

## BIROn - Birkbeck Institutional Research Online

Brooker, Joseph (2014) An oblique blaze in things. *Critical Quarterly* 56 (2), pp. 26-40. ISSN 0011-1562.

Downloaded from: <https://eprints.bbk.ac.uk/id/eprint/12494/>

*Usage Guidelines:*

Please refer to usage guidelines at <https://eprints.bbk.ac.uk/policies.html> or alternatively contact [lib-eprints@bbk.ac.uk](mailto:lib-eprints@bbk.ac.uk).

# An Oblique Blaze in Things

Joseph Brooker

Like the language of literature, critical language is composed of different voices, registers, points of view, figures of speech, forms of dramatization, rhythm, style and so on and is finally not to be distinguished from literary language as such.<sup>1</sup>

Steven Connor wrote those words, but did not altogether mean them. He was outlining the rationale for ‘creative’ forms of criticism that had blossomed by the late 1980s: a rationale he faithfully paraphrased, but from which he retained a cautious distance. Even as his own writing has unfolded new modes of daring and surprise in the quarter-century since, he has scarcely entertained the honorific title of ‘creative’ critic, or hinted that he would confuse his own prose with ‘literary language as such’. It is among Connor’s virtues that he remains so profoundly a scholar, too immersed in the archive to fancy himself a less transitive ‘writer’, too burdened with matter to traffic in empty form. Yet his writing has become distinctive, or indeed unique. Its traits and techniques are inseparable from the effect and worth of his work.

This essay asks, therefore, what happens in Connor’s writing. The answer comes in two stages. First I will identify certain characteristic stylistic features across several texts that Connor has written. Second, I want to draw back slightly and propose four significant intellectual manoeuvres that his work displays.

## Tactics

Steven Connor has written a great deal. Numerous major works will be left unquoted by this analysis; in fact the majority of my evidence will come from his many occasional essays. But where to start? Picked almost at random, the 2011 lecture ‘Public Intellectuals and Public Intelligence’ presents one apt starting point: for it quotes no one, and thus presents us with undiluted Connor.<sup>2</sup> I will begin here to spell out certain features of his writing, and in doing so I will start to move across other texts, seeking to show how these features are recurrent across his work. The recurrent is what is relevant here, by one of Connor’s own arguments: ‘Only that can happen that has happened twice: that has occurred, and then recurred, in the registering of what it can then be seen to have been.’<sup>3</sup>

*Precision* is a term so general that it might lack much precision. But some form of this quality is a major element of Connor’s writing. Consider these sentences:

We mean by an intellectual somebody who is believed, or believes themselves, to have a special vocation, warrant and responsibility for the forming of ideas and arguments. An intellectual is thought to be, or, by some, thought to be meant to be, somebody who has both more distance from contemporary affairs than others, and greater expansiveness of view. ('Public' 2)

Connor's definitions aspire to the exactness of a work of reference. 'Is believed' will not do: he needs to add the additional possibility 'or believes themselves'. This extra option might seem already contained in the more capacious 'is believed'. Connor must, then, be intuiting some slight difference between the two: perhaps the difference is the hint of delusive grandeur in 'or believes themselves', in which case this neutral ground-clearing exercise is not quite so neutral. A sequence of options – 'a special vocation, warrant and responsibility' – covers the ground and closes gaps, before the striking clarification 'An intellectual is thought to be, or, by some, thought to be meant to be'. Would 'thought to be' not suffice? It appears to need another turn of the spanner. 'Thought to be *meant to be*' introduces another layer of distance: it places us at two removes from the ultimate object, which is subtly appropriate to an essay which tends to diminish and undercut that object. Meanwhile the addition has introduced four commas to the middle of a sentence which could otherwise have managed with none: 'thought to be, or, by some, thought to be meant to be'. This proliferation is a sign of the determined exactness in question here. The pauses the commas introduce after such brief sequences of words work as a display of finicky precision, as though this virtue is being openly prized over any other aim like sheer syntactic flow.

The single most defining characteristic of Connor's writing may be, put in negative terms, an aversion to *imprecision*: a refusal to be caught making any utterance that could be dismissed for its slack inattentiveness. The impulse is manifest in the most inconspicuous marshallings of words. Thus in 'Beckett's Low Church' (2007), 'Beckett has become a centrepiece of attempts to recapture for religion or render as religious the experience of religious doubt, or doubts about religion'.<sup>4</sup> Here both the action ('recapture for religion') and its object ('religious doubt') are doubled. In both cases, apparently, the first term proposed turns out not quite to be watertight as the best label for what is in question, and immediately takes the cover of a second. It feels as though two terms are better than one, for plugging any gaps in the sentence's command of the situation.

In 'Collective Emotions: Reasons to Feel Doubtful' (2013), another inflection of this will to precision is powerfully on show. A typical enough sentence is: 'Collective subjects, by contrast, can never *not* feel the things they seem to feel, because they can never really feel them, and they can never really feel them because there is nothing left over from the feeling that is attributed to them'.<sup>5</sup> Here the action does not involve equivocating over option and nuance, as in the Beckett sentence above, but rather a dramatic densification of thought. Collective subjects, we read, are unable

not to do something because they are also unable to do it – the sentence is already becoming crowded with echoes. And they are unable to do it (a repetition of the last point which makes for a chiasmus at the centre of the sentence) because – actually, Connor is arguing, because they do not exist, which means that the subject of the sentence is being erased even as it is being elaborated in its final stretch. In this essay, to a more heightened degree than usual, Connor's polemic functions through abstract analytical reasoning. The repetition of phrases, within and across sentences, reflects this mode. But the style also becomes a display of the very ability to hold these complex terms in mind across syntactic distance.

A term I have not yet dared use hovers around these examples. They hint at pedantry. The word seems relevant, if absolved of its usual pejorative connotations. When Connor produces a line like 'The only kind of now there can be is one that depends on being able to be reported in a future ("tell him you saw me") that thereby deports the now from itself into that future' ('Time' 2), he is taking on or mimicking the pedantic mantle of the philosopher; but as a writer so attuned to words' work, he is also attaching himself to a tradition of *literary* pedantry, in which (not at all coincidentally) Joyce and Beckett (who is quoted in the middle of the sentence) are foremost.<sup>6</sup> We are still dealing with precision, but it is not the Hemingwayan sub-precision of the bare fact, but the elaborate semantic gambit that tries, as though for a wager, to hold its intellectual complexity together in a form that is lengthy enough to be hard to complete correctly, yet still in fact very compact (the sentence has no real superfluous word, save the parenthetical quotation). Exactness of thought and expression is an obligation, for Connor, but one that he comes to find himself able to sport with.

At the same time, his writing is distinguished by a penchant for *colloquialism*. Homely turns of phrase are legion across the later prose. In the short talk 'A Time for Such a Word', he ventures a brief barrage: 'It's double or quits with history; things must happen at least twice, or not at all. What goes around comes around, and it can't get going until it has come back' ('Time' 1). We might imagine the author settling into (and settling for) a phrase like 'what goes around comes around', finding the old saw falling to hand as he ponders the theme of return. In a sense the cliché is a placeholder, a readymade phrase to keep the writing going. At the same time it is enlivening: curiously, though clichés should be soporific, its arrival alters the texture and its briskness keeps the reader alert. And there is always, for a Beckettian, the prospect that the verbal readymade could hold an intellectual clue; reread or rewritten, a cliché might divulge a thought we did not quite know we had.

Even very small phrases count in this category. Consider Connor's observation that 'Public intellectualism is not something you could easily just go in for, even if you wanted to' ('Public' 6). 'Go in for' is a wilfully rough-and-ready verbal phrase, which Connor has gone for instead of such alternatives as 'choose to do' or 'elect to perform'. It makes a textural shift from the formal register that those terms would maintain. In a sense it simply lowers the tone. So, in fact, does the extrapolated noun phrase 'public intellectualism', which takes the desired dignity

and importance of the ‘public intellectual’ and pushes it two syllables too far. ‘Public intellectualism’ seems a term that only an autodidactically aspirational character in a situation comedy, a *Hancock* or *Steptoe and Son*, might use with an earnest face. This shading (or lightening) of the sentence thus has its rhetorical effect. This essay is largely an attack on the idea of the public intellectual; the overblown expansion of the term makes a mockery of it, while the loose colloquialism ‘go in for’ removes some of the dignity it might want to be afforded.

Consider likewise the end of this sentence:

But we really must mean something more than this, for there are plenty of people who similarly devote themselves to such tasks and diversions – accountants, consultants, architects, engineers, teachers, proof-readers, computer programmers; indeed, viewed in this way, there seem, at least in our part of the world, to be a sizeable majority of people earning their livings in what have to be called intellectual occupations over butchers, bakers or candlestick-makers. (‘Public’ 1-2)

A predictable end to the sentence might have been ‘those engaged in manual labour’. Connor has eschewed this in order to say something more colourful. The colour comes from a nursery rhyme, ‘Rub-a-dub-dub’, from the late eighteenth century, in whose lyrics the three artisans are found in a tub. This origin need not really be in the reader’s mind at all for the phrase to have its effect: it has become relatively detached from the rhyme to become a free-floating tag suggesting an assortment of trades. In the present context it brings a curious specificity that ‘manual labourers’ would not; in fact to anyone who did not have the trace of the rhyme in their head, it might seem like a somewhat arbitrary, but helpfully indicative list of the sorts of professions Connor has in mind. The specificity may be deliberately intended to answer the specific contemporary professions listed earlier in the sentence: perhaps the labour of compiling that list put the author in mind of this older one that oddly foreshadows it.

The fragment of rhyme feels very English: it localizes the text or its implied author. In fact Connor’s previous paragraph was precisely about Englishness, and affiliated its author with the declaration that ‘We live in a country’ which is suspicious of the intellect (‘Public’ 1, my emphasis). Connor’s invocation of the three trades does not align him with this native anti-intellectualism, but it does mark him as a native. The colour is local colour. More than this, the invocation of the rhyme introduces a note of child’s play into Connor’s text. Even as the theme is the solidity of a (now diminished) world of manual labour, this world is rendered to us via a rather fantastical image. The whimsy of the reference actually conveys the disappearance of Britain’s manufacturing base, more strongly than a more solemn phrase or list (‘bricklayers, steelworkers and workers on car assembly lines’) would do. That solid world, it is subtly implied, has melted into this ‘intellectualized’ era in which it has the reality of a nursery rhyme.

Plainly, the idiom just considered borders closely on the comic. To talk of comedy in Connor's work is to broach a topic that almost covers the entire field, so deeply imbued is his writing with a complex comic intelligence. There is something unmistakably light-hearted about the sentence quoted earlier: 'What goes around comes around, and it can't get going until it has come back'. Connor sometimes uses the term 'jingle' to suggest the ring of a recurrent phrase in critical theory (he can even hear a 'Lacanian jingle' ['Collective' 10]). His sentence here also jingles – with familiarity, with jaunty rhythm ('jingle' and 'jaunty' are connected, after all, by their repeated conjunction in the 'Sirens' episode of *Ulysses*, which Connor has declared his favourite novel). Distinctly from this whizzing lightness, though, we should also register in passing a more specific category, the deliberate throwaway line. Hence the parenthesis here: 'Foucault and Lyotard assumed that intellectuals should eschew the role of universal intellectuals, intellectuals assumed to be and accredited as the embodiment of humanity, or at least the nation (in France it still seemed to come as news to some in the 1970s that sometimes this might not be the same thing)' ('Public' 2). The clause echoes one of the earliest such moments in Connor's writing, when in *Postmodernist Culture* he paraphrases Jean Baudrillard's ecstatic vision of contemporary driving, then inserts the sentence: '(Baudrillard ought to try driving in my car through London traffic some time.)' (PMC 169) This earlier jab is rather mild, though in context it secures its effect through contrast with the respectful and serious prose around it. The echo in late Connor is clear, as once again the English voice deflates a self-inflatingly rhapsodic Gallic vision. Both times this is performed within brackets: in effect their contents become a theatrical aside, a mocking mutter that we might imagine as inaudible to the solemn audience the other side of the parenthesis. The tactic is visible yet again in Connor's guide to the Badiouian 'event': 'you need to think of something that you can't possibly think of, an exercise that would tax the capacities even of the White Queen' ('Church' 11). The remark is not tucked between parentheses, but Connor's exasperation is given subtly comic voice through the sudden speeding-up of the prose (the mere shift to the abbreviation 'can't' is a telling tonal move, echoed again in the following sentence) and the allusion to a well-known figure from the whimsical branch of English literary history. (It is harder to imagine executing such a put-down via reference to Flaubert or Mallarmé.)

To our survey so far we must add certain varieties of *heightened* language. One variety is the relatively obscure word. Obscurity is relative, and one reader's arcana is another's everyday idiom. But some words are less widely used than others. Connor likes these. Afflatus (inspiration: 'Public' 3); diplopia (double vision: 'Time' 2), apotropaic (a 'deflecting' brand of magic: 'Time' 3), anamorphically,<sup>7</sup> coenesthetically,<sup>8</sup> rodenticidal<sup>9</sup>: these terms tend toward the technical. 'Blent' ('Collective' 11, and used elsewhere in writing on air) is an archaism that has probably stayed with Connor from the 'blent air' in Philip Larkin's 'Church Going'. 'Ague-proof' is more than once borrowed from King Lear. Cumulatively, this diction

suggests an intimacy with the *OED*, and makes the work's intelligence seem enriched by disciplinary or historical reach.

Such word-weaving suggests Connor's penchant for etymology, as to employ a recondite word will tend to prompt reflection on its properties and history more often than will the recycling of a regular one. Thus Connor writes that 'the present is always projective, time drawn like a bow by tendency or intention (*tendere* means just this, the bending of a bow)' – a link that inspires him as far as an echo of Larkin's 'Whitsun Weddings' ('Time' 2).<sup>10</sup> The word 'world', he informs us, has Germanic roots meaning 'man' and 'age', which offer to reorient the word as a temporal rather than spatial idea.<sup>11</sup> Elsewhere the thought of belief prompts him to dissect the concept, at once intellectually and semantically. By the time Connor has spent two or three paragraphs on the word, with its history of 'believing on' and 'believing in' and its etymological kinship with 'love', it seems harder to be sure what it would involve to believe in anything. With enthusiastic nimety he throws in an etymology of the 'discourse' – 'in the literal sense of a running back and forth – *dis-currere*' – which further troubles belief ('Church' 5-6). The effect of etymology is partly to historicize a word, to suggest depths within it or a past through which it has travelled. It also tends to open up English as we know it to other languages, primarily Latin, rendering something cosmopolitan and challengingly foreign in our words. Most significantly, it discloses shades of meaning, or emphasizes the meaning behind a meaning. What a word means to us is not reducible to its etymology, but might be increasable by it.

When etymological learning is tied to a creative spirit, neologism is their logical issue. Perhaps the first neologism committed to print by Steven Connor is *perclusion*, a 'pervading inclusiveness' identified in the opening chapter of *Postmodernist Culture* (PMC 19). He immediately adds a parenthesis to confess to 'surrendering to the urge to neologism' as a characteristic postmodern rhetorical form. Connorian neologism is thus inaugurated alongside a perceptive analysis of the will to neologise. 'Perclusion' has a small-print endnote cameo at the very edge of Connor's next book *Theory and Cultural Value*; but the apologetic tone will eventually be discarded.<sup>12</sup> Early to mid-period Connor politely offers useful new terms, like 'mimetic automatism' in *James Joyce*.<sup>13</sup> But the later Connor coins new words as though they were going out of fashion, as they quickly seem to do. Noticing a 'contemporary oscillation between obese exorbitance and anorexic emaciation', he reckons that we might call it 'anorbesity'.<sup>14</sup> Reflecting on Murray Schafer's not widely familiar coinage for disembodied voices, 'schizophonia', he rapidly concludes that the word is already out of date, displaced by his own 'panophonia' – though he modestly insists that the new word 'must surely [...] have occurred to many others'.<sup>15</sup> Thinking about the roots of the present, he throws out a new word for 'nowness' – *nunciance* – but barely bothers to justify it by using it again in this brief piece ('Time' 2). He seems more committed to a word for the merging of a sensation with a substance that we have come to associate with it, offering this time a glimpse inside the neologistic workshop: 'I want to propose that we

encounter these qualities as hybrid “sensation-substances”. I’m not crazy on the toy-train coupling of this phrase, but, alas, “substation” has been claimed for other work, so perhaps “senstance” can be made to earn its keep<sup>16</sup>. In a parody of his own lexical largesse, Connor glosses Gertrude Stein’s declaration of Oakland’s having ‘no there there’ with ‘anibidity, a word which I hope I have just made up, and for which I suspect I am unlikely after today ever to have any further use’.<sup>17</sup>

Neologism’s effect is clearly related to etymology’s: it bespeaks a saturation in words’ wellsprings. It adds an element of creation. The neologism is perhaps the closest that Connor can come to making something clearly new. The finest paragraph might be viewed as reshuffling existing ideas, but the insertion of a virgin word seems to guarantee a level of conceptual distinctness, for the word would surely not have been summoned into being were there not a hitherto unnamed idea or phenomenon in need of it. An analogy might be with the scientist’s identification of a new animal species: it was presumably there all along, but to pick it out and name it seems to add to the world’s stock of entities. Neologism is connected to the restless spirit of the later Connor who has chosen to abjure claims of political responsibility and instead to seek to optimize intellectual possibility. Accordingly, as the examples above show, it is profoundly playful. One does not sense that Connor would go to the last ditch for any of his coinages: he would sooner just mint another. Their newness grants them a relativity, a provisional quality: unused yet by others, they are untried as serious prospects in the marketplace of language. They might well not last beyond the occasional talk in which Connor introduces them, and its quiet archiving online. Yet each one seems in principle viable: a would-be word that could, in theory, belong to the dictionary. The later Connor has often insisted, in Beckettian vein, on limit; but neologism is one way that his writing keeps suggesting that our language is not, or need not be, as limited as we think.

Finally, a category likely to overlap with all we have observed so far, but that might gather what has not been collected: sheer verbal flourish. Consider even this mild case: ‘The phrase “public intellectual” is not a neutral descriptor – it is turgid with desire and frustrated longing’ (*‘Public’* 2). This sentence commences with the definitional smartness reviewed earlier, but its second half lets in, or lets on, a lot more. It is not so much critique as contempt, introduced by the curiously subjective and emotional terms that Connor posits at the heart of what ought to be a more impersonally civic matter. A comparable effect is visible in a nearby acknowledgement of ‘the public intellectual as gadfly, sybil or jeremiah, offering dark warnings or thunderous denunciations’ (*‘Public’* 2), with its multiplication of venerable roles and the melodrama of thunder. Here a touch of verbal excess is producing an atmosphere of irony, at the expense of the suspect concept in question. Connor’s flourishes can be freer and plainer than these. He likes to rhyme. Newspaper decays ‘from the flat into the fat’.<sup>18</sup> (*P* 126). Identifying ‘dativity’ as entities’ ‘being-for each other’, Connor expands: ‘Subject and object have their rise in this dativity, finding in it their nativity’.<sup>19</sup> This sentence has a slight air of superfluity, as though it has only been penned because the rhyme called for it. Sonorities

provoke Connor to linger over terms, producing echoes between them, seeing if this will flick on another bulb of meaning.

But he can go higher than this. ‘Print is bleached, bony monochrome compared to these swirling, shifting, spectral, ancestral striations’: in such an assertion, what is primarily being asserted (the bareness of print, the rich ambiguity of voice) seems transcended, as well as thoroughly conveyed, by the line’s auditory extravagance.<sup>20</sup> (We can bracket the paradox that this sentence about spoken accents only exists in writing – ‘Accidence’ was not written as a talk – and that this piece of writing seems to do more swirling and shifting than many people’s speech.) In a final example, Connor’s brief essay on twilight was perhaps not coincidentally a radio broadcast. Its regular touches of finesse – ‘a strange, faint flaring of the air, an oblique blaze in things’; light ‘aching evenly from every surface’ – rise, as in a firework display, to this punning and alliterative climax: ‘This refractory wryness, or angled Saxon attitude, prizes what pales yet persists, what lingers and lasts out, over the blaring conflagrations of noon’ (*‘Slant’*). Connor has here scaled momentarily to the rarified eyrie of the Nabokovian aesthete, selecting words for sound as well as sense, making phrases to relish their resonance. It feels momentary because, despite its ceaseless intensity and exactitude, his writing rarely climbs quite this path: it is as though he is doing this, for a sentence, just to show us that he can.

## Strategies

The features catalogued above are primarily local textual effects: a matter of word choices and sentences’ shapes. I want now to stand a little further back and name four characteristic movements in Connor’s work that exist as much at the level of idea as of diction or style.

We can head quickly, as though hurrying through a department store to what lies at its rear, through one very prevalent move, *complication*, simply because it is all-pervasive in any worthwhile modern criticism. Connor does inveterately say ‘And yet’, setting up as straightforward an exposition as possible and then trying to undo its self-evidence. From the relentless deconstructions of *Theory and Cultural Value* to the swiftly swerving observations of *Paraphernalia*, the mode is characteristic – but the impulse to refuse the obvious is likewise characteristic of almost any writer of intellectual vim. More proper to Connor, a special display at the far end of complication, is the more wholesale *inversion*. This involves, explicitly or otherwise, confronting an accepted dictum and stating that the opposite is the case. ‘It is sometimes said’, Connor notes, ‘that animals have no past or future, but only an ongoing, unconscious now’. He thus naturally says otherwise: ‘But the truth seems to be in fact that animals can be nothing but their past and their future, since what is missing from their experience is precisely the experience of a now’ (*‘Time’ 1-2*). Against the idea that we should concentrate to think better about something, he asserts that we should drift off.<sup>21</sup> In fifty years of Beckett criticism, he must be one of

the few to read Beckett in terms of athleticism ('Javelin'). Declaring that the humanities are horrified by number and calculation, Connor cheerfully avows himself a Benthamite who supports the mathematical weighing of goods and pleasures ('Blissed' 6). Citing, in an interview, Wordsworth's lament that 'the world is too much with us', Connor immediately adds 'He's completely wrong. We're too much with ourselves'.<sup>22</sup>

Here is one of Connor's resemblances to Roland Barthes, who also thrived on the refusal of assumptions that he found too commonplace to be interesting.<sup>23</sup> Barthes had been a controversialist, but late in life he could modestly say that his aim was 'To come up underneath conformity, underneath an existing way of thinking, in order to shift it a little'.<sup>24</sup> Connor has enough self-irony to share this modesty, but the explicit form of his challenges to what Barthes dubbed *doxa* is uncompromising. Displaying a contrarian streak, he does not simply invert beliefs: he also makes a point of dismantling the very concepts he has been asked to address. At the seminar on public intellectuals, he opens by saying that 'the idea of the public intellectual is sad, bad and silly' ('Public' 1). His contribution to a series on aesthetics was 'What If There Were No Such Thing as The Aesthetic?': a topic reprise a decade later after causing too little controversy on its first outing.<sup>25</sup> Addressing the history of emotions, which 'seems scarcely operable without the idea of collective emotions', he spends many pages demolishing the possibility of a collective emotion. More than Barthesian playfulness, a certain eloquent aggression is visible here: a tendency to make guerrilla raids into territory and knock out their key installations, or to accept invitations then bite the hand that feeds him.

*Reframing* is a subtler manoeuvre, if anything more typical of earlier Connor. *Postmodernist Culture* was an outstanding work of its kind for its breadth and synthetic power, but in retrospect, at least, what distinguishes it still more is its insistence on reframing its subject. '[In] trying to understand postmodernism and the postmodernism debate', Connor ventures, 'we must look at the form as well as the content of that debate, must try to understand the priorities and questions which it produces as its own mode of self-understanding alongside the questions with which it seems to be dealing' (PMC 5). Postmodernism, then, should not be taken at its own word. Connor bids us attend to how the debate actually functions rather than only to what it appears to be about. (The value of this approach accords well with a suspicion that, as often in academic discourse, what is called a 'debate' is barely worthy of the name, but is more a self-perpetuating set of repeated stances and statements.) Ultimately Connor proposes a new battery of more sceptical questions, which 'shifts attention from the meaning or content of the debate to its form and function, so that, to borrow Stanley Fish's formula, we ask, not what does postmodernism mean?, but, what does it do?' (PMC 10).

A very like strategy is on show at the start of *The English Novel in History 1950 to 1995* (1996), where Connor urges that the question of 'what narrative is' should be joined by the question of 'what narrative [...] does'.<sup>26</sup> Given the invocation of Stanley Fish in the previous case, we can assume that one source for this manoeuvre is

philosophical pragmatism, which became increasingly prominent in Connor's writing through the 1990s, but was evidently seeded there earlier.<sup>27</sup> Connor's pragmatism allies with his utilitarianism. Both allow him to perform a certain obstinate debunking, in the ornery manner of Ezra Pound amid the Georgians. But in the instances cited, the pragmatic move is not so much a bringing down to earth as a clambering to new analytical height. What seems the relevant set of questions is noted, yet also parenthesized as Connor's thought moves up a gear. The pragmatist's reframing of an issue allows Connor to turn his dissatisfaction with an intellectual scenario into a new meta-scenario in which he can disclose the scene's functioning in a new way.

A certain *involution* is among the most profound figures in the fabric of Connor's work, yet is among the hardest to define. It involves his abiding tendency to find things connected to themselves. So Connor paraphrases Durkheim's notion of 'effervescence' as 'the feeling of an excess of feeling, the feeling of feeling pushing beyond its normal limits, the feeling, felt by an excited crowd, precisely of an excitable crowding' ('Collective' 1). In part, what happens here is a textual effect: a poetic gambit which tries to see how far a word can redouble itself. But writing here necessarily also means thinking. Connor seeks a thought composed of mirroring and multiplication, in which the exegesis of a term is achieved not by paraphrase into other words but by recycling the terms of the term itself. This mode can produce a sense of circularity. What might be held in the runaway's handkerchief? It is very characteristic that Connor concludes his list of possibilities with the thought: 'Perhaps a spare handkerchief?' (P 90). If the objects in *Paraphernalia* seem to have a life of their own, he avers, 'it is a life that we give them, and give back to ourselves through them' (P 4). Explicating the operation of prophecy, Connor describes 'a speech act that saith "Lo, I hereby predict that something in what I here say, or will later be taken to have said, will come to seem like a prediction". Or, in short, "I predict that this will one day count as a prediction"' ('Time' 4). This side of Connor's thought is kin to the Escher staircase or Moebius strip: a path that seems to lead purposefully outward brings the traveller back to itself.<sup>28</sup>

Once one has sensed this motif's presence, it seems present everywhere. *James Joyce*, because commissioned in a series called *Writers and their Works*, commences with a meditation on 'the workings of work'. (Noticeable here, and also characteristic, is Connor's fastening on to the easily overlooked words of the commission: an enlarged version of interrogating the terms of an exam question.) A Connorian word is apt thus to turn in on itself, splitting into gerundive forms and like derivations. It is not enough to analyze work: it must be worked through as work's workings. There seems an intuition or superstition here that a word can be most exhaustively, reliably investigated by itself: a semantic homeopathy. It should not surprise us that in an essay on etymology, Connor explores the doubtful etymology of the word 'etymology'.<sup>29</sup> We can compare the circular motion of sentences like 'Postmodernism became the name for the activity of writing about postmodernism', or, more frenetically and somewhat obscurely: 'Sex has come into

its own, because sex wants to be more than sex'.<sup>30</sup> Comparable again, in its way, is Connor's account of the self-replication with which an animal forms its home via its own form: 'The burrow is the dwelling-place that is formed as a container by its content. Many creatures form habitations that are casts of their own bodies. [...] Worms riddle and aerate the ground and the sand of the beach through movements which continuously recreate their own form, which is the form of an elementary passage. A worm churns the earth both by passing through it, and by passing it through itself.'<sup>31</sup> In this last sentence we can observe an inversion, but of a very different kind from the polemical mode surveyed a moment ago. Here the procedure is to find in or beside a phenomenon the inverse of itself.

Perhaps what drives Connor's reflexive instinct is a will to plenitude. Mirrors and echoes are good because two instances are better than one, or, in belt-and-braces fashion, safer than one. His involutions might thus be figured as a bid for harmony, the snug assembly of voices in parallel lending each other support that by contrast leaves a single vocal channel sounding exposed. As we observed in a different context earlier, the prose alertly patrols to close loopholes; at each moment, it wants to leave nothing unsaid or (notwithstanding Connor's Beckettian pedigree) undersaid or missaid. The impulse to replicate, to fold a word into itself and out again, scouring its own corners for meaning; the impulse to echo a thought with its symmetrical reflection: these perhaps bespeak a desire to complete, to make every part of the object of thought communicate with every other part. Connor repeatedly refers to the game of tag in which touching another is a transformative act. His words' desire to touch base with themselves is still more reminiscent of the Tourettic protagonist of Jonathan Lethem's novel *Motherless Brooklyn* (1999), who is compelled to touch others or objects in mathematically symmetrical patterns. Connor's own fascination with fidgeting is a less extreme version of this, instanced in his compulsion to check the location of his wallet and comb (*P* 63-4, 106-7). Half the objects in *Paraphernalia* come briefly to seem like the one meta-object that would carry the code for all others (as with the pin that is a "stem-thing", that is capable of being turned into almost any other thing': *P* 147), but in the present context the presiding image is probably the knot, which holds things together by making different parts of one object touch and fold into each other. It is emblematic of his inveterate impulse to involution that Connor's first announcement about this most inherently involved object is that its two aspects are themselves 'knottily intertwined' (*P* 110).

Against this intuitive ambition, one last motif: the *abnegation* that Connor's work comes to perform. Even *Postmodernist Culture* was sceptically interested in 'critical modesty' and the renunciation of authority (*PMC* 201-23), but it is the later essays that repeatedly insist on limit. Among Connor's intellectual mentors was Terry Eagleton, whose many books for years would close with calls to arms. With Shakespeare or Richardson reread, the reader was primed for the coming revolutionary conjuncture: this caricature scantly exaggerates.<sup>32</sup> To a striking though likely unwitting degree, Connor's abnegation neglects to follow his former

supervisor's lead. Cultural phenomenology itself, probably Connor's best-known single theoretical intervention, was introduced with a disavowal of its wider potential.<sup>33</sup> Ever since, he has scrupulously shunned most dreams that his work might change anything, save at the most personal, local, unpredictable level.

This theme derives in part from pragmatism, as in the assertion that we can only foster 'public intelligence' by 'dribbs and drabs, ruses, resourceful opportunism, by trying to make intelligence more interesting and seductive than dumbness and good luck. Not, I think, by any kind of theoretical programme' ('Public' 6-7). He commenced his career in an age of 'theory', which he learned to deploy as elegantly as anyone; but for the later Connor, theory holds no special power over the world, and the practice that replaces it is haphazard and imperfect. It is partly in reaction to the sleek, unassailable edifices of theory that once dominated the academic landscape that Connor now insists so repeatedly on theory's relative inability to make things happen. The mood is also Beckettian. Specifically, Connor insists that the knowledge of limit is Beckettian, against a too intoxicated theory or theology that would pretend otherwise. Beckett instances a resolve 'to decline any grandiose worlding of the world' ('World' 13), and his 'fundamental worldliness [...] entails a sad, glad giving over of the omnipotence of thought practised by all forms of theology' ('Church' 18). Connor has performed an analogous relinquishment. In a last asymmetry, this astonishingly learned and intricately crafted body of writing, while giving so much away, has learned not to hope for too much in return.

---

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Steven Connor, *Postmodernist Culture: An Introduction to Theories of the Contemporary* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989), 201-2. Subsequent references to this text as *PMC*.

<sup>2</sup> Steven Connor, 'Public Intellectuals and Public Intelligence' (11 April 2011),  
<http://www.stevenconnor.com/publicintellectuals/publicintellectuals.pdf>. Subsequent references to this text as 'Public'.

<sup>3</sup> Steven Connor, 'A Time for Such a Word: On Prophecy and Performance' (4 October 2013),  
<http://www.stevenconnor.com/atimeforsuchaword/atimeforsuchaword.pdf>. Subsequent references to this text as 'Time'.

<sup>4</sup> Steven Connor, 'Beckett's Low Church' (28 September 2007),  
<http://www.stevenconnor.com/lowchurch/lowchurch.pdf>, 4. Subsequent references to this text as 'Church'.

<sup>5</sup> Steven Connor, 'Collective Emotions: Reasons to Feel Doubtful' (9 October 2013),  
<http://www.stevenconnor.com/collective/collective.pdf>, 6-7. Subsequent references to this text as 'Collective'.

<sup>6</sup> The founding text of this reading, which made a strong early impression on Connor, is Hugh Kenner, *The Stoic Comedians: Flaubert, Joyce and Beckett* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: California UP, 1962).

<sup>7</sup> Steven Connor, 'A Certain Slant of Light' (31 October 2013), <http://www.stevenconnor.com/twilight/>. Subsequent references to 'Slant'.

<sup>8</sup> Steven Connor, '"My Fortieth Year Had Come and Gone and I Still Throwing the Javelin": Beckett's Athletics',  
<http://www.stevenconnor.com/athletics/Beckett'sAthletics.pdf>, 6. Subsequent references to 'Javelin'.

<sup>9</sup> Steven Connor, 'Rustications: Animals in the Urban Mix' (10 July 2013),  
<http://www.stevenconnor.com/rustications/rustications.pdf>, 4.

- 
- <sup>10</sup> The recurrence of Larkin as a source of phrases in Connor's work cannot be coincidental – and might originate with the poet's profile on English curricula in the critic's youth – but can be deferred to some fuller study of his literary intertexts.
- <sup>11</sup> Steven Connor, 'Beckett and the World' (26 October 2006),  
<http://www.stevenConnor.com/beckettworld/beckettworld.pdf>, 11. Subsequent references as 'World'.
- <sup>12</sup> Steven Connor, *Theory and Cultural Value* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992), 259, n.16.
- <sup>13</sup> Steven Connor, *James Joyce* (Tavistock: Northcote House, 1996), 34.
- <sup>14</sup> Steven Connor, 'Blissed Out: On Hedonophobia' (25 June 2012),  
<http://www.stevenConnor.com/blissedout/blissedout.pdf>, 3. Subsequent references as 'Blissed'.
- <sup>15</sup> Steven Connor, 'Panophonia' (22 February 2012),  
<http://www.stevenConnor.com/panophonia/panophonia.pdf>, 1.
- <sup>16</sup> Steven Connor, 'Soap, Senstance and Substance' (19 April 2013),  
<http://www.stevenConnor.com/senstance/senstance.pdf>, 1.
- <sup>17</sup> Steven Connor, 'About There, or Thereabouts' (23 March 2013),  
<http://www.stevenConnor.com/aboutthere/aboutthere.pdf>, 1.
- <sup>18</sup> Steven Connor, *Paraphernalia: The Curious Lives of Magical Things* (London: Profile Books, 2011), 126. Subsequent references to *P*.
- <sup>19</sup> Steven Connor, 'Taking Pity on Things', <http://www.stevenConnor.com/pity/pity.pdf>, 2.
- <sup>20</sup> Steven Connor, 'Accidence', <http://www.stevenConnor.com/accidence/accidence.pdf>, 3.
- <sup>21</sup> Steven Connor, 'Concentrate' (5 March 2013), <http://www.stevenConnor.com/concentrate/>.
- <sup>22</sup> Brian Dillon in conversation with Steven Connor, 'A Philosophy of Everyday Things' (5 December 2011),  
<http://podacademy.org/podcasts/a-philosophy-of-everyday-things/>
- <sup>23</sup> Connor's other resemblances to Barthes include his love of etymology and neologism; the partial likeness of *Paraphernalia* to *Mythologies*; and the career trajectory that moves from an early rhetoric of critique and commitment to a later exploration of play and delight. In fact Connor confirms this last point of affinity in a 2004 interview: 'There are very few writers we currently allow ourselves to read who allow themselves delight; Barthes was one, he allowed himself delight'. Steven Connor and Brian Dillon, 'Cutaneous',  
<http://www.stevenConnor.com/skininterview/>.
- <sup>24</sup> Roland Barthes, 'A Few Words To Let in Doubt', *Elle*, 4 December 1979, in *The Grain of the Voice* trans. Linda Coverdale (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1991), 312-8 (318).
- <sup>25</sup> See Steven Connor, 'What If There Were No Such Thing as The Aesthetic?', delivered on 3 March 1999 to the seminar series 'The Function of Contemporary Aesthetics', <http://www.stevenConnor.com/aes/>; and 'Doing Without Art' (8 July 2009), <http://www.stevenConnor.com/doingwithoutart/>.
- <sup>26</sup> Steven Connor, *The English Novel in History 1950 to 1995* (London: Routledge, 1996), 4.
- <sup>27</sup> For a telling engagement with Stanley Fish see Steven Connor, 'History in Bits' (March 1998),  
<http://www.stevenConnor.com/histbits.htm>.
- <sup>28</sup> In a seminar, I once admitted that while I had heard of the Moebius strip I had never seen one. Steven Connor promptly made one from a piece of paper: a real-world object that seemed to belong to another dimension.
- <sup>29</sup> Steven Connor, 'Writing the Lives of Words' (1 March 2008),  
<http://www.stevenConnor.com/wordlives/wordlives.pdf>, 15.
- <sup>30</sup> Steven Connor, 'Introduction' to *The Cambridge Companion to Postmodernism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 4, 11.
- <sup>31</sup> Steven Connor, 'Channels' (30 November 2013), <http://www.stevenConnor.com/channels/channels.pdf>, 3.
- <sup>32</sup> See for instance Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory: an Introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1983), 217; *The Function of Criticism* (London: Verso, 1984), 124; and *William Shakespeare* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986), 104.
- <sup>33</sup> Steven Connor, 'CP: or, A Few Don'ts by a Cultural Phenomenologist', *Parallax*, 5:2 (1999), 17-31.