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INFORMATION AND POETRY: ENCOUNTERING THE INFORMATIONISTS – DOROTHY LEHANE

This is Part One of a special retrospective on the Informationists, an experimental poetry group including Robert Crawford, W.N. Herbert, David Kinloch, Peter McCarey, Alan Riach and Richard Price. Part One contains introductions and retrospectives from Richard Price and Alan Riach. Also included is a new introductory preface by Dorothy Lehane, written especially for the planned Italian translation of the group anthology 'Contraflow on the SuperHighway'. Five poems from the anthology are also included in Part One.

by Dorothy Lehane

Contraflow on the Superhighway co-editor Richard Price defines the members of the Informationist collective as “bearers of news...” with a goal “to digest and transmit as many different types of data as they can.”^[i] The collective, poets Robert Crawford, W.N. Herbert, David Kinloch, Peter McCarey, Alan Riach, and Richard Price, are bound by a “profound interest in the nature of information itself,”^[ii] by their national identity, and by their interest in “cerebral and human concerns.”^[iii] In this preface, I suggest the poets in the collective are social scientists, challenging authority, their political environment, and the nature of and ways in which people see information. The poetry in this anthology generates discussion surrounding the value, categorisation – we can see this preoccupation in the structure of the anthology from the outset – and validity of information. The poets demonstrate mastery in interpretation, conceptualisation, distillation and the recontextualization of information. Impelled by my interest in the challenges and outcomes arising from interdisciplinary engagement, I will attempt to unpick some of the issues surrounding the appropriation of obscure scientific material, not least because it seems relevant to consider the processes occurring at this point of intersection: there are, crucially, productive tensions created when knowledge mixes with sensibility, when the technical is charged by the quotidian, when lyricism judders against a precision of thought. Kaja Marczevska’s insightful theories on curatorial thinking and appropriation poetics offer a generative lens through which to begin a meditation on the processes occurring in some of the poems. Through theories of intertextuality, linguistic semantics, consciousness and phenomenological perception, I will discuss how information embedded in a poetic structure carries a specific frisson; how appropriated language finds a synthesis, garners new resonance, and becomes an ingredient of communication.

Finally, I will suggest that it is meaning, rather than a lack of meaning that anchors these poems, and that it is possible to find a commonality at work; an inherent desire to educate, increase social understanding and reconcile correspondence.

In the editorial note of the neurological issue of *Litmus*,^[iv] a magazine exploring the intersection between science and poetry, I’ve suggested that it is possible to insert a marginal authority which re-evaluates scientific theories and re-assembles those models in radical ways, in order to create new perceptual scientific models. In this anthology, we find poets who might also be defined as social scientists, consorts in a symbiotic engagement reordering our preconceived ideas of the function of their role. In his poem ‘Pickup, L.A.’ Riach calls to attention society’s preoccupations with the celebrity world. Engrossed with approaching the beachhouse that marks the spot “of a Kennedy/Marilyn tryst,”^[v] the tour group miss witnessing a hawk catching a rodent. The inference is that society is focusing on a superficial veneer – people are seeing the wrong information – and the captivating evidence of the natural world, the sublime mechanics of the food chain running alongside it, is neglected. The poem doesn’t simply nod at the beauty of the ephemeral; it generates valuable

questions about cataloguing and archiving – what is seen, what is recorded and what is considered valuable.

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In his essay 'Approaching the Informationists', Price writes that all Informationists have learnt from the "apparently indigestible pseudo-technical English poetry, and the well learnt lesson of making the poem a carrier of abstruse but (the poet hopes) fascinating news."^[vi] Price explains that a prevailing theme is "the instability of 'authority'... a sense of exhilaration and apprehension in regard to the digital age – it is a poetry about the deep ambiguities of hope and doubt inherent in all the forms of information."^[vii] The dual meaning of 'apprehension' is crucial; there is a grasping for, but also a distrusting, "a doubt inherent" which may refer to specific misinformation or, more broadly, data dressed up as collective truth. The manipulation of data in the practice and utterance of poetry positions itself to challenge political structures: in *Contraflow*, the poets scrutinize the process of presenting information, "sometimes they parody it, often they extend it: they meddle with "enlightenment" itself."^[viii] Here are poems tampering with legitimacy and the dissemination of information, violating predicted routes of engagement. W.N. Herbert's 'Letterbomb'^[ix] bears witness to the complexities, instability and fragility of the history of Anglo-Scottish relations. Authority is scrutinized, routinely ignored information is addressed and propaganda destabilized. The first line, "Too late: by the time you have read this far", reports from the retrospective position of lived experience, and is pivotal in two senses: it throws the mirror upon the reader whilst simultaneously pulling on the thread which connects all of the poetry in the anthology – Scottish identity, and the socio-political landscape.

Within these poems, we find an underlying desire to revive and delight in Scottish vocabularies, and this could be interpreted as a challenge to linguistic imperialism. In Crawford's prose poem 'Composition'^[x] the reader is compelled to experiment with, and indeed verbalise the cadence and rhythm of Scottish language. The generated sounds are pleasurable to roll around your mouth, but the musicality extends much further than cadence; the second section 'Admission to Membership in a Society' is a supporting translation, offering an alternative route of comprehension. In the line "It's raining gently on a music composed of everything that is absurd" the rain dilutes art, whilst the music immortalises the minutia, the forecast is heavy rain. Information is being lost, diluted – in the same way that Scottish language has been lost over time. The amalgamation of media in modern life makes everything accessible – "Lewis and Somalia gathered together beyond comprehension" – yet those disparate connections are incongruous.

In his prose piece, Kinloch writes about the thrill of plundering his dictionary to write a Scots poem: "It was more a question of clothing yourself in the dictionary as you write, of wearing it, of letting its words form the rich loops and pleats of a jongleur's sleeve, of admitting the ordered anarchy of the dictionary into your pen, of welcoming the plurality of its definitions, of surrendering to the dictionary."^[xi] If we sketch these ideas against interdisciplinary engagement, the presence and proximity of the acquired vocabulary creates a network of perceptual implications. Like Kinloch, I welcome the plurality of definitions that follow any assimilation of a new lexicon into poetic practice; the organic, active echo of another discipline, fragmented from whichever source it departed. The fragments remain visible; the new vocabulary operates as an undertow, oscillating between the foreground and background, offering an array of interpretations. To borrow from Herbert, the ability to "negotiate between jargons is of primary importance."^[xii]

Appropriating a foreign lexicon into poetic practice is not without complication, not least because of the slippery nature of fact, and the “doubt inherent in all the forms of information.” It is fair to suggest that a poet bridging two disciplines is in danger of becoming an interpreter, a conduit for information and inadvertently responsible for the channel of meaning. In his paper ‘Strips: Scientific Language and Poetry’ Peter Middleton reflects on this act of mediation:

Once you start looking it is not difficult to find these strips of scientific language in the work of a number of poets. They radiate intransigence from many poems that J.H. Prynne published in the middle seventies, such as these four lines from ‘Pigment Depôt’ in *Wound Response*: “We apply for rebate on the form provided / injected with vanillic acid diethylamide / our displacement is fused / by parody.”...The articles and textbooks from where these strips have been torn are not usually identified, the source is not the point, the reliability is not the point, you either know or you don’t, and the poet isn’t teaching Biochemistry for experimental victims.^[xiii]

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As scientific theories evolve, the strips or scraps remaining in poems will contain error, and Middleton warns that the “strip in the poem may look much more faded than the rest of the language around it, like yellowing newspaper consumed by its acids.” Prynne actively encourages us to find the science, suggesting “reading should not be contemplatively confined to the text itself, but prepared to enquire beyond it.”^[xiv] His poem ‘ARISTEAS, IN SEVEN YEARS’ initially appeared without its accompanying notes, letters, and bibliography, compounding his theory that a reader should become a researcher.

In terms of heritage and scholarly influence, the Informationists are perhaps more closely allied with the philosophical, world-encompassing poetry of Hugh MacDiarmid, whose later work also employed obscure scientific languages. MacDiarmid assumed, as Prynne did, that readers would bring with them a level of competency and literary knowledge. Many of the poets in this anthology have written extensively on MacDiarmid’s oeuvre and inevitably the strategies employed in his work present interesting parallels in relation to their own practices. In *Hugh MacDiarmid’s Epic Poetry*, Riach confronts issues of authorship and plagiarism in MacDiarmid’s poetry, illuminating the significance and implications of appropriating material. Rather than an issue of plagiarism, MacDiarmid’s transcribed material operates “in highly sophisticated ways”^[xv] Furthermore, Riach raises the issue of intertextuality, “Etymologically, the text is a cloth; *textus*, from which the word text derives, means ‘woven’. Every text is itself the intertext of other texts, and belongs to the intertextual.”^[xvi] Riach invokes Kenneth Buthlay’s writings on MacDiarmid’s incorporation of quotations and appropriations, implying some level of skill and vision was employed; but perhaps it is more fascinating to investigate *how* original sources can be re-contextualized in poetic practice.

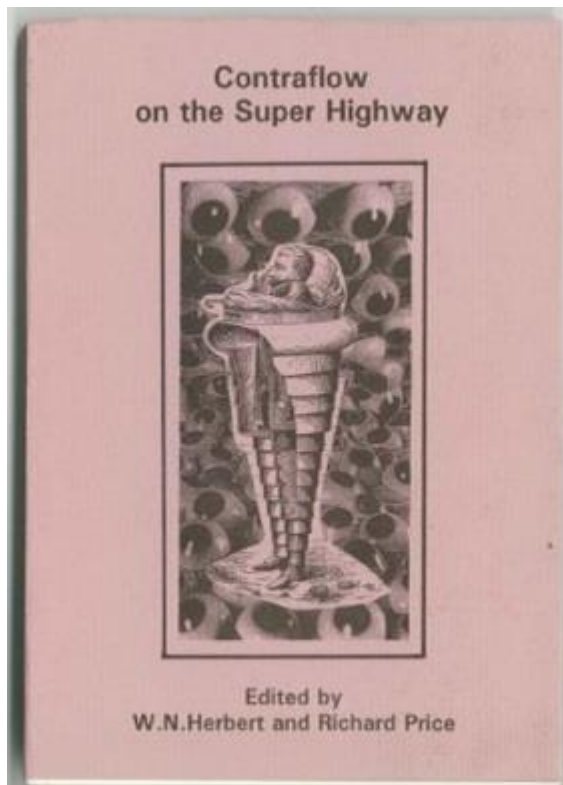
In her essay ‘Modular form as a curatorial practice’, Marczewska presents a useful approach for thinking about appropriation poetics and the curatorial approach to authorship, and considers how creative writing operates when it is “composed by means of appropriation, repeating and repurposing fragments of other texts.”^[xvii] Writing should be an “inspired act of authorship”, triggering the “modular form to emerge.”^[xviii] Drawing on Peter Osborne’s ideas that fragments are “negative in relation to the absent whole,”^[xix] Marczewska attends to the subtle differences between the module and the fragment:

A fragment implies disparity, assumes lack of cohesion and completeness [...] A fragmentary text is stylistically ambiguous and mutable, whereas a modular text is marked by a stylistic cohesion. A

fragment deconstructs, while a module constructs a work. Module, then, is the opposite of the fragment; it is that which does not break the consistency and unity of the whole but rather, by means of organization and arrangement, creates a new totality: a new totality of an exhibition or literary work.^[xx]

Marczewska concludes that a module is an “architectural building block...always contingent on other modules.”^[xxi] Relying heavily on invention and experimentation, it is the act of curating literature, she writes, that “transforms the fragment into a module” and that “emergence of the modular form of writing develops as contingent on curatorial thinking.”^[xxii] This nuanced conceptualization of the choices the writer-as-curator makes in the act of assemblage offers an interdisciplinary writer an exegetical framework for their praxis. This tension between fragment and module also troubles the paradigm; it creates traction for a third space, an organic space where multiple channels of experimentation can emerge.

The poems in this anthology most clearly demonstrating patterns of modular thinking are McCarey’s ‘CYPRESSUS EX PLATANO VENIENS A LYBANO EST INCLINATA DEITAS UT RESPIRET HUMANITAS’^[xxiii] [a later version retitled as ‘Chemin de la rirole’] and Kinloch’s ‘Mamapoules.’^[xxiv] In McCarey’s poem building blocks are light theory: “A particle ploughs silver bromide emulsion, silver precipitate, negative light [...] neutrinos slant through gaists and houlets,” mixed with ecological concerns, “crash in thickets of photosynthesis.” He blends atmospheric physics – “a sandstorm rises and is towed offshore by the north wind” with philosophical concerns “Maybe in the Confucian sense / where an old man is a wise man / out in the storm is braving chaos / with neither umbrella nor ideology?”— focusing in the final lines on human experience: “I’ll still be walking through the wet to your door. To you.” Here physics is simply the language that allows McCarey to describe the imperceptible mechanics operating at a molecular level at every level of engagement: the ‘science’ is implicit in its thinking, in the under-wiring of the poem. Kinloch’s ‘Mamapoules’ demonstrates a similar mastery, by blending marine biology with immunological simile: “With a virus, shapely and complex / As the reef that built this island?” The geo-political – “Now the master race on holiday / Can’t understand it own tongue / Talking back to it:” – fuses with the biomedical – “Genes of sound encoding” – and both are weft into a narrative of holiday-making in the Caribbean, resolving in an image of the refraction of light upon the body in water, a simile for the shattering of the English tongue. Neither poem is self-congratulatory; the reader doesn’t feel defeated by the appearance of an overly contextual text boasting an identifiable lexicon. In both cases, the science is not fragmented; inspired acts of authorship have taken place. Supporting Marczewska’s modular form of curatorial thinking, I would argue that before curating has occurred science and its lexica have been understood, meditated on, mulled over. The poems feel like more than an experiment in assemblage, more than a casual re-purposing of information borrowed from another discourse, more than a collaged text thrown together, where meaning is abandoned in favour of the aesthetic. Instead these extrapolations underpin the interconnectedness of human experience alongside the natural world, and I am reminded of Edwin Morgan’s mixing of Darwinian theories of evolution, geology, palaeontology and philosophy in ‘The Archaeopteryx’s Song’.



Extending the theme of human experience, Price's poem 'An Informationist's kitchen'^[xxv] plays with the idea of the dissemination of information by naming Italian publisher Aldus Manutius, bringing to the foreground the weight of hundreds of years of publishing and offsetting the authority of printing histories against the modern, low-tech, playful fridge magnets as method of communication. The poem verges on instructional, locating the reader in a familiar domestic scene. The washing machine is spinning, as the world does, associated commodities present news bulletins "Non-fast Coloureds. / Delicates is pornography, / Whites, Heavy Soiled, / is the news." The cat, desensitized by such news, finds a warm place to sleep. The reader experiences a panoramic tour of a kitchen, moving at a considerable pace past each appliance, shelf and bowl as a comfortable passenger, until we reach the lines "do you remember every sink / you've washed dishes in, / how home is in the time / the basin takes to fill". There is a palpable change of tone, the rhythm slows down, the poet blends the philosophical with the quantum, catapulting us back in time. This sudden illumination of time as a conceptual phenomenon, as a measurable construct, urges us to engage with those ephemeral domestic moments as we wait for a bowl to fill. The memory of the family is suspended in that moment of domesticity; you can hear it in the washing of the "crocks", in the song the mother sings, in the music of the house. Price uses a second person pronoun, inviting the reader to revisit their own past kitchens, and yet the specificity of the song title "Love is a many splendored thing" keeps the reader rooted in this specific kitchen. The poet can't foretell the end of that domestic situation, but he can tap into that moment every time he fills a basin of water. The message is: you can never leave the kitchen, you are imprinted in its structure, in a dimension of time, no matter how briefly you inhabited the space.

Pleasure is another marked feature in the anthology, and is a distinctive trademark of the Informationists. More serious, political work is interrupted by ludic play, and there is a rich strand of humour, of praise poetry, in their work. The deployment of comedy and the destabilization of information brings to mind the work of the contemporary poet, Jeff Hilson. In Hilson's poetry we find a similar alignment with the engagement and appropriation of information, a playfulness, a crack in the sobriety, a liberation from the seriousness of the source text. Stephen Thomson writes of Hilson's *stretchers* ^[xxvi] "In the mix are curiosities culled from botany, ornithology, history,

architecture [...]. The verse flits from one to the other, veering in the process from one register to another, from silly to doleful to naive to lewd [...] registers bleed into each other, or can leap suddenly out of each other.”^[xxvii] Writing on *Bird Bird*, ^[xxviii] Peter Jaeger comments that the language is “a site for the eruption of non-sense [...]. The point is not to track down the source for every intertext and unlock the poem’s gestalt meaning, but to witness the entropic slipping away of meaning.”^[xxix] It is precisely the loss of meaning that contributes to the comedic effect: the impact of rare associations and unexpected linguistic registers that fire the neurons.

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Literary critic Gillian Beer elucidated some of the perceptual implications of borrowing lexicon: “As soon as terms get outside the interactive eyes of co-workers, unregarded senses loom up [...]”^[xxx] The notion of senses *looming up*, responding to circumstance, terminology and subject matter brings to mind theories of consciousness, phenomenological perception, and modern philosophical accounts of experience that reflect on the neurological. The poet engaging with another discipline is travelling without physically moving, absorbing language, dismantling the existing structures of knowledge to construct what Joan Retallack coined “reciprocal alterity.”^[xxxi] When the poem is disjunctive and reassembled into abstract models, the perceptive mind advances in an undetermined direction. Hilson’s *stretchers*, according to Stephen Thomson, “is interested in the parts of official languages that threaten to uncouple them from their propositional moorings, and lead them to stray. Hilson’s little phrases, coming from here, there and everywhere, remain quite lost.”^[xxxii] Conversely, the poems in *Contraflow* do not lose meaning; they are anchored by complex emotional or aesthetic influences, finely tuned re-imaginings.

The material contained in this anthology is consumable yet challenging; its mastery triggers a notion of an underlying guidance or direction. The poets are often responsible for providing the channel of meaning, but that meaning doesn’t exclude abstraction, linguistic play and innovation. A reader is left with a reaffirmation that research, meditation and metaphor remain key components in modern poetic practice. The philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty, writing on the philosophy of human action and expression, suggested that “Man, as a creature of needs caught in the non-sense, the frustrations, of a given society, must force these contradictions into the light until they become unbearable and must then transcend them in some new, temporary resolution.”^[xxxiii] The poems in this anthology are indeed temporary resolutions, parallel worlds, reconstructions, unchained from their sources, and forced into the light. From one angle, the poets can be seen examining the intersection between data and information, aware of how information ties into notions of power, and is ultimately available for manipulation. But from another angle, the writers are curators, taking “aesthetic pleasure” in “verbal diplomacy”^[xxxiv] as they construct new models and modules of perception, making sense of the nonsense of embodied living.

Notes:

[i] Herbert, W.N. and Price, R. *Contraflow on the Super Highway*, (Southfields Press and Gairfish, London, 1994). p. i.

[ii] *Ibid* p. vii.

[iii] *Ibid*. p. xi.

[iv] Lehane, D and Cleghorn, E. *Litmus: the neurological issue* (Litmus Publishing, Kent, 2014).

[v] Herbert, W.N. and Price, R. *Contraflow on the Super Highway*, (Southfields Press and Gairfish, London, 1994). p. 53.

[vi] Ibid. p. vi.

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[vii] Price, R. "Richard Price Explains Informationism" <http://carcanetblog.blogspot.co.uk/2012/11/richard-price-explains-informationism.html> [accessed 29th December 2014].

[viii] Herbert, W.N. and Price, R. *Contraflow on the Super Highway*, (Southfields Press and Gairfish, London, 1994). p. i.

[ix] Ibid. p. 45.

[x] Ibid. p. 12.

[xi] Ibid. p. 6.

[xii] Ibid. p. xiv.

[xiii] Middleton, P. "Strips: Scientific Language in Poetry." *Textual Practice*, (Routledge, Oxford, 2009) 23, (6), 947-958.

[xiv] Jarvis, S. (2002) "Quality and the non-identical in J.H.Prynne's 'Aristeas, in seven years'" in *Jacket 20* Online: Available from: [<http://jacketmagazine.com/20/pt-jarvis.html>] [Accessed 10th January 2014]

[xv] Riach, R. *Hugh MacDiarmid's Epic Poetry* (Edinburgh University Press, 1991) p. 159.

[xvi] Ibid. p. 52.

[xvii] Marczevska, K. "Modular form as a curatorial practice" *Journal of Writing in Creative Practice*, (Intellect, Bristol, 2014) Vol 7. No. 5 p. 123.

[xviii] Ibid. p. 132.

[xix] Ibid. p. 133.

[xx] Ibid.

[xxi] Ibid. p. 134.

[xxii] Ibid.

[xxiii] Herbert, W.N. and Price, R. *Contraflow on the Super Highway*, (Southfields Press and Gairfish, London, 1994). p. 25.

[xxiv] Ibid.

[xxv] Ibid. p. 34.

[xxvi] Hilson, J. *stretchers*, (Hastings: Reality Street Editions, 2006).

[xxvii] Thomson S. "The Forlorn Ear of Jeff Hilson" ed. Purves, R. & Ladkin, S. *Complicities: British Poetry 1945-2007*, Prague: Litteraria Pragensia 2007).

[xxviii] Hilson, J. *Bird Bird*, (Norwich: Landfill Press, 2009).

[xxix] Jaeger, P. "‘I am something nonne’ Jeff Hilson’s Nature Writing" *Journal of British and Irish Innovative Poetry*, (Gylphi Limited, Canterbury, 2010). p. 128.

[xxx] Beer, G. *Open Fields*, (Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1996). p. 184.

[xxxi] Adair, G. (Panel Editor/Convener) "Metaphor or more" <http://jacket2.org/interviews/metaphor-or-more> (accessed 28 December 2014).

[xxxii] Thomson, S. "The Forlorn Ear of Jeff Hilson" ed. Purves, R. & Ladkin, S. *Complicities: British Poetry 1945-2007*, (Prague: Litteraria Pragensia 2007) *Complicities: British Poetry 1945-2007*

[xxxiii] Merleau-Ponty, M. *Sense and Non-Sense* Trans. editors Dreyfus, H.L. & Dreyfus, P.A. (Illinois, Northwestern University Press, 1964). p. xix.

[xxxiv] Herbert, W.N. and Price, R. *Contraflow on the Super Highway*, (Southfields Press and Gairfish, London, 1994). p. xiv.
