

Book Review

Sensation, Contemporary Poetry and Deleuze

by Jon Clay

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OBSCURITY, RESISTANCE, DIFFICULTY: what does it mean to describe a text—specifically a literary text—in such terms? And is such a description necessarily pejorative or can there be productive kinds of obscurity, resistance and difficulty?

These questions are not new to the study of modernist poetry. Difficulty might be described as its *sine qua non* as well as its most controversial aspect: for T.S. Eliot, a modern poem had to be a difficult poem if it was to be meaningfully modern; for Philip Larkin, British modernism's *bête noire*, such an insistence was an abnegation of the artist's 'responsibility' to his or her audience. Jon Clay frames this schism in terms of an opposition between 'innovative' and 'representationalist' poetry, arguing that the former, by virtue of being 'substantively new', will often be difficult since it is an 'encounter [that] will be in some part unique. With representationalist poetry the world always remains the same.'¹ His book focuses primarily on innovative British poetry of the last fifty years, with a broadly 'Cambridge' feel to it: J.H. Prynne, Denise Riley, Douglas Oliver, John Wilkinson, Andrea Brady and Keston Sutherland are among those poets considered.

Clay develops the concept of poetry as an encounter with a 'block of sensation' from Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's *A Thousand Plateaus*. His introduction states that his book 'might be considered a Deleuzian text', which could sound daunting given Deleuze's own reputation for difficulty. Instead, Clay's writing moves insistently towards lucidity rather than opacity, which in

itself is a valuable contribution to our understanding and application of Deleuzian thought to aesthetics.² As Gary Gutting has recently argued, if the kind of radical thought evinced by Deleuze 'is to shed light on old problems, it has to be properly connected to concepts in which those problems have been formulated—even if its ultimate contribution is to argue for a radical revision of how we think about the problem.'³ Clay does an excellent job of substantiating what the implications of Deleuzian thought might be for readers of contemporary innovative British poetry: it is Clay's great achievement to have written about two such 'difficult' discourses in a way that leaves the reader with an augmented sense of possible approaches to both. His close readings are at times extraordinarily deft, allowing the theory to speak to the poetry without interrupting the latter's 'dance' of syllables.⁴

Clay draws on a number of twinned concepts from Deleuze to establish firstly what makes innovative poetry innovative and secondly how Deleuzian thinking might help us to encounter these texts more intensely. He identifies the process of de-territorialisation, which Deleuze outlines with Guattari in *A Thousand Plateaus*, as broadly synonymous with innovative practices, in contrast with re-territorialisation, which is linked with representationalist poetics that are ultimately rooted in those 'reified territories that are axiomatic to capitalist stability: for example, the discrete and respectable bourgeois subject or a dominant and conformist abstract morality.'⁵ In Clay's account, de-territorialisation is synonymous with *ostranenie*, effecting a dislocation within the reader that 'does not just affect their perception of whatever the poem *refers* to, [...but] rather [effects] a change in readers themselves, which might be produced *through*, among other things, a defamiliarization of their habitual perception.'⁶

Such a defamiliarization is worked through a series of 'post formal elements' which Clay extrapolates from Deleuze to suggest a poetics of sensation rather than representation. Key to this is the idea that 'sensation is also an excess of signification':⁷ signification is taken here as essentially representationalist, wherein it is limited to the signs to which it refers; that which exceeds this limit is sensation, which Clay argues is instigated by such Deleuzian post formal elements as 'affect' and 'percept'. These effects are not so much embedded in the text as generated in its slips and lapses: affects are 'no longer feelings or affectations; they go beyond the strength of those who undergo them'; Clay gives the example of poetic stress as a percept, that is, something 'related to (although it is, in fact, not) perception'.⁸ Neither affect nor percept exists *a priori* to the text: rather, they exceed the poem's formal elements. They are generated in the course of the reader's encounter with the text. Again, the emphasis is on *encounter* rather than *recognition* as the basic premise of aesthetic experience.

A consequence of the insistence on encounter is an understanding of the text as essentially autotelic, defined by its own terms. But Clay explicitly distances himself from the hierophancy associated with the mid-century New Criticism that shared this belief in the autonomous work of art, stating that he rejects 'entirely the role of the priest-critic.'⁹ 'There are meanings here,' writes Clay, 'or references, but there is no *meaning*, which is to say overall representation; there is no higher order before which the poem effaces itself.'¹⁰

This places his account of innovative poetry at a slight tangent from extant accounts such as that offered by Anthony Mellors in *Late Modernist Poetics*, which insists that '[t]he overdetermined, schizoid poetic text allows access to a form of knowledge which, in disorienting the *heimlich* sense of selfhood, somehow discloses a hidden order of reality composed of "larger spiritual bodies".¹¹ For Clay, there is no order of reality beyond that of the poetic text itself. At this juncture, the terms on which this textual autonomy is predicated might be revisited: are there other kinds of sensation at play when we encounter innovative texts? What about the text's physical appearance, or the manner of its distribution? Many of the texts Clay discusses were first printed in little magazines and by small presses and made available away from commercial markets. Might there be a case to argue for a kind of institutional sensation too? This seems to be something Clay gestures towards in his discussion of Keston Sutherland's 'Song of the Wanking Iraqi', which first appeared in a special edition of Sutherland's magazine *Quid* that gathered together poetic responses to the images of prisoner abuse by American forces in Iraq:

The violence and sexual abuse refer (in conjunction with, at least, the title and the poem's original context insofar as the poem appears in a magazine the theme of which is Iraq and Abu Ghraib) to (but do not represent) Abu Ghraib for a reader with a certain cultural, political or historical knowledge.¹²

This kind of reference that exceeds representation is congruent with the post-formal elements discussed above but cannot be described simply in terms of our encounter with the text *qua* text: all texts become manifest in a range of textualities (economic, physical and typographic, for example) that exist independently from the kinds of purely textual signification to which Clay refers in this book. Which is not to suggest that an entirely different approach needs to be taken, or that literary criticism should be limited to a descriptive sociology of texts: there is space for such an account to be accommodated within the terms on which Clay's thesis is predicated, and this will form one of the 'interesting responses' that Clay hopes his book will elicit.¹³

Sensation, Contemporary Poetry and Deleuze is an original and innovative account of an important and too-often-overlooked tradition of post-war British poetry, and the reader takes from it a sense of how 'difficult' texts might be productively approached; that is, by encountering, rather than trying to excise, that which is most resistant to our immediate apprehension.

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- ¹ Jon Clay, *Sensation, Contemporary Poetry and Deleuze* (London: Continuum, 2010), p. 34.
- ² Jon Clay, *Sensation, Contemporary Poetry and Deleuze*, p. 6.
- ³ Gary Gutting, *Thinking the Impossible: French Philosophy Since 1960* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), p. 201.
- ⁴ Charles Olson, 'Projective Verse', *Collected Prose*, ed. by Donald Allen and Benjamin Friedlander (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997) 239-249 (p. 239).
- ⁵ Jon Clay, *Sensation, Contemporary Poetry and Deleuze*, p. 48.
- ⁶ Jon Clay, *Sensation, Contemporary Poetry and Deleuze*, p. 49.
- ⁷ Jon Clay, *Sensation, Contemporary Poetry and Deleuze*, p. 50.
- ⁸ Jon Clay, *Sensation, Contemporary Poetry and Deleuze*, p. 53.
- ⁹ Jon Clay, *Sensation, Contemporary Poetry and Deleuze*, p. 20.
- ¹⁰ Jon Clay, *Sensation, Contemporary Poetry and Deleuze*, p. 21.
- ¹¹ Anthony Mellors, *Late Modernist Poetics: From Prynne to Pound* (Manchester: Manchester University Press), p. 197.
- ¹² Jon Clay, *Sensation, Contemporary Poetry and Deleuze*, p. 175.
- ¹³ Jon Clay, *Sensation, Contemporary Poetry and Deleuze*, p. 11.