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Title	The Value of Inconsistency : John Wilkinson and "Facing Port Talbot"
Type	Article
URL	https://clok.uclan.ac.uk/id/eprint/14358/
DOI	
Date	2015
Citation	Purves, Robin (2015) The Value of Inconsistency : John Wilkinson and "Facing Port Talbot". Blackbox Manifold, W 2015 (15).
Creators	Purves, Robin

It is advisable to refer to the publisher's version if you intend to cite from the work.

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The Value of Inconsistency: John Wilkinson and "Facing Port Talbot"

In one of the most illuminating essays on his work, Andrea Brady mentions the remarkable consistency in John Wilkinson's writing in the twenty two years between *Proud Flesh* (1986) and *Down to Earth* (2008),ⁱ one instance of which can be seen in the resemblances between his commentary on Barry MacSweeney (which first appeared in *Angel Exhaust* in 1995) and his review of Stephen Rodefer's *Call It Thought: Selected Poems* in the Winter 2010 issue of *Chicago Review*.ⁱⁱ To conflate the claims made in each text, Wilkinson argues that neither MacSweeney nor Rodefer can get anywhere through long stretches of their exacting vocation unless under the steam of an illustrious poetic precursor; both are said to ventriloquize Frank O'Hara in order to forge a coherent voice for themselves; both are lone wolves inadmissible to any group formation; both have written poems involving descriptions of sadomasochistic sex; and both are praised in the final paragraph of each article for their "courage" (MacSweeney) or for being "brave" (Rodefer). More importantly, both are recognised as inexplicable masters who, in their wayward careerings, have emitted anomalous masterpieces without warning and with little chance of a follow-up to match them. For MacSweeney this involves the unaccountable appearance of "The Last Bud" (and then, later, the lightning-bolt of "Wild Knitting"); Rodefer's outstanding accomplishment is said to be his *Four Lectures* (The Figures, 1982).

Wilkinson's judgment involves a dismissal of Rodefer's work before *Four Lectures* which is brought off by treating his "Ode to the End" from *The Bell-Clerk's Tears Kept Flowing* (The Figures, 1978) as emblematic of the early poems in general, and symptomatic of his inability to stop sounding like O'Hara pre-*Four Lectures*. The poem is also faulted for a perceived lack of coherence above the level of the stanza, so it is curious that the terms Wilkinson uses to praise the poem he comments upon at length from *Four Lectures* celebrate its 'thought' for not following a logical sequence or giving rise to a discernible result, but for gathering its effects in randomised clusters or arrays.

The review categorises *Four Lectures* according to a value of obvious importance to the critic: the miraculous irruption of inexplicably consistent brilliance in the perennially inconsistent life-work. But we are also forced to diagnose an inconsistency in Wilkinson's approach, since his attitude to the value of inconsistency is, on this showing, internally inconsistent: it valorizes the principle with respect to Rodefer by validating inconsistency in the form of *Four Lectures* as long as the oeuvre it belongs to remains fabulously, appallingly inconsistent, but it condemns the same principle when it is said to be discovered between the stanzas of the "Ode to the End."

The different parts of a great many poems by John Wilkinson, from the level of the words along a line to the level of the stanza or section in longer sequences, seem not to cleave together with any obviously *logical* connection or relation and across the language surface the reasons for this are primarily spatial and syntactical. The elements which could operate in concert to constitute a single theme or a narrative are often distributed in a constellation whose spread challenges the potential for each element meaningfully to influence the others. Relations between single words and between more protracted passages are asked to sustain themselves across gaps longer and

more dismayingly indeterminate than in 'normal' communicative discourse. If we take the poem "Facing Port Talbot"ⁱⁱⁱ and consider its opening lines

What little mutes within our mouldy covers, has weight,
drew devotee manikins would scrunch through cracker stars

inflate a life-saving ring, their sacs were frictionless,
were sterile with the buoyancy of a head start, itinerary

wired to upstage their processors' conveyor facelift -

in terms of the linguist M.A.K. Halliday's four features of textual cohesion (reference, ellipsis, conjunctions and lexical organisation^{iv}), we can immediately see that in terms of 'reference' there is no clear indication of who or what is meant to be the subject of the sentence that unfurls or what might turn out to have been the main verb. 'Mutes' in the first line could be the subject *or* a verb and, of course, both across alternating readings. There is also no unequivocal identification of the subjects represented by various pronouns, which makes tracking established participants in the poem very tricky indeed: *whose* 'sacs were frictionless', for example? The mutes, the covers, the manikins, the cracker stars? Are any of these terms euphemisms for each other? In terms of ellipsis, instances of omission which request that the reader 'make up' the sense are extended way beyond the closely contiguous passages traditionally linked by this kind of writing strategy. And the use of conjunctions in the poem, for example a short passage further down in the same section:

turn right over, into the small of the back dark & hollow

showing no score, but neither of these but dense alloy –
intact should we set about us, swing, saturate this gauze

which repeats the adversative extension 'but', instead of setting up logical relations between units to engage in a process of clarification, sets up purely structural relations which either confuse or ignore issues of cause and effect or induction. Considering the topic of lexical organization with regard to the poem, the expected affiliations between words are both present and absent to a degree that overwhelms the usually cohesive impression from collocation. The word 'star', for example, written as 'star', 'stars', 'starry' or 'stargleams', occurs at least ten times, including three times in section one and three times in section seven, with a demonstrably semantic relation reinforced by other keywords ('a universe', 'space', 'heavens', 'skies'...) while the same letters in the same order reoccur in 'start', 'stare & stare', leading to a noticeable build-up of words starting with st- that climaxes in section eight. But as the poem moves along its course, there is little or no effect of gradual clarification: lexical permutations get introduced then restated in new terms without refinement towards a summation, without making *anything* more precise. The practice is paratactic extension by variation and the oddly formative loosening of cohesive procedures means that the poem incorporates inconsistency and incoherence, to a degree that is utterly disorientating when compared to everyday communicative discourses but also quite remarkable when compared to other poetries in the same vein.

“Facing Port Talbot” was written at some point between 1991 and 1994 while Wilkinson was living in Swansea, a city which faces Port Talbot across Swansea Bay. As a town suffering the effects of managed de-industrialization, pollution, poverty and neglect, Port Talbot, it is clear, has to be ‘faced’ in the sense of an obligation on the part of the poet to confront it through representation. Section seven begins:

At the year’s end the lights occlude the bay & make count
like a manciple who wards off breath on a starry pane

otherwise invisible; the Christmas tree of a far refinery
burns off waste production makes an angel dance at the tip,

& all is fair with what in the least infringes on near-
sightedness...

as if only optical damage and the blotting out by night of all but the bulbs and flares of the town can render it ‘fair.’ Elsewhere, the guts of marine animals strewn between the boats in the bay and the dock’s warehouses where their carcasses will be auctioned off are depicted with a graphic dexterity (“the magpies plunging in feel // flummoxed by soft mess”), though there is also a fugitive sense that to ‘face’ Port Talbot would be finally to come to terms with an event of a personal nature which took place there; this feeling is reinforced by the less congested and very beautiful poem, “High-water Mark,” which follows it in *Effigies Against the Light*.

The poem is a sequence in nine sections; the shortest section is the fourth, which has four stanzas, each made up of two long lines; the longest are sections seven and eight which each have nineteen stanzas in the same format (uniform across the poem as a ‘whole’). As a sequence, it exhibits continuity in the way I have tried to describe so far: one word, line, stanza or section follows another, though the nature of the connections between these constituent elements is what I have been calling ‘inconsistent.’ To be consistent, the sequence would involve repetitions that could assimilate certain unobtrusive forms of variation, and this record of persistence could be trusted to resist the pressure to metamorphose, to change its mode of operation entirely. It is my contention that the consistency of “Facing Port Talbot” is to be found in the general operation of its *prosodic* insistence and formal regularity, and that its inconsistency is manifested in the reader’s experience of *semantic* capriciousness or thoroughgoing errancy.

If we return to the opening of the poem and give the first sentence in its entirety

What little mutes within our mouldy covers, has weight,
drew devotee manikins would scrunch through cracker stars

inflate a life-saving ring, their sacs were frictionless,
were sterile with the buoyancy of a head start, itinerary

wired to upstage their processors’ conveyor facelift –

such pressure for renewal, lightsome at their spread wings

would shut the hatch, taught on each approach they flicker
never touching, who else's natural chaos billows free

above a hard-bitten surface, abstrusing out in a sphere
of No disturbance; theirs alone the fires supported wicker

harmlessly, unmeasured on those scales the breath skews.

it might conceivably be read as a snickering, satirical account of some privileged students ("sterile with the buoyancy of a head start") and their attempts to grind out critical work on especially cryptic poems (the "little mutes within our mouldy covers") such as the one under discussion at the moment.^v Yet the passage is subject to transfigurations, and influxes of terminologies which direct us to entirely different sets of image- or signifier-batches, so that any reassuringly "hard-bitten surface" drops away from our feet and leaves us flailing in a welter of apparently irrelevant flotsam.

To approach the value of inconsistency from a different angle now, if we read Wilkinson's essay, "The Metastases of Poetry,"^{vi} we can, I think, see an analogous phenomenon to this poetic inconsistency at work in its account of his poetics, an account made with explicit reference to the poem we are currently looking at:

I'm not willing, and I'm unable, to try to explain such a poem ['Facing Port Talbot'], but what I can do is point out a principle of organisation which I call metastatic. I tend to work across a number of poems simultaneously, and in a long poem like this, across its various parts simultaneously. What gives the poems such coherence as they exhibit is not a metaphorical development, but a set of linked and transforming entities, which can be syntactical gestures, vowel and consonant patterning, imagistic or discursive modes. 'Metastasis' is a term in rhetoric, but my use derives from a brief experience of nursing in a cancer hospice, the way metastatic tumours echo about the body and these nodes define the shape of the body subjectively, through the pain. Of course, the location of the primary tumour is outside the poem's realm; the poem develops around the metastatic nodes, and these gestures come to evoke its physical lineaments. The reticence of the primary helps guard against a reductive essentialism in approaching the poem, that it is about such-and-such – in fact, there will be a number of extrinsic primaries. Too many indeed for amenability. (154)

The extended metaphor identifies the *composition* of the poem with the formation of tumorous colonies at multiple sites in the body due to the dissemination of cancer cells via the lymphatics and the vascular systems. Wilkinson's use of the metaphor develops the poem being written as a cancer with an unknown primary – a particularly dangerous kind, since establishing quickly what type of cancer you have and the site at which it has originated are essential for a positive prognosis.

A number of questions can be posed in response to this use of the metastatic metaphor. First of all, how can we make sense of the posited link between a cancer and the composition of a poem? Is the poem here the suffering body, and are its unique stylistic features the cancer which dictates its form? If so, can the hyperproliferation of cancer cells in a body be accurately described as a 'principle of organisation'? If the answer is yes, is there an incoherence at the heart of the comparison if we point out that the body doesn't flourish around metastatic nodes but dies around them? If the formation of the poem is (like) the proliferation of cancer cells, what might the 'pain' mentioned represent for the poem? The cancer metaphor appears apposite in describing a relatively uncontrolled but related series of events happening at different points in the same field and gradually defining its shape. If this is the main 'point' of the comparison, then it could be argued that pain is not a necessary component in the metaphor, since it has no obvious metaphorical counterpart, so why not draw the metaphor from the processes of *normal* organ development, embryogenesis or healing, which all involve cells' ability to self-renew, differentiate and migrate? Other questions: can there really be more than one *primary* tumour? And can a tumour be 'outside', extrinsic to what it infects?

The following quotation from the same essay contains an explanation of the metastases of the image, specifically that of the torus in "Facing Port Talbot", and how the metastatic extension of this image led Wilkinson into 'unwitting' play with different accounts of the shape of the universe:

One of the advantages of composing in the metastatic echo-chamber is its serendipitous range – frequently the connectives remain obscure to the writer until stumbled across at a late stage in writing. Rather as what we receive of stars is old light and old radio transmissions, the poem reveals itself as a map of radiant traces. The torus range of metastases in this poem provides a vivid example; my wife was given for Christmas a popular account of the cosmological discoveries of the past six decades, and there I discovered I had been playing all unwittingly with competing cosmological models, with a fidelity which takes me aback. (154-5)

It is important to Wilkinson that his poems know more than he does until they teach him what they know as they progress towards their completion. The tumorous nodes later in the same essay are subject to a transformation: "Metastases are the scattered receptor sites of a primary memory process, retrievable only in...faint traces" (155). These 'faint traces' are the associations between the toroid imagery in "Facing Port Talbot" and the cosmologies that it is said not just to resemble but to be. But Wilkinson's account gives every indication that he did not *know* these cosmological models, could not have forgotten them and so would be unable to remember them, so this memory would be a memory, like the primary tumour it has replaced, extrinsic to the body which remembers: a body of knowledge more like the memory in a hard drive. With respect to the torus image, it features in the poem as a "life-saving ring," "marker buoys," "the loop," the trajectory which "flows back & round," the means by which "the first & last, meet," as "circulation," what "comes back" as "collectively recursive," "the void cavity" or "endless loop schemes," "wheels within" and "a curvature which snaps," a Yeatsian gyre in which "the lights turn & turn," an invitation: "shall we turn," and "metal circlets, / rim of the circle tightened." The torus is also present in the phrase "one turned himself in," in the descriptions

“tubed” and “toroid like a lobster-pot,” in the “playpen lobster-pot” and drawn in the circles of “O turn over”, in “It circulates” and most obviously in “a sexual torus.”

The metastasising of the image outside the range of Wilkinson’s understanding of his own poem could continue in a productive direction if we introduced the use of the torus in topological theory and, in particular, the adoption of the figure by Jacques Lacan, who specifies a peculiar set of functions for the torus in the explication of his own ideas about the nature of desire.^{vii} The torus, best visualized as a rubber ring or inner tube, is useful to Lacan because the surface encloses an empty interior it separates from the void the surface encircles. This means that ways of moving around the central void can represent the relentlessly circular operations of unconscious desire, of “signifying insistence and especially the insistence of repetitive demand.”⁽³⁾^{viii} Just as important though is a distinction Lacan makes between two types of ‘hole’ with respect to the torus, namely, the irreducible holes of the “void cavity” the torus surrounds and the hollow tube under its surface, and the kind of hole that “can be represented as a shrinking circle.”⁽¹³³⁾^{ix} The former represent the idea of an originary lack at the root of “the very constitution of subjectivity” declared to be “sufficiently unbearable for us to strive endlessly to circumvent it.” But “in the very effort of circumventing it, we only trace out its contour all the more.” ⁽¹³⁴⁾ Unlike the kind of circle which we can visualize being drawn down to a point, “[t]his privation is real and as such it cannot be scaled down.” ⁽¹³⁵⁾

Wilkinson’s own belated recognition of the cosmological significance of the torus in “Facing Port Talbot” might imply that poetic inconsistency is just consistency deferred, that is, it could be seen as holding out for a comprehensive reckoning with “Facing Port Talbot” anticipated during the gradual crystallisation of the poem by each successive and more fully informed reading. The refusal to explain the poem and the confession of his inability to explain it are countered and compensated for by the poem’s efforts to include and explain the cosmos. Without authorial input, then, rudimentary forms of order will arise in and from the page, we will witness the emergence of a syntax governing possible unities of self-organizing succession: the words by themselves play together and produce their own structures. The intervention, in today’s reading, of Lacan’s torus, writes the function of lack, represented by the void circumvented by the torus, as the cause which generates the toroid movement of unconscious desire, a desire which proceeds at the level of the signifying chain by metonymy. This holds out the prospect for “Facing Port Talbot” to achieve consistency of a more persuasive kind than the purely formal or rhythmic variety, a rhetorical consistency obtained, but not necessarily earned, through its metonymic revolutions and extensions.

Joe Luna has written with great insight on John Wilkinson, focussing on the poem *Proud Flesh* and with close reference to an essay by Wilkinson, “Following a poem,” written in 2004.^x One of the aims of “Following a poem” is, I think, to re-describe his poetics in terms which strike out the morbidity of the tumorous metaphor in “The Metastases of Poetry,” so it declares that by ‘following’ a poem “a reader unpicks and re-integrates elements of the poem in a felt motion which can restore a healed and full being in the world.” ⁽¹⁹⁶⁾^{xi} It is not entirely clear whether this restored condition will be the poem’s or the reader’s, or if it is to be mutually enjoyed, but Luna, in a very detailed and convincing reading, identifies a “contradiction between what ‘Following the Poem’ wants to instantiate through a reading practice, and what so much of Wilkinson’s

poetry refuses its own subjects.” What Luna names as contradiction keeps open the ‘instructive’ potential of a dialectic between “desire and the social reality from which that desire emerges, the same reality in which that desire falls catastrophically short of realisation” (18). It is strange here to realise that in this formulation of Luna’s, ‘desire’ is instantiated in Wilkinson’s critical prose, and the prosaic ‘social reality’ inside and against which the dream founders is the counterpart of Wilkinson’s poems. But what Wilkinson seems in the end to ask of his poems – and here I refer back to the self-perpetuating metonymic activity welcomed in “The Metastases of Poetry” – is that they do not betray the one true aim of desire’s signifiers: to keep on desiring and not shrink to pusillanimous demands formulated according to the conditions of ordinary language. All of Wilkinson’s poems can be considered ‘sequences,’ even the shortest and most ‘unified’ of them, but the image of the integrated, sequential form is not to be trusted. The preponderance, across his entire body of work in poetry, of intransitive verbs or transitive verbs which are used intransitively and in the continuous present tense, is connected to the preponderance of holes, cuts and splits in the body of the poem and in the bodies or part-objects represented in those poems, none of which can or ought to be shrunk to a point or sutured shut. This is what all of these bodies do and will go on doing in the absence of anything to do it with or on or at or to or for or against, and the machine-like slew of biological operations, what bits of bodies do all on their own, puts our conventional ideas of what is involved in cultural production in their proper place. We are left with the image of a poetic sequence as the endless slip of a severed and perforated tongue, a parapraxis both involuntary and curiously willed at the same time. In which case, Wilkinson’s several efforts to describe his own poetics would have to be considered the necessarily inconsistent attempt to reveal and conceal the fissure of and at the poem’s conception. To reveal what he does not know about the poem and to conceal what he does not know he knows about it. What Luna has called the “theoretical wish-fulfilment” (8) directed towards the accomplishment of wholeness and integrity in “Following a poem” is the impossible dream of patching up that radical lack which is the provocation for and motor of the poem. If cancer is not its truth then neither is it recuperation or remission.

ⁱ Andrea Brady, “The subject of sacrifice in John Wilkinson’s *Down to Earth*,” *Textual Practice* 28:1 (Winter 2013), 57-78.

ⁱⁱ John Wilkinson, “A Single Striking Soviet: The Poems of Barry MacSweeney,” *The Lyric Touch*. (Cambridge: Salt, 2007), 77-96; and review of Stephen Rodefer, *Call It Thought: Selected Poems* in *Chicago Review* 55:1 (Winter 2010), 174-182.

ⁱⁱⁱ John Wilkinson. *Effigies Against the Light*. (Cambridge: Salt, 2001), 113-126.

^{iv} M.A.K. Halliday. *An Introduction to Functional Grammar*. (London; Melbourne; Auckland: Edward Arnold, 1994, 2nd ed.), 309-339.

^v I incline to the idea that the “drew devotee manikins” might be an insulting description of fashionably dressed dummies drawn devotedly to the classes of Drew Milne, a popular lecturer in the Faculty of English at the University of

Cambridge, a poet who moves in the same circles as John Wilkinson and a critic who has written incisively about Wilkinson’s work himself.

^{vi} John Wilkinson, “The Metastases of Poetry,” *The Lyric Touch*. (Cambridge: Salt, 2007), 148-156.

^{vii} Wilkinson has undoubtedly read Lacan – he mentions (without naming Lacan) his concept of the *point de capiton* in an essay on Barbara Guest, for example – but makes much more use of psychoanalyst-authors such as Bion, Bollas, Freud, Klein and Winnicott in his own published criticism. There is no reason to suspect the concealment of an influence on the poem from the Lacanian torus in “The Metastases of Poetry.”

^{viii} *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan: Book XI. Identification, 1961-1962.* Trans. Cormac Gallagher.

^{ix} Jacques Lacan. *Anxiety: The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book X.* Jacques-Alain Miller (ed.). Trans. A.R. Price. Cambridge, UK & Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2014.

^x Joe Luna, "Following John Wilkinson." *Journal of British and Irish Innovative Poetry* 7(1):2, 1-19.

^{xi} John Wilkinson, "Following a poem." *The Lyric Touch.* (Cambridge: Salt, 2007), 195-211.