

INTRODUCTION

This anthology is intended to highlight the contribution made by poets to narrative prose writing since 1970, emphasising the variety, scope and singularity involved, and signalling that a great deal of the most interesting, unconventional and impressive work in this field, in the UK and North America, has been written by poets.¹

(i) *Aristotle or Otherwise / Business as Usual... or Not*

Narrative prose in the UK and North America is, for the most part, not even haunted by the presumed ghosts of “classic” modernism (e.g. James Joyce, William Faulkner, Djuna Barnes, Gertrude Stein, Franz Kafka, Hermann Broch, Andrei Bely, Miguel de Unamuno), let alone informed by an awareness of the living example of these writers, and most certainly doesn’t attempt to go *beyond* modernism.² It’s more as if modernism never existed... except perhaps as something to teach in the academy. Language is mainly seen as a transparent medium, and literature (following on from this) is a largely direct transference of happenings, ideas, emotions, etc, from one mind (the author’s) to another (the reader’s), only complicated by questions of manner, ingenuity, decoration or embellishment, and order (mostly considered in a fairly rudimentary way, if sometimes “tricky” at the same time). Mimesis hangs behind all this like a moth-eaten curtain, and Aristotle’s well-made plot (with its beginning/middle/end) largely reigns supreme, even if a little chronological reshuffling may be indulged in, together with certain other ways of complicating the basic schema.³ “Character” follows the certainties of conventional psychology, for the most part. We are what we know we are, however terrible that may sometimes be (as with the fictional – and cinematic – obsession with serial killers, for example), and however mistaken we may sometimes be about one another.

The late Edouard Roditi wrote of the present writer’s novella, *Tesseræ*:

Traditional notions of plot, character and environment or “spectacle”, in the Aristotelian sense, are here profoundly modified. Perhaps one should even coin new non-Aristotelian terms for his fiction and call it amythic, anethic and anoptic, because it refrains from the traditional development of plot (*muthos*), character (*ethos*) and spectacle (*opsis*), while remaining faithful to the Aristotelian concept of diction (*lexis*)....⁴

I don't quote this here to concentrate attention on myself, but simply for its aptness to the situation many writers have found themselves in with regard to narrative prose – that is, the need to find or work towards alternative possibilities. I think this is important to emphasise. *Even if* we were to grant mainstream fiction – and memoirs, autobiographies, travel writing are in much the same situation, *mutatis mutandis* – an agenda and goals which are legitimate within their own terms, we are still left with the question of alternatives.⁵ For the most part, narrative prose is a matter of *business as usual*.⁶ But not for the writers in this anthology.

In many cases (though certainly not all, by any means) we have to move outside the domain of the novel or novel-length fiction to consider other achievements. And if indeed we are to look for alternatives to “the usual” in narrative prose, it is mainly to be found in the work of poets, as I have already indicated.⁷ Much of the work in this anthology is either self-contained or comes from relatively small books, although there are excerpts from longer works, as with Barbara Guest's, Rosmarie Waldrop's and Giles Goodland's pieces (Goodland's being from a novel-length work-in-progress). (Some of it doesn't fit easily into genres, either, or inhabits the space of other genres than fiction, such as poetry in prose or the memoir.) But regardless of questions of length, there are certain aspects of these writings that we can generalise about with some aptness and to some advantage.

Here are some of the characteristics and concerns involved:
The poet Roy Fisher has referred to “additive form”, where

“each section [of a work] was written in an attempt to refer only to what I had already written in that work, and without any drive forward at all.”⁸ Even if this is not strictly adhered to – and it isn’t by Fisher himself in his prose work *The Ship’s Orchestra*, the subject of his remarks, due to the way that sections *diverge* from each other – something similar informs the pieces by (eg) Harwood and Sheppard. (Actually, I think Fisher’s formulation is slightly misleading, in as much as what I think he is really pointing to is the way that sections are added together, one to another after another after another, without reference to some pre-established and overarching development.) More generally, we can point to a largely non-hierarchical tendency, *vis-à-vis* structure, in a number of the writers here; it can also be said that their work, quite often, resists the tendency to be directed towards an end (or *telos*).⁹ However, it should be stressed that we are not talking about an avoidance or dismissal of the notion of structure here, but rather a rethinking of it.

Staying with structure for the time being, we can look at what’s variously referred to as juxtaposition, contiguity or contiguous structure, discontinuous structure, and, drawing on comparisons with other art forms, collage, assemblage and montage. At its simplest, this involves one thing (one “piece” of text) placed against, alongside or after another (depending on how you think of this spatially), with the individual “pieces” or elements often of a disparate nature, and sometimes “found” or quoted from other texts. How this may work, in regard to the relationship of discontinuity and continuity, and the way a larger structure is built up from these contiguous “pieces”, will differ from writer to writer. Guy Davenport proposed a model for this under the name of *architectonics*: where subjects are arranged “in ideogrammatic form, shaping them with a poetic sense of imagery, allowing themes to recur in patterns, generating significance... by juxtaposition and the intuition of likenesses among dissimilar and unexpected things.”¹⁰ The writer in the present anthology who comes closest to this is perhaps Will Petersen, whose prose works interlace journal extracts, excerpts from let-

ters (his own and others’), poems, etc., bringing together memories, observations, narrative strands and reflections on art and theatre, finding connections through imagery and thematic concerns.¹¹ More generally, I think it’s possible to see that much of the work in this anthology can be said to be *constructed or assembled*, in a way that can scarcely be said of more conventional narrative prose. I would instance Rosmarie Waldrop, as a fairly self-evident example, but someone like Robert Lax could also be instanced, though this might not be quite as obvious.¹²

It should be clear from the above that fragmentation, or rather the fragment and its relation to larger textual identities, is an issue or concern here, relevant to a number of writers – including, again, Rosmarie Waldrop, as well as Ian Robinson, M J Weller, David Rattray and others.¹³

Lyn Hejinian and also to some extent other contributors, including Bernadette Mayer and M J Weller, can be seen as playing with the conventions of fiction and narrative, in a way that revisits the notion of metafiction – fiction about fiction, or self-reflexive fiction – in individual ways and to considerable effect.¹⁴ However, while certain writings may incorporate references to aspects of writing and to the writing process, amongst other elements, metafiction as such seems largely spent, where the notion has not been overextended.¹⁵ At the same time, it’s clear that all the writers included here show their awareness of how narrative is mediated through literary conventions, rather than being a “transparent” medium.

“The writing itself also becomes important..., in all its elements, and not merely as a *vehicle*”, writes LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka. He is writing, in the Introduction to his anthology *The Moderns*, about James Joyce, in order to explicate Joyce’s influence on William Burroughs and Jack Kerouac. “Samuel Butler’s writing is important only so far as it is *about* something”, he continues. “Joyce’s writing became an event in itself.”¹⁶ The notion of a foregrounding of language and a resistance to the idea of language as a “transparent” mode of communication between author and reader, is highly relevant to the work in this anthol-

ogy, but it should be clear that this is more strongly or radically the case with some writers than others (as indeed it is in Jones/Baraka's book). However, it's my sense that all the writers here are, let us say, intensely *mindful* and *thoughtful* about language, as well as the processes involved in narrative – in their various ways. And I don't think any of them fall into the trap of decontextualising language – treating it as if it somehow existed in a vacuum. (Interestingly, Jones/Baraka is also clear about this in regard to the writers in his anthology.)

Genre has already been touched upon, if only in passing. It is a characteristic of several of the texts here that they either mix genres or inhabit a space that is ambiguous with regard to genre classification. Will Petersen's writing would be characteristic of the former, as I've indicated, whereas Lax, Birchard, Marlatt and Watts might be considered examples of the latter. (Is Lax's "21 pages" fiction, prose poetry or prose meditation? Are Birchard's, Marlatt's and Watts' pieces personal memoirs, prose poetry or examples of travel writing – or all of these? Or possibly fiction – at least in one or two of these cases?) Why would this matter? Because alternative possibilities are being explored; rigid classifications are being loosened... rendered fluid or even beside the point. An opening up can be observed.¹⁷

Before passing on to some other concerns, I think it is crucial to emphasise that techniques and structures or forms – including almost all of the things discussed above – simply "do variations on the same law" unless subject to "the alchemist's mind [by which] all is changed" (Fanny Howe).¹⁸ Howe has written elsewhere: "If a face does not gaze back at me from the page, there is only paper and wood, the static object empty of divine spark. The human face in repose and in silence is the face I see, when what I have written approximates the unspeakable."¹⁹ Placing these two quotations side by side is instructive, I feel. Texts can be said to come alive, the words of the text can be said to suffer a transformative action, they can be said to make manifest what can't be spoken. Or they can lie dead on the page. While it is important to speak about structures and tech-

niques, it is, in the final analysis, how they are “taken up and used” that makes the difference.²⁰

Amongst the texts that are concerned, either directly or more indirectly, with exploring issues of personhood, I would mention those of Guest, Lax, Howe, Buck, Prevallet, Goodland and Keith Waldrop. “No psychology (of the kind that discovers only what it can explain)” (the filmmaker Robert Bresson).²¹ If psychology is displaced and “the self” problematised (in the sense of acknowledged as having the nature or status of a problem), this is in terms of an affirmation of the person, not a denial.²² To problematise means to admit there are problems in definition and knowledge; the very certainties of “the self” as an entity that’s rationally “comprehended” in terms of a system of knowledge become problematic. And in doing so within narrative writing, we have the possibility of something breaking through, some awareness and some manifestation or disclosure of the personal that *resists* and remains *radically other* to rational knowledge.

This brings us to the exploration of the alogical or trans-logical within narrative. While this is evident in Lax’s or Howe’s contemplative approach, it is equally so in the imaginative concerns of Capildeo or Levy.²³ Perhaps trans-logical is more apt for Lax or Howe, and I would suggest that *attention* or *attentiveness* might be considered relevant here.²⁴ Other contributors can perhaps be seen as working with alogical imaginative concerns, or else we might simply see their work as inhabiting strange or offbeat – often subversive – imaginative spaces. Capildeo and Levy, in the pieces in this anthology, ring the changes on children’s stories to bizarre effect; while de Wit, Marley and Weller, in their various ways, inhabit anarchic, wild or delirious/vertiginous imaginative and textual regions. This is also true of an earlier story by Haines, “In Istanbul”, where for example he writes:

I had my shoes shined with a cap pistol and my socks filled with honey. No alteration. In the small shop was a tension wire. At each end of the wire were teeth of men. All men with cov-

ers on their chests. The floor was cold and covered with rice, onions and eggplant. The tension wire was pulled taut and started to sing. Then it was eased down. Each man, lying on the floor, had the cover of his chest opened and a handful of quarters thrown in for good measure. I was asked to remove my shirt and of course refused.

The story ends:

Soon hands were inside chest covers. The little girl attempted to bite on my face. Getting her off me smeared honey. My right hand locked in the honey of my left wrist. She cried with glee and stepped away. With her toe she opened the cover of my chest and it was more pleasant than I ever thought it could be.²⁵

What *on earth* is going on? I could say that I know and don't know, at the same time. But amongst other things, it's an improvisation on certain key terms/things, including feet (shoes /socks/toes), honey, chests... to hilarious and also disturbing effect. "Unrecommended Lures", from later in Haines' life, is more subtly subversive; while lacking in anything cruel or vicious, the text exhibits the deadly agility of an Indian mongoose, as well as its fabled tendency to eject jewels from its mouth. As with (say) Marley, we are quite some distance from satire in any conventional sense.

Imagination, clearly, is important here, especially as it relates to the unforeseen. But this does not necessarily have to do with character, plot or setting (in the sense of strange characters, strange events or actions, strange environments), though of course it can. The imagination works at a fully textual level, right down to the most fundamental elements: the words. In the excerpts from Haines given above, it should be obvious that what is happening is constituted linguistically as much as anything – and I don't mean this in the sense that *any story*, of necessity, uses words. That would be an utterly banal observation (though perhaps some readers, and writers, need to be

reminded of it, just the same). Look at the way words interact to mould meaning and also resist any easy interpretation, both between the sentences but also within them. If imagination may well be about *seeing possibilities*, where they haven't been seen before, we must insist on the importance of the words, the arrangement of sentences, the textual structures and so forth. We must look to how a certain word or combination of words sparks possibilities, how the unfamiliar turns upon a juxtaposition of textual elements.... Yes, of course, Capildeo's dwarfs and Levy's bears insist upon their particular imaginative identities, but this rests upon what might be called a *disturbance* amongst words.²⁶ And *seeing* is not of course anything of a visual nature, or at least not necessarily; it is a matter of *insight*.²⁷

Uncertainty: in various ways, I think that the writing in this anthology can be seen as relating itself to uncertainty, and the writers as working with uncertainty. This is as true of the unsettling excerpt from Daphne Marlatt's *Zócalo*, as it is to the searching, the vigilant waiting and the darkness that inform Lax's "21 pages". But at a more basic level, we can point to what occurs when knowledge and certainty break down, and when information, in itself, is seen as inadequate. Or perhaps when we realise that the known and the unknown are in dialogue, a fruitful dialogue, or, if you like, there's an interplay between them... and that this suspends certainty.²⁸ We may find ourselves in territory where we can say, with the experimental filmmaker Bruce Baillie, "I want everybody really lost, and I want us all to be at home there."²⁹ We may wish to invoke John Keats' famous letter to his brothers George and Tom (December 1817):

...I mean *Negative Capability*, that is when a man is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact & reason – Coleridge, for instance, would let go by a fine isolated verisimilitude caught from the Penetralium of mystery, from being incapable of remaining content with half knowledge.³⁰

We may find something similar about what we, as writers, have written to what Jay DeFeo said about her painting *The White Rose* (or *The Rose*, as it was finally called):

The White Rose is a fact painted somewhere on a slow curve
between destinations.

This is all I remember

This is all I know.³¹

And it is also what she didn't know... what we don't know... what we are not certain about.

But finally, it is necessary to say that when you leave certainties behind, you have to really write (or paint, or play). No fooling around. You have to *really* write.³²

But I still need to add something more. Risk-taking can be seen as highly significant, even if it may be entirely in the background of what a writer is concerned with. To take a risk is to play with the possibility of failure; not to take risks leaves us in the region of "business as usual", as well as in what James Agee called "the safe world". However, to set oneself up as a *risk-taker* may have more to do with egoism than anything else, and may result in pretentiousness. (I won't name names in this instance.) I can only say that taking risks as a writer is relevant to all the aspects of writing I have looked at above. And that is how risk-taking should be looked at – not as something *in itself*, but as the necessary attitude required for any of this to happen, for any of these developments in writing to occur.³³

(ii) *A Little More Information*

I don't believe it is necessary or even useful to remark on all the contributors (or contributions), but a few may benefit from a little comment....

Will Petersen would probably be regarded by most people who know his work as primarily a visual artist (printmaker, especially), but he wrote poetry throughout his career, as well as being an editor, translator and essayist.³⁴ Most importantly, for

the purpose of this anthology, he was a writer of prose memoirs – or at least, that's the nearest I can come to defining them, with their audacious mix of genres. Petersen's prose pieces, such as "The Mask", revolve around his time spent in Japan, studying to be a Noh actor, often contrasted or at least juxtaposed with his own (or his friends') situation back in the USA.

Again, Lawrence Fixel might be seen by some readers as secondarily a poet, but in fact Fixel probably published more as a poet (if we include prose poetry) than as a fiction writer and thinker, and he published throughout his life in poetry journals and maintained close associations with like-minded poets such as Edouard Roditi, Carl Rakosi and Anthony Rudolf. Although the piece included here is an example of Fixel's singular take on the parable, it might also be seen as a prose poem: Fixel is another writer whose work often resists categorisation. (It should be added that his more philosophical concerns are seldom far from any of his writings. These concerns are most clearly evident in *The Book of Glimmers* (London: Menard Press, 1980).)

Tom Lowenstein's piece is an excerpt from a considerably longer text, relating his experiences on a whale hunt in May 1977. It directly relates to his field work as an anthropologist amongst the Inuit, but also to his concern with Mahayana Buddhism (something that is also evident in a number of his poems). Lowenstein writes: "...mesmerized by constant daylight and fatigue, the mind sometimes drops its psychological habits and enters states of being in which the whale hunt itself seems to become a mere pretext." The rich mixture of wry humour, anthropological observation, personal experience and meditation, together with a poet's sensitivity to language, make this a very valuable contribution, and as a text dealing with the author's encounter with a highly different culture, it bears comparison with Petersen's work, especially.³⁵

Stephen Watts' "Nonno" is also part of something larger, though self-contained at the same time. Watts' own comment is sufficiently fascinating to warrant inclusion here almost in full, and without further comment of mine:

These texts... talk, in an immediate sense, of the village in the Alta Val-camonica that my grandfather migrated to London from many years ago, and in a wider sense of language, memory and place. (...) I have lived mostly in London but with a mountain culture inside me and I began to write poetry sensing a second language hidden within. This work addresses issues of mother tongue and grandfather tongue and, I hope, the nature of memory and text – since poetry is my mother tongue and English the language I write it in.³⁶

Kristin Prevallet's very moving "essay in mourning time", *I, Afterlife*, written in the wake of her father's suicide, also requires no comment of mine, although I do need to explain something about what appears from it in this anthology (and what doesn't). *I, Afterlife* is a heterogeneous work comprising prose, poetry and visual images. Also, the two prose sections given here do not follow directly on, one from the other, in the original book – in fact, there is a good 26 pages between them. However, I believe they "stand alone" as much as any excerpts from a longer work stand by themselves; I also believe that, with their understated and impressive gravity, this anthology would be poorer without them.

While clearly not autobiography in any conventional sense, Paul Buck's "skiP there is no story speaK to me" tellingly has the first and last letters of his own name inscribed in the title.³⁷ In a note about this work, Buck wrote: "Since the early nineties I've been thinking, researching, making notes that explore the hidden version of my background, that my mother was Italian. At least five escapades are in progress. Not all will attain completion. Not all will undress themselves. Or be disrobed." Buck's position in UK innovative literature is a fairly anomalous one, in as much as his work relates itself to French transgressive writing, and he also has strong connections to the contemporary visual arts, as well as having written alternative travel books.

(iii) Some of the Things that Aren't Here

Editing this book has involved a certain flexibility, but also a certain strictness, and it has benefited greatly from dialogue with Ken Edwards, who is a very considerable writer of narrative prose but who has chosen not to have his own work included.

This book is not definitive: I don't seriously believe that any anthology of this sort could be. (Where do you stop? Also, do you take on board any criteria upon which writers might *not* be included?) The objective has been to concentrate on poets who write prose narrative, but are not primarily fiction writers (or memoirists, etc.). (So, for example, a novelist who also writes poetry would not be regarded as a suitable inclusion.)

For the most part, poets who have a serious commitment to narrative prose, rather than writing the odd piece, have been prioritised.

Work from 1970 onwards seemed a reasonable starting point, chronologically, given developments in late 20th century / early 21st century writing, and from the point of a manageable selection. However, it did of course mean that a number of excellent writers were excluded. Without even going back to Zukofsky, Cummings or Patchen, for example, I have had to do without excerpts from two of the signal books of the 1960s: Tom Raworth's *A Serial Biography* (London: Fulcrum Press, 1969) and Roy Fisher's *The Ship's Orchestra* (London: Fulcrum, 1966).³⁸ Paul Haines' earlier work was another unfortunate loss, as was Thomas Merton's *Original Child Bomb* ([Norfolk, CT:] New Directions, 1962), an impressive text about the bombing of Hiroshima, imbued with a fierce yet controlled anger.

Emphasis on non-conventional, in many cases innovative or experimental, writing is at the heart of the enterprise, and this of course has involved exclusions.³⁹ Poets may write narrative prose, and it may be very good within its own terms, but it may also fail to fit the criteria of this anthology.

It has also been regarded as imperative that narrative is at the heart of the matter. Work that only *hints* at narrative has been avoided. (Regretfully in some cases – for example, Peter

Money's *CHE: A novella in three parts* (Buffalo, NY: BlazeVOX [books], 2010), or the prose pieces collected in Roy Fisher's *The Cut Pages* (which were probably all written before 1970, anyway, even if the book didn't come out from Fulcrum Press until 1971).

There was also a decision not to include work by writers who are sufficiently well known and whose work is easily available, that it would seem redundant for them to appear here – eg Robert Creeley, James Schuyler, Iain Sinclair. (In addition, Sinclair has become more a prose writer who also writes poetry.)

Lastly, there are too many contemporary poets who are writing, or have written, prose for anything like an inclusive anthology to be feasible. It would be all-too-easy to imagine alternative selections that might feature, say, Carla Harryman, Ron Silliman, Leslie Scalapino, Peter Redgrove, Brian Louis Pearce, Michael Heller, Martin Anderson or Richard Makin.⁴⁰ In some cases, however, these writers would be excluded from the present anthology for the various reasons given above – I won't elaborate, for lack of space, except to instance that Silliman's prose is more to do with anti-narrative or non-narrative than narrative as such. And if being all-inclusive was ruled out, due to its impossibility, it's arguable that the selection is *representative* of the best, liveliest and most significant work available.

(iv) This is Not the Book it was Originally Going to Be

What has turned into *The Alchemist's Mind* began as a somewhat different project. Paul Buck and I had decided to collaborate on an anthology of narrative prose writings by poets, visual artists, filmmakers, composers... even an architect and a design theorist. (John Hejduk and John Chris Jones were the architect and the design theorist, respectively. They were “definites” for me, at least.) The basic objective was very similar – to demonstrate the contributions made to the field of narrative prose writing by practitioners usually associated with other disciplines.⁴¹ The idea was a good one... but we hit various snags, the most important being that the project simply ran away with us... or more pre-

cisely, *from* us. We ended up with a list of potential contributors that was far too long, and which also suffered from certain imbalances – in particular, there were more poets than anything else, although admittedly there were also a large number of visual artists.

At this point, Ken Edwards suggested to me that the anthology could usefully be confined to contemporary poets who write narrative prose. I decided that this was in fact the best way forward, and that although it would be a different (if related) project, it would have its own integrity, scope and significance. Paul dropped out to concentrate on other work.

And so, what has developed from this? It's the book that you hold in your hands, *The Alchemist's Mind*, a book that indeed shows what poets have done in the field of narrative prose.

Prepare to be astonished.

David Miller
May 2012

1 Even when poets are not writing engaging narrative prose, they may well be writing engagingly about it, and with insight. See for example John Phillips' "That story you always thought..." and "The story..." in *What Shape Sound*, Nottingham: Skysill Press, 2011, pp 65, 87, and Anthony Rudolf, "Zigzag (Teaching Autobiography, 2000-2003)", especially section 6, "The Face beneath the Mask", in *Zigzag: Five Prose/Verse Sequences* (Manchester: Northern House / Carcanet, 2010, pp 56-7).

2 I don't want to explore the murky waters of when or if modernism ended, and how it relates (or doesn't) to postmodernism, but it seems fairly innocuous to suggest that there was a "classic" period of modernism from the 1910s to the 1930s, with predecessors and also with later developments. Later modernist writings especially relevant here would include, amongst others, James Agee's *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (1941) (a collaboration with photographer Walker Evans), Hermann Broch's *The Death of Virgil* (1945), Malcolm Lowry's *Under the*

Volcano (1947) and Carlo Emilio Gadda's *That Awful Mess on Via Merulana* (1957). And of course Samuel Beckett's later prose writings.

I'd make a point of naming three further writers: Charles Madge, most especially for his extraordinary prose collage "Bourgeois News", and to a lesser extent "Government House" and "Landscape I-IV", in *The Disappearing Castle* (1937); Paul Goodman, whose often audacious fiction was written between the 1930s and 1960, reflecting the influences of Cubism on prose narrative, psychoanalysis/Gestalt psychology/psychotherapy as an exploration leading, in his best work, through the self to self-transcendence, and anarchism, extended from the political *as such* throughout thought and life; and the singular writings of Jaime de Angulo, with their forays into fiction, story-telling and memoir that mix, break and remould genres, and their relationship to his field studies with American Indians. (For de Angulo, see *The Lariat and other writings*, ed. David Miller, Berkeley: Counterpoint, 2009. I've written about Madge and also Goodman, in "Disclosures: Notes on the Poetry of Charles Madge", *Great Works*, No 7, Bishop's Stortford, Herts, 1979, and "Anarchism and Literature: Self-Transcendence in the Writing of Paul Goodman", *Spanner*, [No] 37, London, 1987 [entire issue]. I won't make apologies for such old pieces of mine – believing there is *some* relevant discussion involved, at least. Madge's "Bourgeois News" was reprinted in *Alembic*, No 6, Orpington, Kent, 1977, as a result of my sharing my enthusiasm with the editors. Later "Bourgeois News", "Government House" and "Landscape I-IV" were all reprinted in Madge's *Of Love, Time and Places: Selected Poems*, London: Anvil Press Poetry, 1994.) Why these three, when clearly others might be mentioned, also? Because they don't tend to get a look in in this sort of discussion – and they should. And I think Madge, especially, anticipates in some respects later developments, from William Burroughs and Brion Gysin (*Minutes to Go*, with Sinclair Beiles and Gregory Corso, 1960) and Alan Burns (*Babel*, 1969) to the textual artist Jenny Holzer (*Under a Rock*, 1986) and Antony John (*now than it used to be, but in the past*, 2009) – even if Madge had little if any direct influence.

3 Walter H Sokel's discussion of mimesis or "imitation of nature", in *The Writer in Extremis: Expressionism in Twentieth-Century German Literature*, NY: McGraw-Hill, (1959) 1964, remains relevant in many ways. See p 7 and *passim*. I need to add that we are referring to mimesis as an overall scheme, rather than in regard to specific details. The Aristotelian notion

of narrative with regard to beginning/middle/end is actually not quite as straightforward as it's often made out to be, as Earl Miner points out in his contribution to *To Tell a Story: Narrative Theory and Practice*, by Miner, Paul Alpers, Stanley E Fish and Richard A Lanham, Los Angeles: William Andrews Clark Memorial Library, University of California, 1973. Practitioners often tend to act as if it was, however.

Spatially, any narrative text, no matter how brief, may be said to have some sort of beginning, middle and end – or at least I would hazard that this is the case. (I think this is true even of Fredric Brown's celebrated two-sentence story, "The last man on Earth sat alone in a room. There was a knock on the door..." This piece, which Brown describes as "a sweet little horror story", is cleverly embedded in a longer story, "Knock" (1948), as a story-within-a-story. It can be conveniently found at koapp.narod.ru/english/fantast/book34.htm, even if with obvious mistakes; the most recent publication of it in book form would seem to be in *From These Ashes: The Complete Short SF of Fredric Brown*, Framingham, MA: NESFA Press, 2001.) But the Aristotelian model is specific about plot dynamics, in relation to strict causal chains of actions/events. Where the model is actually not irrelevant to narrative prose by innovative poets, it tends to be profoundly or radically modified or rather *shifted* in some way or another, directed/redirected by alternative concerns. (Where there is a divergence from the Aristotelian well-made plot in mainstream narrative literature, it is rarely towards anything more adventurous.)

Needless to say, perhaps, there are some exceptions within the mainstream. E L Doctorow's *City of God* (London: Little, Brown/NY: Random House, 2000), would be one, with its mosaic structure of narrative and other textual elements, and with distinct genres included within the overarching genre of the novel. It is, however, precisely an *exception*. And it should also be noted that Doctorow works towards certain *resolutions* in a way that would be deliberately avoided by many of the writers here, eg Rosmarie Waldrop, Paul Buck or Robert Sheppard.

4 "Foreword: The Non-Aristotelian Poetics of David Miller's Fiction", in: David Miller, *Tesserae*, Exeter: Stride, 1993, [np]. "Tesserae" was later included in my collection *The Waters of Marah*, Exeter: Shearsman Books, 2005.

Edouard Roditi deserves mention here for his own narrative writings, not so much the stories in *The Delights of Turkey* (NY: New Direc-

tions, 1977), perhaps, as some of the prose pieces in *Emperor of Midnight* (Los Angeles: Black Sparrow Press, 1974).

I fully realise that the notion of a “mainstream” is a contested one, or at least one that’s considered problematic. However, if we are talking about *visibility* outside of a relatively small number of readers, other practitioners, critics and academics, then the writers we are celebrating here are definitely not generally known about, let alone in any sense acknowledged or accepted – they are indeed in a marginalised position. However, I cannot subscribe to the notion of a mainstream or dominant literary culture that is monolithic or like a seamless web or a piece of whole cloth (rather, it contains ruptures, fissures, irregularities, even certain contradictions); nor do I believe that there is simply a single alternative – there are, indeed, multiple alternatives, as the work in this anthology helps to show.

In the UK, a lively attempt in the 1960s/early 70s to bring experimentation back into fiction after “classic” modernism largely ran aground when two of the key writers involved, B S Johnson and Ann Quin, died (Johnson and Quin both committing suicide in 1973). Others continued to write in experimental ways, such as Christine Brooke-Rose and the extremely independent Polish expatriate, Stefan Themerson, but they were isolated voices.

In North America, the situation is slightly more complex. This can be pointed up in part by referring to LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka’s anthology, rather fatuously titled *The Moderns: An Anthology of New Writing in America* (NY: Corinth, 1963) – although of course the title may not have been Baraka’s fault. Interestingly, Baraka identifies strong connections between the experimental or alternative fiction writing collected in the book with modernism on the one hand, and with contemporary US poetry on the other. Indeed, as he says, a number of the writers in the anthology are also (or primarily) poets. What needs to be said in this context is that the few writers who achieved any really widespread reputation did so more on the basis of their subject matter than for any other reason – Jack Kerouac, William Burroughs, Hubert Selby, Jr. (The same would be true of a later US writer, Kathy Acker.) This is not of course to say that there weren’t other things going on besides the (often notorious) subject matter! But other writers included in the book, such as Paul Metcalf, Russell Edson, Douglas Woolf and Fielding Dawson, have had relatively limited audiences and little impact outside of fairly small circles. (Woolf did

receive considerable attention for his novel *Fade Out* (NY: Grove Press, 1959), but his reputation has subsequently slipped into near-oblivion.) In the years since *The Moderns*, there has been work by various writers, including Ron Sukenick, Raymond Federman, Gilbert Sorrentino, Walter Abish, Kathy Acker, Fanny Howe and Dodie Bellamy, that is relevant to this discussion (and Howe is one of the contributors to the present anthology), but the situation remains largely the same.

6 Returning to the question of exceptions, we might ask: *why* do exceptions occur, in the sense of the occasional author who, like Iain Sinclair, achieves a wider impact? In publishing terms, it's often a question of tokenism, such as J H Prynne being taken up by a mainstream publisher like Bloodaxe Books, and also seen as having a token significance. (If Prynne is granted some sort of "significance", other poets who share certain characteristics with Prynne for the most part won't be; and Prynne's "significance" clearly exists in an entirely different poetic universe to the "significance" of, say, Carol Ann Duffy. Also, it is instructive that it is Prynne who's granted this position. Various issues to do with academia have some relevance here, at least – for example, Prynne's own role in Cambridge and as the chief instigator and *éminence grise* of "Cambridge School Poetry", and the way his work cries out for academic exegesis or commentary. Academic outreach, eg articles by academics that appear in non-academic periodicals and papers, may be responsible for awareness of this poetry filtering down somewhat... but to *what* extent and effect is not entirely clear.) Subject-matter, shock value and personal/public image can also play a role, of course, singly or more likely together, and here we are often in the territory of the cult writer. Also, occasionally a writer may begin as fairly conventional and become more unconventional, without his or her reputation *necessarily* declining. (A blind eye can be very useful for a critic at times. At times, also, one guesses there is a genuine response, against the odds and against the grain of mainstream criticism.) And we can perhaps also refer to, in certain cases at least, the *comparative* extent of experimentation/innovation/etc involved, in relation to a measure of acceptability. (Almost all of these issues would be relevant to a discussion of Jack Kerouac's writings.) I don't mean to denigrate readers here – I'm more concerned with the way that writers are *sold* to them.

As an instance of how writers are sold to readers, I have in front of me Ben Okri's *The Famished Road* (London: Vintage, (1991) 1992). On

the back cover, we are told by a reviewer, Linda Grant, that Okri is “incapable of writing a boring sentence”. If only I had a pound coin for every boring sentence in this 500-page novel.... Put alongside Ruskin, Melville or Faulkner – I am deliberately using historically accepted examples – it should be obvious just how boring Okri’s sentences are, for the most part. Possibly an even more misleading job of product description can be cited, involving the current Poet Laureate, Carol Ann Duffy, being lauded for having a “razor-sharp technique”. I don’t remember the reviewer’s name, but he or she clearly had a very limited knowledge of contemporary poetry and no knowledge at all of razors. I think we have to ask ourselves why such work is being served up as the embodiment of excellence, and thus acting as a model for how “good” writing can be, while anything more adventurous is in danger of being cast into oblivion. (However, while asserting this, I must again return you to the question of exceptions... as discussed above.)

I admit that this discussion is necessarily a limited one, for obvious reasons, and can’t do complete justice to the complexity of the situation involved, with the business of publishing supported, augmented and in some respects or instances complicated or even challenged by the role(s) of critics and academics, on the one hand, and the non-business (for the larger part) of small presses and little magazines and the role(s) of (different) critics and academics in relation to them, on the other. (For some sense of what’s involved with little magazines and to a lesser extent small presses, and the way they tend to champion and disseminate the sort of work in this anthology, please see David Miller and Richard Price, *British Poetry Magazines 1914-2000: A History and Bibliography of “Little Magazines”*, London: The British Library, 2006.)

7 This is not of course to deny that novel-length fiction has indeed been written by innovative poets, including Gilbert Sorrentino, Ron Loewinsohn, Robert Creeley, Iain Sinclair, Fanny Howe and Ken Edwards. I should also mention the UK poet Douglas Oliver, whose novel *The Harmless Building* (London: Ferry Press, 1973) appeared, interestingly enough, in the year of B S Johnson’s and Ann Quin’s deaths.

8 Jed Rasula and Mike Erwin, “An Interview with Roy Fisher”, in: *Roy Fisher, Nineteen Poems and an Interview*, Pensnett, Staffordshire: Grosseteste, 1975, p 14.

Stanley E Fish makes some apposite remarks in his contribution to

To Tell a Story: Narrative Theory and Practice (*op cit*, p. 67): "...the axis on which semantic units are combined into a meaning that is only available at the end of a chain becomes instead a succession of equivalent spaces in which independent and *immediately* available meanings are free to interact with each other, unconstrained by the subordinating and distinguishing logic of syntax and discourse. Sequence is no longer causal but additive; it no longer processes a meaning but provides an area in which meanings separately constituted are displayed and equated." This gives us another interpretation of the notion of additive structure; but I should be fair here and admit that Fish is writing about the 17th century preacher/writer Lancelot Andrewes.

9 This is true, even if sometimes they may *play* with a movement towards an end – a teleological movement, in a limited sense – as in Harwood's treatment of the wizard figure in "The beginning of the story".

10 Davenport, "The House that Jack Built", in: *The Geography of the Imagination: Forty Essays*, San Francisco: North Point Press, 1981, p 45. He is actually writing about John Ruskin's *Fors Clavigera* (published serially between 1871 and 1887), but elsewhere in the book he refers the notion of architectonic form to Bely, Broch, Dos Passos and Paul Metcalf, amongst others. See especially pp 316-18. Also see my essay, "Post-modernist Fiction: A Discussion of Guy Davenport", *Parallax: a journal of literature & art*, vol 1, no 3, Wellington, NZ, 1983, where I look at notions of contiguity/contiguous structure and architectonics.

11 Admittedly the excerpt from Petersen's "The Mask" shows this far less than the work as a whole does. Unable to include a significantly larger excerpt, it was necessary to decide upon something that stood on its own reasonably well. I am not apologising – I am, however, recommending that readers seek out Petersen's books, as hard as they tend to be to find, and also that publishers consider reprinting his valuable and distinctive work.

12 See my essay "Robert Lax's 21 pages", in: David Miller and Nicholas Zurbrugg (eds), *The ABCs of Robert Lax*, Exeter: Stride, 1999.

Constructing or *assembling* is less to do with a *way of telling* a story than with a narrative emerging from the process concerned. We are not talking about something that's written as an Aristotelian linear narra-

tive and then the constituents shuffled into a different order or pattern for a novel effect. The narrative *as such* tends to come out of the act and process of construction. The emphasis needs to be on the fact that one is not simply trying to tell a story in a novel way, when the story could easily have been written in a more conventional “manner”... that is not what is going on at all.

One other thing perhaps needs to be said here. An emphasis on structure does not preclude a concern with emotion – if we look to J S Bach’s music we should surely see that this is the case. It should also be self-evident from the writings assembled here, where an opposition between emotion and structure would be falsely dichotomic and a misinterpretation.

13 This is more evident later on in Rattray’s diaristic piece than in the beginning.

For a discussion of working with fragments in literature, see my review of Olivia Dresher’s anthology *In Pieces: An Anthology of Fragmentary Writing* (Seattle: Impassio Press, 2006), in *Stride* (www.stridemagazine.co.uk/2006/Sept2006/fragments.MILLER.htm). I remark upon a concern with the fragmentary in relation to “Avoiding the continuous, the systematic and the closed, while exploring the power of compressed language and a range of *possibilities* of meaning” amongst certain writers, as well as “with a dialogue of *some kind* between fragment and whole, discontinuity and continuity.” (That this is true of journal writers, for example, can be shown in the way “the writer is aware – to some extent at least – of that which precedes what is now being written”, rather than the individual bits and pieces being totally and uniformly discrete. Tom Lowenstein’s journal excerpt would be a case in point.) I also point out that some writers “have tended to involve themselves with contiguous structure by explicitly composing with fragments – putting one distinct thing directly alongside another and another and another, but not as separated entries (and, by the way, in an *exploration* of meaning, not as an intended negation of meaning).” I should also have said that there is an exploration of structure involved, not a negation of it.

14 To take Hejinian’s piece – Hejinian both plays with *and* subverts conventions, leaving us (enjoyably) we know not where, while exploring various narrative possibilities and treating us to pithy sayings along the way. The verve and inventiveness of her writing are telling.

15 Tex Avery was playing with fictional and cartoon conventions in quite audacious ways in his banned animations, *Red Hot Riding Hood* (1943) and *Swing Shift Cinderella* (1945) – although it must be emphasised that the films were geared purely and simply towards entertainment. (As retellings of classic children's stories, Vahni Capildeo's and John Levy's pieces in this anthology take us into much stranger territory.) The use of *metafictional conventions* – and I think it can be put that way – in recent popular culture is now common currency and more and more part of “business as usual”.

Looking back, it seems to me that much of what is referred to as metafiction, in terms of fiction writing, either pretended not to take itself seriously while taking itself very seriously, or else took itself very seriously when there was little basis for it. In the latter category, I would put an example of “weak” metafiction – metafiction that doesn't really have the courage of its convictions – such as John Fowles' *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1969), a tedious and gimmicky book if ever there was one. However, I was probably wrong to be so dismissive of metafiction in general when I wrote the essay “Post-Modernist Fiction: A Discussion of Guy Davenport” (*op cit*). I won't bother to quote from it here – anyone really interested can surely track it down.

16 Introduction, *The Moderns*, *op cit*, p xv.

17 This is not exactly a new phenomenon – for example, George Borrow's extraordinary books *Lavengro: The Scholar – The Gypsy – The Priest* (1851) and its sequel *The Romany Rye* (1857) are “good examples... of largely unclassifiable imaginative prose. If one points out that Borrow refuses to resolve the ambiguity of *Lavengro* and *The Romany Rye*'s status as fiction or autobiography, one has done little to identify the strangeness of these books. Borrow himself, in denying that *Lavengro* is ‘what is generally called autobiography’ [notice the use of the word ‘generally’!], says it is ‘a dream’ and ‘a philological book, a poem if you choose to call it so’.” (David Miller, “Interrelation, Symbiosis, Overlap”, in: *Art and Disclosure: Seven Essays*, Exeter: Stride, 1998, p 15. The quotations from Borrow come from the “Appendix” to *The Romany Rye*, London: Dent, 1969, pp 367, 368. Within the texts themselves, Borrow refuses to give his narrator a proper name at all, so that if he isn't “George”, neither is he “not-George”! Or to put it another way, he could be “George”, but then again he might not.)

It might be worth adding a comment here with regard to precursors. It is commonplace to refer to Lawrence Sterne in connection with the ancestry of experimental fiction/prose narrative, but reference might also be made to Borrow, James Hogg and Thomas De Quincey... and possibly Charles M Doughty. (If we were discussing German literature, E T A Hoffmann, Friedrich Schlegel and Achim von Arnim would need to be mentioned; and so on.) The question may arise: are contemporary writers (and other creative workers) simply repeating what certain earlier figures have done? No; of course not. Even if we were to affirm the idea that “nothing’s new under the sun”, we would need to modify it in certain ways as well as interpret it carefully. Surely Schoenberg’s twelve-tone compositions, Ad Reinhardt’s “black” paintings and Eugen Gomringer’s “constellations” (Concrete poems) all came as unexpected arrivals to almost everyone (and the “almost” would refer primarily to those closely connected with the creators in question), despite precursors. In other words, the existence of precursors hardly prevented their work from having the effectiveness of the unexpected, and very intensely or strongly so. The relationship of present to past in writing and the other arts is, or should be, active rather than passive, involving renewal, extension, re-development and re-invention, change and transformation, consciously or not, rather than simple repetition. If the notion of a dialogue between present and past writing (and so forth) is important, and I think it is, this distinction between active and passive is crucial.

18 See Howe’s piece “Even This Confined Landscape”, included in the present volume.

19 Howe, “Well Over Void”, *Five Fingers Review*, [no] 10, San Francisco, 1991, p 80.

20 I am borrowing this phrase from Hans-Georg Gadamer: “For in speaking, there always remains the possibility of cancelling the objectifying tendency of language, just as Hegel cancels the logic of understanding, Heidegger the language of metaphysics, the Orientals the diversity of realms of being, and the poet everything given. But to cancel [*aufheben*] means to take up and use.” (*Philosophical Hermeneutics*, tr and ed David E Linge, Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1977, p 240.) (If only all poets cancelled “everything given”!)

How are techniques and forms or structures being used, and what is it they are being used towards? What is the *fundamental orientation* involved (the phrase is *suggested*, at least, by Frank Samperi's writings, as well as Simone Weil's)? I remember an especially fatuous argument that used to be advanced, namely that because advertising had taken on or adapted certain literary techniques (primarily far-fetched metaphors, eg a gold cigarette pack as an Egyptian pyramid), advertising had somehow replaced poetry or else proven that the experimental could be absorbed into the commercial. Clearly this is specious on more than one level. First, we need to look at what exactly is supposed to be taken over by advertising (the example I've given above doesn't go beyond Martian School poetry); but secondly, and more importantly, there is the question of what is being achieved (or attempted). Advertising is oriented towards persuasion, manipulation, the sale of goods, making money; any techniques or strategies involved are part of an arsenal of rhetoric. Poetry challenges the reader, opens up, explores and discloses the unfamiliar, while at the same time remaining resolutely resistant to any interpretation or explanation that would simply empty it out. (However, I can't speak for all poetry or narrative prose by poets, obviously.)

21 Bresson, *Notes on Cinematography*, tr Jonathan Griffin, NY: Urizen Books, 1975, p 39.

22 A theoretical/conceptual critique or even denial of "the self," in relation to its having a reality outside of being a cultural, social and linguistic construct, is one thing. To deny personhood, however, is to support, tacitly or not, the subjugation of the individual and the denial or erasure of his or her rights, colluding, tacitly or not, with totalitarian /Fascist leanings. How we try to define personhood (and within what context) is admittedly a difficult and complex matter and, I'm suggesting, it will always fail. The very failure needs to be seen as significant here, and the effort towards that failure is one that is purposefully and necessarily renewable. Does personhood indeed underlie our entire field of experience, underlie our sense of our physicality and others', and underlie our human rights, and yet remain resistant, excessive or transcendent to what can be established in rational, systematic and epistemic terms? Is it still disclosed, manifested or shown to us? Can we still speak about it and feel that our speaking is justified and can be

useful? Yes. And it should be obvious I am not simply referring to a lexical shift from “self” to “person”. Nor some metaphysical essence.

23 I would strongly recommend other prose writings by Capildeo and Levy, especially Capildeo’s extraordinary “Person Animal Figure”, published as a booklet by Landfill Press in Norwich (2005) and included in her collection *Undraining Sea* (Norwich: Egg Box Publishing, 2009), and the work in Levy’s *A Mind’s Cargo Shifting: Fictions* (Lawrence, KS: First Intensity Press, 2011).

24 “Attentiveness is the rarest and purest form of generosity” (Simone Weil, quoted in Jacques Cabaud, *Simone Weil: A Fellowship in Love*, NY: Channel Press, 1964, p 251). (The phrase occurs in a letter to the poet Joë Bousquet.) If the philosopher Nicholas Malebranche said that attention “is the natural prayer of the soul”, Weil echoed this, consciously or not, when she wrote that “Attention, taken to its highest degree, is the same thing as prayer. It presupposes faith and love”. (Weil, *Gravity and Grace*, tr Emma Crawford and Mario von der Ruhr, London/NY: Routledge, 2002, p 117. The Malebranche quotation is known to many of us, and certainly to me, from Paul Celan’s famous speech “The Meridian” (1960), in: Celan, *Collected Prose*, tr Rosmarie Waldrop, NY: Routledge, 2003, p 50.) (No space here for going into Weil’s fierce critique of the imagination in relation to her espousal of attention.) See my essay “Robert Lax’s 21 pages”, *op cit*, where I speak of attention or attentiveness in relation to a contemplative or meditative approach. Attention is what persists, obdurately, and penetrates and uncovers... disinterestedly, and by *staying with* its subject, rather than by some act of force. Attention is faithful to what it attends to. It aspires to a form of lucidity, no matter how complex (and without ignoring this complexity or trying to falsely simplify it). It is an absorption into things, but a thoughtful one.

25 Haines, *Secret Carnival Workers*, ed Stuart Broomer and Emily Haines, [np]: H Pal Productions, 2007, p 8.

26 A disturbance, in this sense, does not have to be accompanied by trumpet fanfares and drum rolls; it can even work beneath the surface of our awareness.

27 “In-sight”: the visual emphasis seems to be there in our language. “Vision”, in the sense of the awareness and/or making manifest of the spiritual, is a term that might be considered relevant to some of our writers, but again we have to emphasise that “vision” should not be equated, necessarily, with something of a visual nature. We can point, for example, to the importance of *oral* modes in various religious or spiritual traditions, as well as to the famous instance of God *speaking* out of the whirlwind in Judaism; we can point to the mystical significance of *the letters of the Hebrew alphabet* in Cabbalism; and so forth.

28 Not only the known and the unknown, but the visible and invisible and the said and the unsaid/the sayable and unsayable, may be said to be in a dialogic relationship. (I am following Hans-Georg Gadamer here.) This is something I have discussed in, for example, *Art and Disclosure: Seven Essays, op cit*; see especially pp 12-13, 42-43.

29 Quoted in P Adams Sitney, *Visionary Film: The American Avant-Garde 1943-1978*, Oxford: OUP, 1979, p 169. Baillie doesn't leave it there, but what I've quoted is sufficient for my purpose in this Introduction.

30 Keats, *Letters of John Keats*, ed Robert Gittings, London: OUP, 1970, p 43. I've tried to say a little about this in relation to negative theology (as parallel instances of an emphasis on uncertainty and unknowing) in “The Dark Path: Notes for/from/about Fanny Howe”, *Five Fingers Review*, [no] 17, Berkeley, 1998.

31 DeFeo, quoted at the beginning of *Jay DeFeo and “The Rose”*, ed Jane Green and Leah Levy, Berkeley: University of California Press/NY: Whitney Museum of American Art, 2003. DeFeo was writing in 1965; *The Rose* was begun in 1958 and abandoned in 1966 – though in a state that could be considered “finished” – at least, as much as could be the case with a painting that made nonsense of the entire notion.

32 I am paraphrasing the musician Albert Ayler: “You have to really play your instrument to escape from notes to sounds. You have to really play. No kidding around” (quoted by Robert Ostermann in his article “The Angry Men who Make the New Music (they don't call it jazz)”, *National Observer*, June 7, 1965).

33 For Agee, see his book (and Walker Evans'), *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men: Three Tenant Families*, London: Panther Books, 1969, p 15.

Many of the issues I have addressed in this section are also discussed, interestingly enough, in an interview with the experimental filmmaker Leslie Thornton. For the sake of comparison – a comparison that extends across art forms – I recommend that readers have a look at this: “An Interview with Leslie Thornton” by Irene Borger (1998), www.egs.edu/faculty/leslie-thornton/articles/an-interview-with-leslie-thornton/. A few of Thornton’s films can be seen on UbuWeb: www.ubuweb.com/film/thornton.html.

34 Petersen was associated with Gary Snyder, Cid Corman and Frank Samperi, especially. He worked with Corman on the second series of the latter’s legendary magazine *Origin*, and later edited his own magazine of poetry and printmaking, *Plucked Chicken*. Jack Kerouac based one of the characters in his novel *The Dharma Bums* (1958) on Petersen.

35 In as much as Lowenstein’s text involves a journey, it can be usefully compared to Daphne Marlatt’s piece, as well as to the contributions by Watts and Birchard. In all these pieces there is a dialogue between location and dis-location, in terms of physical and mental space, even if the journey involved is perhaps familiar as well as unfamiliar. (More evident in some of the texts than others, admittedly – and I should also add that the journey in Marlatt’s piece is not into familiar territory in any sense, even if the presence of the protagonist’s boyfriend mitigates this to some extent.)

36 Included as a prefatory note to “Nonno”, in *Modern Poetry in Translation*, Third Series, No 11, Oxford, 2009.

37 While mentioning the autobiographical, we have in this volume bpNichol’s splendidly unusual, startling and funny re-invention of the autobiographical mode.

38 I have of course mentioned James Agee before. It’s possible that Agee is best known as a novelist and scriptwriter, but he was definitely a poet, and furthermore his highly unconventional prose work *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* is as much a huge documentary prose poem as it’s anything else. I think *Let Us Praise Famous Men* is instructive in this

regard, as in others: what indeed is it? Agee wrote it about three poor white tenant families in rural Alabama, and his (and photographer Walker Evans') experiences staying with them; interestingly, the edition I have is published by Panther in its Panther Modern Society series, giving the impression of a sociological study. But that scarcely prepares one for Agee's phenomenological readings or accounts of physical things/environments, so long, detailed and relentlessly *attentive* as to become near-hallucinatory – let alone preparing one, for example, for two pages composed solely of single words, or passages from other writings (Blake's, and The Bible) collaged into his own text, or, indeed, the anger that Agee displays in the book towards what he calls the "safe world" ("Every fury on earth has been absorbed in time, as art, as religion, or as authority in one form or another. The deadliest blow the enemy of the human soul can strike is to do fury honor. Swift, Blake, Beethoven, Christ, Joyce, Kafka, name me a one who has not thus been castrated."). (*Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, *op cit*, pp 15, 14. For the passage of single words, see pp 415-17.) Add to this Agee's insistence that Walker Evans' wonderful photographs included in the book "are not illustrative. They, and the text, are coequal, mutually independent, and fully collaborative" (*ibid*, p xv), and we are also in the territory of text and image/image and text (and Evans' name in fact appears on equal terms with Agee's on the cover and title-page). (Agee's criticism and foreswearing of the imagination in the Preamble to Book Two of *LUNPFM* bears putting alongside Simone Weil's attack on this same subject, which I've referred to above; and, alas, as with Weil's comments, there isn't room for discussion here.) For an instance of how Agee's prose is relevant to more recent writing, I would ask the reader to compare bpNichol's "Still" (included in *The Alphabet Game: a bpNichol reader*, ed Darren Wershler-Henry and Lori Emerson, Toronto: Coach House Books, 2007, pp 220-25).

39 While continuing to use the terms "innovative" and "experimental" as shorthand for certain tendencies in writing, I prefer the word "exploratory", as a related term, but with a slightly different emphasis, ie the desire to explore modes of language, thought, feeling and imagination, and to discover and disclose aspects of existence and experience – beyond the merely familiar and conventional. I put this slightly differently in "Interrelation, Symbiosis, Overlap", where I referred to "the desire to explore modes of thought, feeling and imagination,

within or in terms of the possibilities of a material medium [etc]” (*Art and Disclosure: Seven Essays, op cit*, p 16). I was thinking of “medium” as referring to eg words or paint marks or sounds or physical movements, and not as a synonym for “vehicle” in the sense of something you jump into to get from A to B, metaphorically speaking.

A term I think should be resisted is “avant-garde”, as outdated or, if used to refer to contemporary figures, ahistorical; as well as clannish; and underpinned by naive ideas about how the artist relates to society as a whole, in an historical perspective. The “avant-garde” is a useful term for discussing certain developments in the arts in the early part of the 20th century (eg Dadaism and Futurism), but arguably has little application to what’s happened since, except in the limited sense of a recycling of certain formal and gestural modes. Why? First, primarily because of its absurd concern with a *tabula rasa* – a concern embraced more wholeheartedly by some adherents of the avant-garde than others. This concern may have helped with certain ways of working in the arts, through acting as if the past might as well not have existed, but it was also limiting, of necessity – given that a *tabula rasa* is not actually possible, even if it were really desirable in the first place. Second, with its often mutually exclusive clusters of groups and movements, the avant-garde presented a fragmented front while theorists have falsely pushed the idea of avant-gardism as some sort of united front of activity and ideology. Last, the idea that the avant-garde artist is projecting into the future while “the rest” of humankind slowly follows him or her, gradually catching up (of course while they’re doing so, other artists are meanwhile projecting even further), is at the very least an overstatement, but in some respects it’s more a travesty of the complexity of the historical process involved. (Kandinsky’s upward-advancing pyramid, with the avant-garde artist at the apex, is paradigmatic for this particular sort of thinking about “progress”. For some comments on “progress” or “advances” in the arts, see my essay “Interrelation, Symbiosis, Overlap”, in *Art and Disclosure: Seven Essays, op cit*, p 17. I should add that I’m emphasising a “strong” model of avant-gardism, where the model is firing on all cylinders, so to speak.) Futurism may have lost its teeth, but this has more to do with its age than with anything else, and of course the fact that the powerful machinery of the art museums promotes it – the very institutions the Futurists would have liked to see demolished; while Gertrude Stein’s *Tender Buttons* (1914) is apt to prove as puzzling to the general reader

today as when it first appeared – more resistant to ageing but in no wise something that humankind “as a whole” has “caught up with”, which in the Kandinsky model means *occupying the space* once occupied by the avant-garde artist or writer. James Agee makes the point that when writers and artists find large scale acceptance, it can be in terms of their work being trivialised and rendered safe rather than anything else (*Let Us Now Praise Famous Men, op cit*, p 13 especially). Agee was not expressly thinking about the avant-garde, and I suspect he was being deliberately negative in some respects, in order to emphasise what he felt he and Walker Evans were up against with their particular project; but at the same time, between this position and the Kandinsky model of artistic progress and its reception, there seems little in common. (Incidentally, *how* do these respective processes take place; *who*, following on from the artists who create the work in the first place, is responsible for these processes, and why; and *who* actually constitutes either “the rest” of humankind or the recipients of a trivialised and safe version of what might otherwise prove profound and dangerous?)

Again, with regard to the work in this anthology, let us speak first and foremost of alternative possibilities rather than anything more restrictive in definition.

40 Actually, Leslie Scalapino was someone Ken Edwards and I both thought about including, but we failed to secure any work. Other writers whose work I failed to secure would include Carlyle Reedy, Gad Hollander and Philip Jenkins.

41 A little of this interdisciplinary emphasis survives in the inclusion of Will Petersen, quite clearly, and also in Tom Lowenstein's, in as much as Lowenstein is an anthropologist who writes narrative prose (as well as a poet who writes narrative prose). But I can also point to *related* interdisciplinary concerns, in M J Weller's work as a cartoonist, Brian Marley's as a photographer and music critic, Keith Waldrop's as a collagist, Barbara Guest's as an art critic, Paul Haines' as a librettist, music critic and video-maker, Ian Robinson's as an artist specialising in drawings, and my own endeavours in visual art and music.