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Introduction: Weather Reports

Joseph Brooker

This special issue of *Critical Quarterly* was originally inspired by a symposium held at Birkbeck, University of London in July 2012. The occasion was the departure of Steven Connor from Birkbeck to take up the Grace 2 Chair of English at the University of Cambridge. An academic taking a new post would not normally be great cause to hold a conference. But this was different for two reasons.

One was the scale of Steven Connor's service at the University of London. He was appointed at Birkbeck in 1979, shortly after completing his doctorate at Oxford. Since then he had served as head of the English department, as Professor of Modern Literature and Theory, and in a senior managerial role, before spending a dozen years on secondment as the Academic Director of the London Consortium. The Consortium was a bold intervention in British higher education, which brought together a range of institutions across the arts – Birkbeck, the Architectural Association, the Science Museum, the British Film Institute, and the Tate galleries – in offering research degrees at Masters and doctoral level. Steven Connor made a profound, long-standing contribution to its multidisciplinary activities.

This would still be a parochial matter, though, were it not for the quality of Connor's own work. Almost everyone who was asked to contribute to the symposium responded with enthusiasm. This reflected personal affection or professional respect, but also a shared sense that Connor's published work had become a major contribution to the possibility of thinking about literature, other forms of culture, or indeed – this would be part of the point – almost anything else, from classics to physics, linguistics to sport. That range might suggest a comparison with Roland Barthes, whose exhilarated transposition of semiotics to other fields led him to reshape literary study but also to visit places hardly thought proper by the academy of his time: film, wrestling, cuisine or fashion. By Connor's time, the imitated example of Barthes and others had made many such investigations routine. Yet Connor's later work would still spring a surprise that one might by now have thought hard to achieve, as he wrote entire books on skin and air, and unforgettable essays on sweets and bags.

The range that Connor has invented for himself is one distinction. Another is the depth of research that he brings to all these inquiries, increasingly showing a formidable familiarity not just with the local historical neighbourhoods of 'modernity' or 'the contemporary' but with two or three millennia of thought and feeling. A third is his acuteness as a reader, accompanied unmistakably by a fourth: his remarkable character as a writer, with a critical idiom of fierce precision yet rich flamboyance. Those who have read Steven Connor at length, or even heard a few of his lectures, will recognize the qualities just listed.

To a degree, an early and a later Connor can be distinguished. Continuity exists: Connor's critical voice has evolved or shifted, but not been rendered unrecognizable since the 1980s, and the subjects of his first two books, Dickens and Beckett, have remained his literary lodestars. Yet his own biographical description on his website proposes a significant shift. 'In 2000 my book *Dumbstruck* appeared, and I thought it had a look of me. Things were going to be different from now on'.¹ If we accept this implicit narrative, we might identify two phases. The first contains the books on Dickens and Beckett, *Postmodernist Culture*, *Theory and Cultural Value*. The second overflows with *Dumbstruck*, *The Book of Skin*, *Fly*, *The Matter of Air*, *Paraphernalia* and *A Philosophy of Sport*. Two more books of the mid-1990s, *The English Novel in History 1950-1995* and *James Joyce*, on Connor's own account belong in the earlier phase, but may better be seen as transitional.

A clearer sign of new bearings in the late 1990s was the article 'A Few Don'ts by a Cultural Phenomenologist'. From this article and *Dumbstruck* on, the most readily visible change is the new centrality of objects, substances and everyday actions in Connor's writing. From about the mid-1990s, he made himself into a commentator on flies and parrots, knots and clapping. To expand one's subject matter in this way is a major move in itself. Arguably, doing so also occasioned a change in Connor's writing. As its subjects became (by the lights of literary criticism and theory) more unusual, the writing itself became freer, looser, stranger, more perverse; more allusive, experimental and opinionated. This development was hastened and facilitated by the expansion of Connor's online archive of writing, so that a vast amount of his work could now be personally archived rather than enfolded in the professionally accredited forms of the monograph or journal article – though these continued to cascade into print.

Several essayists in this volume explore these new territories. Laura Salisbury presents Connor's thought about matter in a psychoanalytic frame. Some contributors have been Connor's students, and exemplify the possibilities encouraged by his thought while breaking their own ground here. Matthew Wraith writes about bubbles, Mark Blacklock about knots, Will Viney about twins. Seth Kim-Cohen recalls Connor's teaching itself. Paul Sheehan and William Rowe approach through literature, and I try to identify Connor's critical styles. And in short personal tributes, three celebrated professors – Isobel Armstrong, Andrew Gibson and Julian Murphet – share distinct perspectives on a friend and colleague.

This special issue takes its title from the symposium. *Weather Reports* echoes Steven Connor's own suggestion that weather might be a suggestive model for culture:

Almost immeasurably complex interactions of a small number of determinate variables – wind-speed and direction, pressure, temperature – produce determinate weather effects. There is no difficulty in establishing whether it is or is not, at any particular place and time, raining. But what is the 'it' that is raining, and that, so to speak, wills or weathers the weather? [...] I hope we

will want, or mean to learn to want, not to think of society as having self-consciousness and actively self-directing purpose on the analogy of an individual will. A cloud forms, a waterfall plunges and seethes; but not as an expression of the will, the desire or the unease of the cloud or the waterfall.²

Our understanding of collective life might become subtler, he proposes, if we think of it in these meteorological terms. The desire for greater subtlety and depth, the originality of angle, the poetic idiom in which a new critical model is suggested, are characteristic of Connor's thought. Typically enough, criticism has yet fully to think through the potential of his suggestion. The contributors to this issue of *Critical Quarterly* try to map the pressures, updrafts and precipitations of Connor's thought, though few would venture to forecast its future.

¹ Biographical note at <http://www.stevenconnor.com/bio.htm>

² Steven Connor, 'What Can Cultural Studies Do?', <http://www.stevenconnor.com/interview/>