

Introduction: ‘Make It New’ Once Again: Experimental Trends in 21st-Century Poetry in English

Laurent Milesi* and Radu Vancu**

*Shanghai Jiao Tong University; **Lucian Blaga University of Sibiu
E-mails: milesi@sjtu.edu.com; rvancu@gmail.com

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One hundred years ago T. S. Eliot published *The Waste Land*, the acme of High Modernism (along with Rainer Maria Rilke’s *Duino Elegies* and, for fiction, James Joyce’s *Ulysses*, Marcel Proust’s *In Search of Lost Time* and Franz Kafka’s composition of *The Castle*, to name but these), in which the poet articulated his response to post-WW1 disillusionment.¹ Five years before the appearance of Eliot’s ‘long poem’, Ezra Pound, who will, ironically somewhat belatedly, utter his famous slogan ‘make it new’,² had begun serializing his *Cantos* in *Poetry*, an epic *magnum opus* which took him half a century to complete and cast a long shadow across the best of postmodern(ist) poetry, such as William Carlos Williams’s *Paterson* (1946), ‘a hodgepodge, the American version of Pound’s more famous “ragbag”’,³ Charles Olson’s own epic project of the *Maximus Poems* (1950-1970), and, more generally, much of the experimental poetic output of the second half of the 20th century that still owed its aesthetic principles, however distantly, to an ‘ideogrammic’ method of composition.⁴

Fast forward to our contemporary epoch and the (broadly defined) ethno-ethical – including in the sense of a localism, or *ethos* – and political re-anchoring of much post-WW2 (especially North American) poetry, in the wake of (*inter alia*) Olson’s epoch-making castigation of the moral failure of Poundian aesthetics, but also ethnopoetics à la Jerome Rothenberg, which emphasized connections between human activity and the environment that produces it, continues to leave its indirect imprint on some of the latest poetic agendas. Witness trends such as ‘poetry and the environment’ (Wendell Berry, Mary Oliver), ‘nature poetry’, or a renewed tradition of ‘ecopoetics’ – a (re)opening of

¹ For an excellent, wide-ranging compendium of essays on the all-round significance of that year, see *1922: Literature, Culture, Politics*, ed. Jean-Michel Rabaté (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

² Ezra Pound, *Make It New: Essays* (London: Faber and Faber, 1934). See also his equally celebrated diktat in *ABC of Reading* (London: Faber and Faber, 1961 ed.), 29: “Literature is news that STAYS news.” See also Lynn Keller, *Re-Making It New: Contemporary American Poetry and the Modernist Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), which documents the (dis)continuities between modernist and ‘postmodern’ (post-WW2) American poets: Wallace Stevens vs. John Ashbery, Marianne Moore vs. Elizabeth Bishop, William Carlos Williams vs. Robert Creeley, W. H. Auden vs. James Merrill.

³ William Carlos Williams, *Interviews: Speaking Straight Ahead*, ed. Linda Welshimer Wagner (New York: New Directions, 1976), xi.

⁴ See Laszlo K. Géfin, *Ideogram: History of a Poetic Method* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1982).

the field⁵ – which for Lynn Keller designates contemporary poets’ ample gesture of bringing together humans, nature, culture and the nonhuman world.⁶ From the turn of the millennium onwards, we can speak, still with Keller, of a ‘self-conscious Anthropocene’ as the ‘period when people in the developed world [...] are very conscious of the impact of humans and often anxiously so’.⁷ ‘Making poetry’ (*poein*) is no stranger to this engagement.

In 1922, at the peak of the modern breakthrough, humanities were still a dominant cultural force and paradigm. One century later, humanities have lost their privileged position in the public sphere of knowledge and the prevalent scientific discourses at the turn of the millennium are those of cosmology, on the one hand, and neurosciences, on the other. Contemporary poets have allowed their art(s) to be pervaded by these sciences of the brain and of the cosmos; also, neuroscientists openly admit that the production of meaning in the brain follows a metaphorical procedure⁸ and that the history of neuroscience is the history of the production of such cognitive metaphors.⁹ Therefore, the ‘metaphorical brain’, to use Seana Coulson and Vicky T. Lai’s apt phrase,¹⁰ proves to be essential for understanding how the contemporary *Zeitgeist* works, and some contemporary poets have made its mapping the very goal of their writing.

In relation to physics, after the now classic 1982 book by Roger S. Jones, *Physics as Metaphor*,¹¹ the contiguities of cosmological thinking with the ‘metaphorical brain’ in contemporary physics have been increasingly explored and found to be central to the explanations of the production of physical models. Hanna Pulaczewska has demonstrated how ‘the aspects of metaphors in physics’ produce concrete knowledge,¹² while Corni, Fuchs and Dumont have shown how physics is a reticular construction of ‘conceptual metaphors’.¹³ There exists in contemporary poetry a lineage of poets fascinated by this metaphorical understanding of cosmological models, and their writing

⁵ See *Ecopoetics: Essays in the Field*, ed. Angela Hume and Gillian Osborne (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2018), whose title echoes one of Robert Duncan’s most celebrated poetry collections, *The Opening of the Field* (New York: Grove Press, 1960), with its precursor poetics.

⁶ Lynn Keller, *Recomposing Ecopoetics: North American Poetry of the Self-Conscious Anthropocene* (Charlottesville, VA and London: University of Virginia Press, 2017).

⁷ Sara Thomas, ‘Why We Need Experimental Poetry in the Anthropocene: A Conversation with Lynn Keller’, *Edge Effects*, 12 October 2019; available at <https://edgeeffects.net/keller-ecopoetics-anthropocene/> [accessed 9 November 2022]. The discussion focused on Keller’s *Recomposing Ecopoetics*. As shown on the magazine’s website, *Edge Effects* is a digital magazine [about environmental issues] produced by graduate students at the Center for Culture, History, and Environment (CHE), which is part of the University of Wisconsin – Madison’s Nelson Institute for Environmental Studies.’

⁸ Vicky Tzuyin Lai and Tim Curran, ‘ERP Evidence for Conceptual Mappings and Comparison Processes during the Comprehension of Conventional and Novel Metaphors’, *Brain and Language* 127 (2013): 484-96.

⁹ See Matthew Cobb, *The Idea of the Brain: A History* (London: Profile Books, 2020).

¹⁰ Seana Coulson and Vicky T. Lai, ‘Editorial: The Metaphorical Brain’, *Frontiers in Human Neuroscience* 9 (2016); available at <https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fnhum.2015.00699/full> [accessed 2 November 2022].

¹¹ Roger S. Jones, *Physics as Metaphor* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982).

¹² Hanna Pulaczewska, *Aspects of Metaphor in Physics* (Tübingen: Max Niemeyer, 1999).

¹³ Federico Corni, Hans U. Fuchs and Elisabeth Dumont, ‘Conceptual Metaphor in Physics Education: Roots of Analogy, Visual Metaphors, and a Primary Physics Course for Student Teachers’, *Journal of Physics: Conference Series* 1286 (2019): 1-10.

and poetic practice respond to this blending of cognitive poetics and physical cosmology.

In spite of numerous geopolitical upheaval, the turn of the millennium has also witnessed a re-enchantment of the world, a *Wiederverzauberung der Welt*, if we are to echo and invert Max Weber's famous phrase from his Munich conference about the experience of modernity as a disenchantment of the world.¹⁴ Poetry reacts and responds to these new pulsions of the sacred made visible in the social body. The private body (as the siege of this sacred pulsion) also reacts to this re-enchanted world as poetry acknowledges this new type of sacrality, where the former transcendental pulsion geminates with information coming from politics, cosmology, physics, neurosciences, genetics, etc. Also, the works of post-confessional poets such as Olena Kalaytiak Davis, Terrance Hayes, Meg Freitag, etc. can be read as a direct response to this new re-enchancing of the world – their poetry documents how the self reacts when its synthesis has to take place in such a context.

Over the last three decades, the world has also become posthuman, and the latter's gradual assimilation into an academic trend and area of study is reminiscent of Mark Greif's reading of earlier, contemporary literature as pertaining to 'the age of the crisis of man'.¹⁵ Poetry has naturally reacted also to this posthumanization of the world, which is fast altering our (self-)consciousness and global perspective on the universe we inhabit, from the relation with our own technological body (and with diseases) to the relation with the world at large, where feelings of alienation and of (gnostic) exile are experienced even by people who have never experienced exile itself. The ongoing recreation of the linguistic Babel adds to this feeling of alienation; thus, poetry tends to become transnational and plurilingual, mirroring the translanguistic and multicultural texture of the globalized world.

Within this context of pluralization and global diversification, and uncannily echoing the posthumanist urge to revisit the origins of the human species, the new millennium has produced an abundance of returns, revivals or reappraisals, among which the (re)discovery of alternative forms of modernism in arts, with the aim of describing the evolution of culture and society in the alleged aftermath of postmodernism (or even 'postpostmodernism') as an extended form of a broader modernism: hypermodernity,¹⁶ altermodern,¹⁷ digimodernism, formerly called pseudo-modernism,¹⁸ and, more prominently – and crucially, on account of its embrace and/or rediscovery of affect, speculative modes of thinking, neoromanticism and authenticity –

¹⁴ See the 1920 version of *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, 2nd ed. (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1976), which refers the reader to his *Wirtschaftsethik der Weltreligionen* [the economic ethics of world religions] for further developments on this process. For an analysis of the millennial swing of the pendulum towards re-enchantment, see, for example, Richard Jenkins, 'Disenchantment, Enchantment and Re-Enchantment: Max Weber at the Millennium', *Max Weber Studies* 1 (2000): 11-32, and *The Re-Enchantment of the World: Secular Magic in a Rational Age*, ed. Joshua Landy and Michael Saler (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2009).

¹⁵ Mark Greif, *The Age of the Crisis of Man: Thought and Fiction in America, 1933-1973* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015).

¹⁶ Gilles Lipovetsky, *Hypermodern Times*, trans. Andrew Brown (Cambridge: Polity, 2005).

¹⁷ Nicolas Bourriaud, *Altermodern* (London: Tate Publishing, 2009).

¹⁸ Alan Kirby, *Digimodernism: How New Technologies Dismantle the Postmodern and Reconfigure Our Culture* (London: Continuum, 2009).

metamodernism.¹⁹ It is within this broad context, and not merely that of the centenary anniversary of the *annus mirabilis* of the movement, that Jed Rasula's essay opens the volume, followed by Daniel Katz's assessment of the indebtedness of Peter Gizzi's work to key modernist figures like William Carlos Williams and Wallace Stevens, but also to proto-modernist interlocutors such as Emily Dickinson and Walt Whitman. Ming-Qian Ma's phenomenological reading of Andrew Joron's more speculative form of poetry, then Felix Bernstein's glossed script of a 'dialogue' staged in tandem with artist and performer Gabe Rubin and painter Jacqueline Humphries, further testify to the resilience of 'high theory', philosophy and even psychoanalysis in the practice (and interpretation) of contemporary experimental poetry, including as witty critique of capitalism.

Operating a heady cocktail of Lacanian psychoanalysis, informatics, AI, digital and performance art, and automated painting, Bernstein's arguably difficult piece should be singled out for further contextualisation, if only on account of its self-conscious, problematic relation to the 'name-of-the-father' (Charles Bernstein) since 'language poetics' trace a watershed between the post-WW2 inheritance of modernism(s) and post-millennial departures proposed in this issue. It is in the direct lineage of Bernstein's own 'Notes on Post-Conceptual Poetry', one of the most savvy, brazen, ambitious poetic manifestoes of a generation, to which the puzzled reader should turn for guidance.²⁰

Yet despite afore-mentioned attempts to reconnect with the major literary avant-gardes of the twentieth century,²¹ much of the poetic panorama of the current age feels distinctly different in tone and sensitivity from the experimental (postmodern American) renegotiations with the recent precursors that still lingered on in post-1980s 'movements' like L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E and (post-)conceptual poetics. Compare the make-up and line-ups of anthologies like the two editions of Donald Allen's now canonical *The New American Poetry, 1945-1960* (1960) and (with George Butterick)

¹⁹ Andre Furlani, *Guy Davenport: Postmodern and After* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2007); Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin van den Akker, 'Notes on Metamodernism', *Journal of Aesthetics & Culture* 2.1 (2010); available at <http://dx.doi.org/10.3402/jac.v2i0.5677> [accessed 2 November 2022], followed by *Metamodernism: Historicity, Affect, and Depth After Postmodernism*, ed. Robin van den Akker, Alison Gibbons and Timotheus Vermeulen (London and New York: Rowman & Littlefield International, 2017). See also Antony Rowland, *Metamodernism and Contemporary British Poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022). To this list we could add the conference on '1922-2022 – Total Modernism: Continuity, Discontinuity, and the Experimental Turn' organised in May this year by the Centro Studi 'Arti della Modernità' / Centre for Comparative Modernisms in Turin (https://www.studium.unito.it/do/avvisi.pl/Show?_id=3kp7 [accessed 2 November 2022]).

²⁰ For a brief, critical articulation of the significance of these Notes in relation to several contemporary (chiefly US) experimental poetics, see Laurent Milesi, 'Counter-texting One Another: Conceptual Poetics, Flarf and Derridean Countersignature', *CounterText* 1.2: 'Toward Counter-textuality', ed. Ivan Callus and James Corby (2015): especially 224-9. The Notes themselves first appeared as 'Notes on Post-conceptual Poetry', *Evening Will Come: A Monthly Journal of Poetics*, Conceptual Poetry Feature-Issue 41 (May 2014); available at <http://www.thevolta.org/ewc41-fbernstein-p1.html> [accessed 2 November 2022]. They were revised, extended and republished as a 'Deluxe Edition' together with other essays in *Notes on Post-Conceptual Poetry*, preface by Trisha Low (Los Angeles: Insert Blanc Press, 2015), 15-98.

²¹ For another instance, see the 'post-projective poetics' elaborated by Wanda O'Connor, a Canadian poet living in the United Kingdom, in her eponymous doctoral thesis (see Bibliography), which updates Charles Olson's theory of the 'projective field', mixed with post-Heideggerian 'thrownness', within a new space or 'archival field' where accumulation, encouraging repetition and non-closure, is the driving force, and identifies a similar trend in the poetics of Susan Howe and Rachel Blau DuPlessis.

The Postmoderns: The New American Poetry Revised (1982),²² Paul Hoover's first and second editions of the Norton *Postmodern American Poetry* (1994, 2013), or Douglas Messerli's comprehensive *From the Other Side of the Century: A New American Poetry 1960-1990* (1994), with the subtitles (and selection) of Claudia Rankine's own two co-edited volumes of *American Poets in the 21st Century* – (with Lisa Sewell) *The New Poetics* (2007) and (with Michael Dowdy) *Poetics of Social Engagement* (2018) – and Ann Keniston and Jeffrey Gray's *The New American Poetry of Engagement: A 21st Century Anthology* (2012). While the likes of Allen Ginsberg and fellow Beat cronies, or Leroi Jones aka Amiri Baraka, surely cannot be accused of lacking a sense of social and political critique, or, in the case of Gary Snyder, an early awareness of environmental issues, it is the flagging of the notion of engagement, an unconscious latter-day avatar of Jean-Paul Sartre's advocacy of literature's politico-ideological commitment (*littérature engagée*),²³ that signals the epochal divide, as if sheer content ultimately prevailed over its encoding in an experimental poetics – and this may also explain indirectly why, regardless of their chosen critical angle, those that answered the call for this special issue ended up writing most prominently about the arguably more buoyant scene of US poetry, largely defined: see also Philip Coleman's review article and the topics selected in Timothy Yu's *Cambridge Companion to Twenty-First-Century American Poetry* (new Black aesthetics and new feminisms, Asian American, Latino/a and indigenous poetics, disability aesthetics, poetry's relation to bioethics, trauma, war, neoliberalism, etc.), also reviewed here by Laurent Milesi and Arleen Ionescu. In very different ways, both Radu Vancu's conversation with Romanian-born poet Andrei Codrescu and Arleen Ionescu's with Cristina Bejan, also of Romanian descent, which head the review section, take stock of this generational sea change and offer contextual musings about the post-millennial orientations of a more 'committed' poetry against the fraught historical background of our contemporary epoch.

The other contributions not mentioned yet are in this vein: Jason Skeet's on Bhanu Kapil, whose writing is informed by and builds on postcolonial and feminist critiques of humanism and its encoded whiteness, and whose *How to Wash a Heart* he appropriately examines in the light of Deleuze and Guattari's conception of 'minor literature'; Doris Mironescu's on Ilya Kaminsky's *Deaf Republic*, analysed from the critical perspective of disability studies, whose aim is to situate contemporary disability poetics at the crossroads of modernism and metamodernism; likewise Ronnie Stephens's piece focusing more broadly on illness and the corporeal experience as a source of collective healing in 21st-century American poetry (with specific reference to Shira Erlichman, Katie Farris, Andrea Gibson, Rachel McKibbens, Sam Sax and Danez Smith); and Andrada Yunusoğlu's on how writers like Melissa Lozada-Oliva and Olivia Gatwood resort to feminism and the political thrust of confessional poetry as means of empowerment.

The aim of this special issue of *Word and Text*, whose title echoes a previous issue on "'Keep It New": Recent Trends in Experimental Fiction in English' (2014), is to offer a comparable, if concise roadmap of some of those more recent territories towards which poetry and poetics have been gravitating, a full century after *The Waste*

²² Refer also to his companion critical volume, co-edited with Warren Tallman and published in the interim, on *The Poetics of the New American Poetry* (1973).

²³ See Jean-Paul Sartre's epoch-defining 'What Is Literature?' (1948), trans. Bernard Frechtman, in *What Is Literature? and Other Essays* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988), 21-245.

Land. Taking into account that, as Julia Jordan and Laurent Milesi stated in “‘Keep It New’”: A (Re-)Introduction’, ‘[t]he experimental [...] has connotations of risk, excitement, innovation, and aesthetic progressiveness, but it also frequently contains a knowledge of its own possible failure: an awareness that experiments by their nature might go badly wrong’²⁴, the essays presented in this issue testify to contemporary poetry’s enduring spirit of resilience and of an inventiveness apace with our epoch’s renewed agendas.

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²⁴ Julia Jordan and Laurent Milesi, “‘Keep It New’”: A (Re-)Introduction’, *Word and Text – A Journal of Literary Studies and Linguistics* 4.1 (2014): 5.

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