of merely personal expression but of a passionate thinking that presses against the formalities of scholastic thought. Bush offers a scrupulous account of how Pound's research into Cavalcanti and Avicenna comes to an extraordinary climax in Cantos 81 and 83, as the gaze that haunts the poem 'interpasses' and 'penetrates', as 'The eyes, this time my world, / But pass and look *from* mine / between my lids'.[13] The particular philosophical power of this climax, as a poetic rendering of a love which has the power to suffuse, has gone unremarked, Bush argues, because of a misrendering of the Greek word 'Eidos', in Canto 81. In correcting this error, the essay reclaims an

entire tradition of thought, and offers a new way of understanding the working of the poetic mind in Pound's *Cantos*.

Maud Ellmann's chapter, 'Cold Noses at the Pearly Gates', also turns around the communicative power of the gaze, and in this case of the gaze between the human and the spectral animal. The chapter departs from a reading of Pound's poem 'The Return', which, Ellmann argues, is one of a small collection of moments in modernist writing in which we are presented with the ghost of the animal. The speaker in Pound's poem, she notes, does not attempt to share the gaze of the gods, to mingle in some sense with the divine and the infinite, but rather looks at the ghost dogs which, in Pound's poem, lead the gods who are returning to us in spectral form. 'The speaker', she writes, 'looks down rather than up, as if fearful of gazing directly at the gods, lowering his eyes to their feet and dogs' (p. 123). This observation leads Ellmann to a reflection on the place of the spectral animal in Modernism more generally, whose peculiar and marginal presence marks the limits of modernist language in producing meaning and thought. The animal ghost, which tends to manifest itself as body without spirit rather than spirit without body, presents us with a picture of a foully carnate language which is no longer 'contained by thought', a 'padded corpse' no longer 'animated with the spirit of the speaker' (p. 133). Ellmann follows this logic though the work of Flaubert, Hofmannsthal, Joyce and Kafka, returning to the concept of parrotry as a figure for the automated language of the deadened animal. Where Jarvis is interested in melody as poetic thinking, and Middleton extends this to focus on the poetic significance of bird song (pp. 46-52), Ellmann reads the echoes of parrotry in modernism (particularly in Flaubert's *A Simple Heart*) as the sound of a modernist language gone carnal. Flaubert's parrot, and parrotry in modernism more generally, 'repudiates', Ellmann argues, 'the notion that words contain a core of meaning or intention' (p. 133). Flaubert's parrot is perhaps, in this regard, an ancestor of the parrots which recur in Beckett's writing, and of that parrot in *Malone Dies* who has a bash at the philosophical maxim 'nihil in intellectu quod non prius in sensu' (nothing is in the intellect which is not first in the senses). 'These first three words ['nihil in intellectu'] the bird managed well enough', Malone says, 'but the celebrated restriction was too much for it, all you heard was a series of squawks'.[14]

John Wilkinson's chapter, 'Glossing Gloss and its Undertow', turns to the contemporary poet Barbara Guest, and offers a tightly focused reading of a page from her late work *Rocks on a Platter*. While Perloff's chapter extends Beasley's reading of Poundian translation towards the contemporary, Wilkinson's close reading of textual levels in Guest's verse has resonances with the chapters in the collection by Ellmann, Jarvis, Middleton and Prynne. The essay follows the production of poetic thought in Guest's poetry, by documenting the reading process, the 'listening forward and thinking back' by virtue of which lyric thought 'emerges' from the poem (p. 176). In a passage from *Notes to Literature* that is invoked in Wilkinson's essay, Theodor Adorno writes:

> One does not understand a work of art when one translates it into concepts – if one simply does that, one misunderstands the work from the outset – but rather when one is immersed in its immanent movement; I should almost say, when it is recomposed by the ear in accordance with its own logic, repainted by the eye, when the linguistic sensorium speaks along with it.[15]

It is this recomposing by the ear, this repainting by the eye, that Wilkinson undertakes in his glossing of Guest, and in so doing he puts to work the conception of melodic and poetic thinking that emerges at different angles throughout this collection. At the foundation of Guest's poem, Wilkinson writes, is its 'sonic substrate', its 'fundamental hum', and his reading of the text—his immersion in its immanent movement—is his recomposition of the process by which this sonic substrate 'push[es] into emergence' (p. 165), and the poem's 'argument' is 'carried forward acoustically' (p. 177). As, in Jarvis' Wordsworth, line 'thinks back' against design (p. 177), so Wilkinson traces, with his body, his ear and his eye, the emergence of thought from the tensely contradictory layers of the poem. 'As listening forward and thinking back always directs when following a poem by Barbara Guest', he writes, 'the moment when the thought occurs is the moment when the poem seemingly decides to confirm the thought in a new event' (p 176).

The collection closes with Keston Sutherland's essay 'Wrong Poetry', which returns to Wordsworth, and to an implicit engagement with Jarvis' and Prynne's conceptions of poetic thought. Sutherland's essay is a passionate polemic against right-mindedness, and an insistence that poetry makes new thinking possible by breaking the orthodoxies and forms of consensus by which we encourage ourselves to believe that we are right. 'Right knowledge', Sutherland argues, reading through Hegel, 'must become wrong: it must irreversibly "spoil its own limited satisfaction" by subjecting itself to the unfamiliar thing, at the real cost of its former freedom and authority' (p. 182). Prynne writes, in the opening essay of this collection, that 'poetic thought' is 'brought into being by recognition and contest with the whole cultural system of a language, by argument that will not let go but which may not self-admire or promote the idea of the poet as arbiter of rightness'. (p. 14) Sutherland's chapter follows this refusal of the poet as arbiter of rightness, to suggest a kind of collapsing category of poetry which he calls 'wrong poetry'. As Wilkinson argues in his essay collected here, and as Adorno writes in the passage that provides the epigraph to Barbara Guest's *Rocks on a Platter* (p. 165),[16] poetic thinking involves us in overstepping the limits that allow us to think. It requires us to refuse the satisfaction of being right, and thus to adopt a 'negative relationship to truth' (p 183). For Sutherland, indeed, it is the poetry of John Wilkinson and J.H. Prynne, in the second half of the twentieth century, that has most assiduously pursued this mode of poetic thought. The focus of his essay is, however, not Wilkinson or Prynne, but Wordsworth, the poet who emerges again and again in the collection, in the contributions by

Prynne, by Wilkinson, and by Jarvis. Sutherland reads Wordsworth's poem 'The Thorn', and particularly its last two lines, as an example of 'wrong poetry'. The poem closes with a description of a muddy pond:

> You see a little muddy pond
> Of water, never dry;
> I've measured it from side to side:
> 'Tis three feet long and two feet wide. (p. 186)

This last couplet, with its refusal of poetic language, its adoption of a kind of diagrammatic expression that finds its final extension in the imaginatively deadened mathematical language of Beckett's late rotunda texts, has attracted censure from its first publication. But Sutherland reads it here as an example of Wordsworth's poetic method, his capacity to produce 'cognitive transformation' by stretching 'grammar, idiom, diction, propositions, echo, and utterance to a breaking point' (p. 195).

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The volume as a whole, then, offers an analysis and a performance of the way that new thought—Sutherland's 'cognitive transformation'—is won through a surpassing or a breaking of the limits that constrain and shape it. With the weakening explanatory power of postmodernism and its related compounds, we are entering a new period in the theoretical, political and institutional production of textual knowledge. The political and cultural institutions for the production of knowledge—the university, as well as the publishing house and the bookseller—are also in flux, as they struggle to adapt to the demands of a global 'knowledge economy'. This is an environment in which one might be forgiven for thinking that the very possibility of radical textual practice, of inventive thinking without rule, is a thing of the past, that the potentialities of critical thought have given way to merely fashionable rituals of dissent. The essays collected here reject that negativity, insisting that the exhaustion of old forms does not entail a simple failure of thought, but rather opens the possibility of a new kind of thinking. Simon Jarvis writes, in relation to Keats's *Endymion*:

> [A]ny elegantly despairing presupposition of lateness, any idea that the language is done and dusted, is broken open just in so far as the priority of the tune keeps allowing new verbal material to be made up in order to fill it. (p. 34)

It is just this fashioning of newness from lateness—this recognition, as Edward Said has it in his posthumous book *Late Style*, that 'lateness' and 'newness' lie 'next to each other'[17]—that is the departure point for this collection.

Notes

1 George Steiner, *The Poetry of Thought From Hellenism to Celan* (New York: New Directions, 2011), p. 147.
2 Ibid., pp. 37, 52 (his emphasis).
3 Antoine Compagnon, *Literature, Theory, and Common Sense*, trans. Carol Cosman (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2004), p. 127.
4 Ezra Pound, *Literary Essays*, ed. T. S. Eliot (London: Faber and Faber, 1968), p. 9.
5 Cf. Roland Barthes, 'Style and Its Image', in Seymour Chatman, (ed.), *Literary Style: A Symposium* (London and New York: Oxford University Press, 1971), p. 9.
6 George Oppen, *The Selected Letters of George Oppen*, ed. Rachel Blau DuPlessis (Durham and London: Duke University Press), p. 104; Robert Duncan and Denise Levertov, *The Letters of Robert Duncan and Denise Levertov*, ed. Robert J. Bertholf and Albert Gelpi (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2004), p. 545.
7 Louis Zukofsky, 'Sincerity and Objectification', *Poetry*, 37.5 (1931), p. 273.
8 James Joyce, *Dubliners* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 151.
9 Samuel Beckett, 'Dante... Bruno.Vico.. Joyce', in Samuel Beckett *et al.*, *Our Exagmination round his Facitification for Incamination of Work in Progress* (London: Faber and Faber, 1929), p. 14 (emphases in original).
10 Ibid., p. 16.
11 See J.H. Prynne, 'The Elegiac World in Victorian Poetry', *The Listener*, February 14th, 1963, pp. 290-91.
12 Pound, *Literary Essays*, p. 154.
13 Ezra Pound, *The Cantos of Ezra Pound* (New York: New Directions, 1995), p. 555.
14 Samuel Beckett, *Malone Dies*, in Samuel Beckett, *Molloy, Malone Dies, The Unnamable* (London: Calder, 1994), p. 218.
15 Theodor Adorno, *Notes to Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992),p. 97.
16 The epigraph, taken from Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory*, reads 'The moment a limit is posited it is overstepped, and that against which the limit was established is absorbed'.
17 Edward Said, *On Late Style* (London: Bloomsbury, 2006), p. 17.