

Stress Fractures: Essays on Poetry

Edited by Tom Chivers

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Penned in the Margins

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Stress Fractures

Introduction

As a kid growing up in South London, one of the highlights of my year was the visit of the Chinese State Circus to Brockwell Park. Into the hilly expanse of green space wedged between the urban neighbourhoods of Brixton, Herne Hill and Norwood would come these lithe, muscled, impossibly exotic entertainers: acrobats, tumblers, strong-men and fire-eaters. The Big Top was a strange, other world, governed by Sun Wukong: the Monkey King. Entry was a contract – for the duration of the show, you agreed to be bound to the rules and internal logic of the tent.

In the final essay in this book, Katy Evans-Bush compares the poetic line to a high-wire act ('the line must be taut, and strong enough to hold'); but poetry is also clowning *and* the taming of the lion. It is circus without the ringmaster.

In *Stress Fractures* I hope to stimulate new conversations about poetry, with all the infelicities of its language (to borrow Ross Sutherland's phrase). The essays are not unified around a particular set of themes, but approach a wide range of subjects. A radically reinterpreted Emily Dickinson mingles with British hip-hop artist Roots Manuva; a teacher's perspective on poetry in education appears alongside investigations into computer-generated writing. Poetry is conceived as a broad **church** tent which entertains the constant play of contradictory forces *or fractures* (tradition/innovation, private/public, freedom/control); and as an artform stretching, connecting, collaborating and making sense of its new positions in a rapidly-changing cultural landscape.

Much has been written about the decline in space available in mainstream culture for literary criticism in this country; the increasing

commercialisation of publishing; and the dispersal of critical culture to the unrestricted – and virtually unrefereable – territory of the internet.

Some of this is nostalgic grumbling for a golden age that probably never existed in the first place. Much of it certainly overlooks the opportunities to exploit new technologies (the internet, yes, but also digital printing) to generate new dialogue. We are, I believe, witnessing the growth of a tendency towards cultural democratisation, in which the static roles of writer, reader, critic, academic and consumer, as well as the hierarchical structures of publication, distribution and reception that hold those roles in place, are becoming unstable.

In his essay, Theodoros Chiotis responds to this new environment by making the case for a ‘multidimensional, interdisciplinary’ digital poetics which disrupts the authority of the writer, and stimulates new modes of cognition in the reader. To similar ends, Ross Sutherland shares his own experiments with SYSTRAN translation software to create a collaborative robot poetry. Both envisage a new, dispersed kind of authorship, though one with precursors in, respectively, Modernism and Science Fiction.

I am glad to include Tim Clare’s playful deconstruction of Slam Poetry. It seems to me that performance poetry in general has existed for too long without a strong critical culture, and that a certain stream of anti-intellectualism within that broad artform has limited its capacity for innovation. Hannah Silva’s work straddles performance poetry, theatre and live arts, and certainly doesn’t lack innovation. Her fascinating essay ‘Composing Speech’ unlocks some of the secrets of her practice as a writer/performer, such as talking backwards and the peculiarly named art of ‘double tonguing’.

Silva’s essay contributes to wider conversations about the relationship between poetry and performance, live art and text-based visual art. In ‘Radio and...’ James Wilkes records an imaginary conversation with

Holly Pester; as regular collaborators, their work explores the poetry of radio transmissions and spoken broadcasts: 'the ruined voice'.

A widely acknowledged association between poetry and hip-hop is developed by David Barnes in his essay on British rapper Roots Manuva, whose lyrics he evaluates in relation to the Romantic poets and Wesleyan theology. Luke Kennard's contribution approaches the fictional space or 'engine room' of the poem via early 20th century comic strips and the music of Nick Cave, David Berman and Smog. And in 'Emily Dickinson, Vampire Slayer', Sophie Mayer investigates the many cultural afterlives of the seminal American writer in visual arts, photography, music, and on YouTube.

That poetry is seen here to intersect with pop culture constitutes neither some desperate plea for 'relevance' nor a nose-dive towards the lowest common denominator; rather, it demonstrates an open, interdisciplinary critical mode which supports a view of poetry in flux with its cultural surroundings. I am keen to reject the notion that poetry and all poets exist in a special bubble, aloof and disconnected.

Emily Critchley focuses her attention on the American writer Lyn Hejinian, a major figure within Language poetry whose activities since the 1970s have been anything but disconnected. She is, for instance, an energetic supporter of cross-genre collaborations between poets and other artists. Critchley's essay carefully unpicks the creative, critical and philosophical dynamics at play within Hejinian's work.

Some of the essays in *Stress Fractures* point towards a new direction in contemporary poetry, a vision that breaks out of the factionalism of the past forty years. Simon Turner identifies a resurgence of interest in Oulipo writing techniques amongst a number of younger British poets, arguing that this could provide a means of combining radical experimentation with the concern for form and craft that characterises mainstream poetry. American writer and critic Adam Fieled, meanwhile, provides an illuminating and

necessarily subjective examination of ‘post-avant’ poetry – a problematic term, but one which has generated new energies on both sides of the Atlantic.

As a literary critic, David Caddy is interested in the social histories of artistic communities: the relationships, shared spaces and chance meetings that underpin creative expression. His essay here is concerned with both the history *and future* of the prose poem in English poetry, characterising it as a ‘hybrid form’ with the ability to ‘absorb a wide range of discourse’.

Caddy’s subject is the poem without its most identifiable feature – the line break. Katy Evans-Bush follows with ‘The Line’, an extensive analysis of the poetic line which draws on examples from Sharon Olds, Basil Bunting, Marianne Moore and others, and which is filtered through a reading of high-wire walker Philippe Petit’s *On the High Wire*.

There is much hand-wringing within the arts over the ‘relevance’ of poetry to children. Indeed, as I write, the Arts Council of England has just made available a major new funding stream to enable poetry organisations to engage with young people. Alex Runchman gives a refreshingly frank assessment of poetry in education from his experiences as a secondary school teacher. He describes a largely conservative educational culture in which poetry is often badly taught and routinely reduced to exam fodder, and argues for a more liberated approach in which poetry can be both studied *and* enjoyed. Specifically, he calls for more poetry to be written for teenagers.

I originally conceived of this book as a kind of almanac – a form suggesting the collection of sundry data, facts, chronologies, and so on.¹ I hope to

¹ I was partly inspired by reading Daniel Brine (ed.), *The Live Art Almanac* (London: Live Art Development Agency, 2008).

have maintained something of the miscellany in *Stress Fractures*. This is not an academic publication, though a number of the contributors hold postgraduate degrees, and there are plenty of footnotes to point the diligent reader towards further study. Most of the contributors are themselves poets, and some of the essays will appeal to writers, but this is not a book solely for practitioners. Like the Big Top, anyone is welcome.

The artist Marc Chagall said: 'For me a circus is a magic show that appears and disappears like a world. A circus is disturbing. It is profound.' I hope the essays that follow offer you glimpses into a world that can be both disturbing and profound, but also fun, mischievous and exhilarating.

Tom Chivers

London, September 2010

THE ARCHITECTURE OF FICTIONAL ROOMS

Interrogating the metaphor: Luke Kennard on secret rooms, strange endings and early 20th century comics

It's not that students don't "get" Kafka's humour but that we've taught them to see humour as something you *get* - the same way we've taught them that a self is something you just *have*. No wonder they cannot appreciate the really central Kafka joke: that the horrific struggle to establish a human self results in a self whose humanity is inseparable from that horrific struggle. That our endless and impossible journey toward home is in fact our home. (64-65)

David Foster Wallace, *Consider the Lobster*

People sure love unsolved mysteries, don't they?

Scott Plangenhoefer on the music video for Radiohead's 'Just'

As a young child I had the same recurring nightmare about a secret room behind the gas oven in my gran's kitchen¹ so many times that one day I

¹ The room was dark, bigger than the house itself and filled with a reddish light. There appeared to be what I now recognise as a religious ritual taking place within it. Although actually I don't recall there being any people. Perhaps the ritual had just finished.

insisted on moving the oven out with my dad (a man whose preternatural patience on this occasion shaded almost into indulgence) so I could look behind it. I discovered a slightly greasy wall and a gas pipe. I often set novels in this house (as in novels I'm reading), whether the house fits the author's description or not, and I still dream about it – I recently dreamt about chipping the wall away with a pallet knife to find the room was there after all. Faced with incontrovertible evidence that the room doesn't exist I still can't let it go.

My thesis here is that poetry creates a fictional space which itself contains a fictional space; a dream within a dream which acts as a kind of engine room for whatever engaging, mysterious effects the poem has. This is going to involve examples of language and popular culture which could be accused of obfuscation to hide their ultimate emptiness², a Russian Doll which is missing its central, solid doll.³ So I want to suggest that in poetry, as in art in general, one of our most satisfying reactions is 'WTF?', and that there's a good 'WTF?' and a bad 'WTF?' between which every writer must negotiate. I want to start by looking at three songs, which I believe

² C.f. IMDB comments about any David Lynch movie, the ending of *The Sopranos* or, indeed, any open-ended narrative: the suspicion that the writer/director is just trying to bilk you on a satisfying denouement because they "can't be bothered" to come up with a decent ending or are "taking the piss" out of people who claim ambiguity is intellectually satisfying.

³ E.g. a kind of Paul Auster self-parody wherein an uninspired writer discovers an unfinished manuscript by an uninspired writer about an uninspired writer discovering an unfinished manuscript... I haven't found them, but I'm pretty certain there are a couple of meta-fictional Mills & Boon novels with a hero/heroine who happens to be an uninspired romantic novelist and whose "real-life" adventures feed into the novel he/she's working on.

manifest directly (or overtly conceal) something necessary to all poetry – ('a poem should resist meaning / almost successfully' - Wallace Stevens) – 'The Farmer's Hotel' by David Berman of the Silver Jews, 'Fable of the Brown Ape' by Nick Cave, and Smog's 'Keep Some Steady Friends Around'. Actually, before that I want to talk about the use of quotation marks in early 20th century comic strips.

George Herriman's *Krazy & Ignatz* concerns the relationship between Krazy Kat, a naïve, whimsical Kat in love with Ignatz, a mouse who hates him and has made it his sole *raison d'être* to throw a brick at his head (a gesture Krazy misinterprets as a declaration of love); and Offissa Pupp, a police dog committed to protecting Krazy Kat ostensibly to keep the peace, but actually due to his unrequited love for Krazy and hatred of Ignatz. The action takes place in the deserts of Coconino County, Arizona. One way or another, and usually as a result of every plan backfiring at once, Krazy Kat always gets hit with a brick and Ignatz ends up in jail. Every page-long strip has the same plot; it ran from 1913 to 1944. The dialogue is widely lauded for its poetic and eccentric phrasing but, while I concur that it's delightful, it's not what I want to focus on here. Rather I want to look at Herriman's curious habit of placing important nouns in speech marks:

DAWGUNNIT, NOW MY "COMEDY" IS RUINED!!!! (p. 68)

I WILL NOW SCAN THE "NORTH" – ALL'S WELL THERE. (p. 97)

SHUX, "MOUSE", YOU'RE JUST A AMATEUR HIDER – I'LL SHOW YOU HOW TO HIDE A "BRICK" SO THAT EVEN THE 103RD EYE WON'T EVER LOCATE IT... (p. 80)

The speech marks affect the way you sound the line out in your head;

they place a surreal focus on the noun in question and hint at something which isn't really there, acknowledging the falsity (there is no such thing as North in an ink drawing of a dog with a telescope standing on a tower).

there is no such thing as North in an ink drawing of a dog with a telescope standing on a tower

In any given strip, the things placed within speech marks – whether objects, directions or abstract concepts – are the chess pieces Herriman is going to manoeuvre through the same plot. Although obviously content with his

situation, Krazy Kat's regular song, which concludes several strips over the 31 year run, is "THERE IS A HEPPY LEND FURFUR A-WAAY!!!"

Tony Millionaire's contemporary comic *Maakies*⁴ began with the same traditional cartoon theme of eternal recurrence. It's a work of remarkable draftsmanship, harking back to the *Krazy & Ignatz* era in its line-quality, juxtaposed with every extreme of lewdness conceivable. Two sailors, Drinky Crow (a crow) and Uncle Gabby (an ape) are drinking on a boat. They discuss something, perhaps aided by supporting cast; the theme is usually the pointlessness of life or the uncontrollability of our appetites or instincts. Drinky Crow then drinks too much (accompanied by the eminently quotable "Dook-dook-dook-dook-dook!") and shoots himself in the head. The strip is replete with insults and bawdiness which sound at once everyday and horrifyingly oblique:

⁴ On the meaning of the name: "I can't release that information until a certain person dies... Because he or she would be extremely pissed off to even know that that name was being used." (interview with Millionaire in *The Comics Journal*, 2003).

MAYBE YOU SHOULD CRAWL BACK INSIDE YOUR MOTHER AND TRY AGAIN
(p.8)

BULLETS THAT SAY "PENIS" ON THEM!! DON'T JUST KILL!! INSULT!! (p.48)

Speech marks are used more sparingly than in earlier comics – thus stand out all the more. Drifting in a sailboat, Drinky Crow apologises for getting drunk and ruining the day. As it was Drinky Crow's sober self, henceforth referred to as "Sobie", who elected to drink the booze (putting the "kibosh" on their plans for a good sail), Uncle Gabby reasons that they should always be drunk in order to prevent "Sobie" making any more bogus decisions.

HA HA!

exclaims Drinky Crow,

I SEE! WE WILL FOOL "SOBIE" AT HIS OWN GAME!
(Maakies Corner, p.29)

The ship approaches a waterfall.

Each episode of *Maakies* has a miniature 4 panel comic running along the base-line, a strip which has its own consistent characters, rules and (usually somewhat ruder) tone.⁵ In one of my favourites, three poets claim to have stripped poetry of its needless pretence and fabrications to its very essentials. After two attempts, ("Hi, I!" and "A") a third claims to have written the shortest poem of all time: he shoots himself in the head. The strip

⁵ *Krazy Kat* actually began as just one such "sideshow" strip in Herriman's 1910 comic *The Dingbat Family*.

occasionally features a mysterious tug boat inhabited by Rear-Admiral Maak, a bald, stubbly little man who resembles a fragment of Popeye. At times he is Drinky Crow's own uvula, at other times he appears in a bathroom sink which Drinky Crow (sole survivor of a violent, ten-episode rampage) is able to enter, whereupon the water darkens, the tug is surrounded by ancient and modern ships and normal service is resumed (Drinky Crow shoots himself in the head). The implication being that *Maakies* takes place in an infinitely refracted world-within-a-world, further reflected in (i) the circularity of the jokes, (ii) the shifting focus (the same gag played out on the human, animal, parasitic and macrobiotic level), (iii) fuzzy, self-justifying logic ("Sobie") and ultimately (iv) the simultaneously scabrous and poignant self-defeating loop of addiction and relapse. The unthinkable happens and the unnameable is named every single day and the next day everything has returned to normal in order for it to happen again.

Which leads us, inexorably, to 'The Farmer's Hotel'. David Berman is probably as well known as a poet as he is a songwriter - his song lyrics tend to make more use of regular rhyme schemes and Country & Western traditions, but they contain as many knock-out images as the poems, e.g. *The Natural Bridge's* "jagged skyline of car keys" (which captures not only how much a horizontal car key resembles the silhouette of a horizon, but encapsulates the means of driving towards that horizon). 'The Farmer's Hotel' isn't like that; it's wilfully flat, starting with night falling and our narrator being lost in the one-horse town of Goshen. The song documents a gradual, apparently unalterable journey towards a place the narrator is continually warned against (or, in some cases, bemusedly directed to: "If I get your meaning then I'm definitely leaning / toward recommending the Farmer's Hotel.") The object of fear remains entirely vague. The chorus is wordless, a climbing piano and warbly guitar part. Furthermore, the melody isn't in any way ominous; the song is in a major key, heavy on flats, and