



Seven Types Of Marginality:  
A Review of *Hidden Agendas – An Unreported Poetics*  
Edited by Louis Armand

By [David Vichnar](#)

One of the first questions a collection such as the volume in question, edited by Louis Armand and published by Litteraria Pragensia, Prague 2010—one dealing with the related issues of un- or under-reportedness as somehow generative of a poetics—must ask itself is: how is unreportedness, i.e., hiddenness from official critical discourses, brought about, or indeed possible, in the internet age where information dissemination seems all-effective, if not all-pervasive, Armand’s introduction refutes this seeming by arguing that if nothing else, “the sheer magnitude of the potential electronic archiving [...] renders illusory the idea that ‘accessibility’ via the web equates to reception; indeed a great deal about how the web has evolved and is now organized stands opposed to such an idea at every level,” not to mention the obvious fact that “no archive [...] is ever a surrogate for the ongoing task of critical reception” (1). It is precisely this easy accessibility stymying receptive—not to mention critical—distance that has institutionalized the contemporary avant-garde and seems to have rendered most of today’s radical innovation “virtually invisible.” The quandary, for Armand, lies then in how the vast electronic archive “*oblige*s us to be, in some respect, complicit in the delegation of critical reception ‘to it,’ allowing ourselves to become blind to whatever is not yet assimilable within its present structures [...]—however improbable this may be made to appear.” Thus, the two adjectives in the title—“hidden” and “unreported”—result both from a certain “blindness” of local cultural discourses of literary reception toward a certain poet/ics, and from the latter’s resistance to assimilation, purposeful or not – the ambivalent notion of *obscurity* runs the length of the volume. Taking its cue from Armand’s “Notes in Lieu of an Introduction,” and forming the bulk of *Hidden Agendas: Unreported Poetics*, are a total of eighteen essays whose authors were “invited to reflect on a poet, a group of poets, or a poetics from the last half-century, that they deemed of personal significance and which they felt to have been underestimated, neglected or overlooked” (4); and which, each in its own particular fashion, addresses the issues of hiddenness and unreportedness. This review, then, sets out to map the various kinds of marginality as they evolve and intersect throughout the collection, attempting to group them into seven overlapping sections and to assess their relevance for an understanding of contemporaneity.

The collection opens with a truly pioneering piece of fieldwork, Kyle Schlesinger’s “No One ‘Understands’ Language: Asa Benveniste & the Trigram Press.” Immediately from the outset, there is a palpable tension between Benveniste’s credit in Schlesinger’s eyes and his status in the official scholarly discourse. With a dozen poetry collections and his instrumental role in

the Trigram Press, Benveniste (1925-1990) remains “one of the major [...] voices in the British Poetry Revival,” but what Schlesinger’s research reveals is that there still exists “very little scholarship on literary publishers whose hallmark accomplishments did not contribute directly to the seemingly not-so-distant worlds of graphic design, artists’ books or even the private press lineage” (7). Due to the paucity of extant material, the research turns into a detective hunt for information from eyewitnesses and the essay itself resembles a chronicle and an archive – lists of publications, authors, dates, venues, and so on. The particular emphasis on the events of 1968-69, arguably the best years for Benveniste’s Trigram Press which saw the publication of David Meltzer’s *Yesod*, Jack Hirschman’s *Black Alephs*, Jim Dine’s *Welcome Home Lovebirds* or Benveniste’s own *The Atoz Formula* – all top-notch specimens of the art of publishing, beautifully designed, aptly type-set, with daringly experimental use of the graphic potential of the image/text interface. However, the limited print run, expensiveness due to meticulous production, as well as the “marginal” experimental writing on which Trigram focused – all this has contributed, according to Schlesinger’s account, to how Benveniste and his press have fallen by the wayside of the interests of the scholarly accounts of literature historians.

The potentially peccable character of most “official” literary historical accounts that deal with non-mainstream literary activities is most poignantly illustrated in the opening to Robert Sheppard’s piece, “The Colony at the Heart of the Empire: Bob Cobbing & the Mid-1980s London,” which maps the alternative London poetry scene of the early to mid-1980s. Sheppard quotes the authoritative Jacques Donguy survey *Poésies expérimentales – Zone numérique (1953-2007)* that has Cobbing dead in 1982, that is, twenty years before his actual death in 2002, and, what is more, before Cobbing reached the career stage focused upon by Sheppard’s article: “if he had died in 1982, much of what I describe here would not have happened” (30). Sheppard’s text deals chiefly with the poetry reading series network of the era – mainly the Sub Voicive group, run by Gilbert Aldair and Patricia Farrell, the New River Project, with “Bob Cobbing seemingly in charge” (33), and the International Sound Poetry Festival in whose charge Cobbing spent many years. This time, the author himself is cast into the role of an eyewitness, with his own journal entries interspersed within the more “official” literary-historical account. With the Sound Poetry Festival, a theme emerges which is to surface in quite a few places here; that of a literary form whose be-all and end-all defies archiving in any usual sense:

The fact of the performance becomes its own meaning, and eclipses the anecdotal strategies of more culturally validated poetry. [...] The poetics of many is summarised by Fisher: “Their art involves a wish to violate their own perceptive sets and, they believe as a consequence, the sets of their listeners. The words they use to describe their art focuses on improvisation, freedom and change. As such their perspectives engage with the complex discussion of these terms in contemporary cultures [...]” (35-6)

Added to this is a highly exclusive—and thus deliberately and inherently marginal—mode of textual transcription of Sound poetry into lexically concrete works published by, among others, Writers Forum Books, as well as a political sense of the necessity of challenging from the outside what passes for literature or art – Sheppard quotes Cobbing in 1981, “[a]rt has been taken out of our hands, it seems to me, and we must be artless” (44). Sheppard concludes his informed survey of “re-constructed evenings, disconnected memories, lacking context or record, partial or over-vivid, that I can’t resolve into narrative” (45) by calling for “a genealogy of these people and connections, to sustain our practice when it becomes difficult to maintain its authenticity against official histories that (still, unaccountably) include almost none of the names and activities from this memoir” (47).

Moving from the collective literary enterprises of presses, reading series and literary festivals to a narrower, personalized scope of an individual poet/writer developing their own poetics outside the limits of official literary history, and from a historico-biographical account to a more closely exegetical focus, two essays discuss New York poets of a rather “conservative” disposition, yet one which external circumstances have reduced to marginality. Vincent Katz discusses the *opus magnum* of Edwin Denby (1903-1983)—“Mediterranean Cities”—and shows that it was Denby’s both politico-aesthetic and personal beliefs, not so much the merit of his writing, that determined its status as marginal within literary history: “What Denby was fighting against, sometimes surreptitiously, was art that relied too heavily on ideas. Usually, though not always, those ideas tended to be political. This antipathy to conceptual art set him in opposition to the seminal 1950s aesthetician John Cage” (63). Although living and breathing poetry in the New York of the 1950s and 60s, and “despite being friends with, and admired by, the first-generation New York School poets,” Denby is absent from its two most influential anthological summations, i.e. Donald Allen’s 1960 *New American Poetry* and John Bernard Myers’ 1969 *The Poets of the New York School*. One possible explanation for his absence offered by Katz is Denby’s “reluctance to show his poetry to others, not to mention his abhorrence of giving public readings” (65).

Stephan Delbos’s article discusses another similar omission – that of William Bronk (1918-1999), whose “name is not found among the crucial American poets” as his “relatively reclusive life and his rejection of poetic politics won him few supporters among the poets and critics of mid-century American letters” (85). Delbos traces the (almost dramatic) story behind Bronk’s omission in Allen’s anthology to his fellow-poet supporter and admirer, Cid Corman, who secured for Bronk a place in the anthology alongside his own work. Then, however, he decided against his own inclusion, and so “Bronk lost his only champion and became the last poet to be cut from the manuscript” (90).

A triad of essays discusses another, perhaps more “radical” type of marginality, one blending aesthetic, sexual, political, and even racial minority and opposition into an act of artistic rebellion. John Wilkinson’s piece makes a case for the usefulness of the term *poésie brute* defined as “a body of work consistent in its independently generated compositional principles, developed by a writer with limited formal education [...] and in isolation from the major writing of the time, yet possessed of an ambition comparable to contemporary major writing” (48). Indeed, for every dividing line one might like to draw, there is a point of convergence, since “the most adventurous, modernist strains in formally published and critically recognised poetry” exhibits the same quality of *obscurity* in the sense of “special or cult or cant poetic language” to be found in the best examples of *poésie brute* (49), and yet, with *poésie brute*, the poetry’s semantic obscurity has the additional dimension of thematizing its social obscurity. A case in point of such a convergence, for Wilkinson, is Mark Hyatt (1940-1973), “an English poet who wrote only a few good poems by the tenets of close reading, but whose poetry as a body of work is of much more than passing interest” (52), which Wilkinson’s reading demonstrates with clarity and acumen. Syntactically awkward, autobiographically (homo-)erotic poetry charged with explicit content, written by a semi-literate author and hence, being of a problematic textual status, becomes subjected in Wilkinson’s hands to an “active” reading capable of teasing out its merit – “amazing and unforgettable lines that have broken loose from encapsulated pain or from benign stupor” (62).

Armand’s own piece, ““You do not know my history & will not write it...,” focuses on the obscured figure of Lukáš Tomin (1963-1995), the son of a prominent Czech dissident philosopher, a Czech emigrant educated in Oxford, living chiefly in London and Paris, writing in English, yet, even today—20 years after the Velvet Revolution and 15 years after his premature, self-imposed death—“overlooked by the Czech literary establishment and ignored

by publishers in the UK and the US” (115). Armand’s reading of Tomin’s prose (chiefly his major three novels, *The Doll*, *Ashtrays*, and *Kye*) demonstrates the reasons behind this systematic overlook – Tomin’s idiosyncratic aesthetics (“extreme realism” as opposed to the established tradition of Czech surrealism) as well as its political opposition which Armand encapsulates as follows:

In the context of post-Revolution literary nationalism, Tomin’s writing carries no instructive “message”—it remains alien, unassimilated and ostensibly unassimilable. Against the poetics of tribal evocation, Tomin’s is a poetics of *dispossession*—above all the dispossession of linguistic certitude by *means of* the ideological machinations with which they are imbued. (123)

Michael Farrell’s contribution, “An Australian Classic: Robbie Walker’s ‘Okay, Let’s Be Honest,’” deals with yet another type of *dispossession* and political opposition – the case of an aboriginal poet killed in custody in Fremantle Prison in Western Australia, whose *Inside Black Australia* offers “a memorable and original critique of Australia” (179), replete with painful reminders of the country’s convict past and oftentimes criminous present, and challenging the official aesthetic *status quo* by drawing heavily on Aboriginal vernacular.

A fourth type of marginality is represented by two essays by Jeremy Davies and Ali Alizadeth, on Gilbert Sorrentino (1929-2006) and John Kinsella (1963-), respectively. Both show how even major writers (according to the criteria of the canon) can fall prey to a certain critical marginalization. Davies’s critique is aimed against what he terms “Sorrentino underground” which he accuses of managing “thus far to avoid the reassessments and encomiums writers as prolific and influential as he tend to accrue” and contributing to a general sense—however problematic it may be to measure or substantiate it—that “the establishment, be it academia or the ever-shrinking world of popular literary fiction, has ignored Sorrentino, and continues now to ignore him” (96). Davies’s reading of passages from Sorrentino’s novels as well as essays, reviews or interviews unveils as his key topic a “conflict between a love of elaborate falsification and a disgust for the false fought to a draw over and over again,” which, for the reader, is “deeply unsettling,” and for the literary establishment “deeply unfashionable, as it must needs be” (100). But Davies goes further, examining and challenging the very claim of Sorrentino’s influence in terms of literary tradition: “It may be, then, that Sorrentino does not open ways for writing, but closes them,” he concedes, in that “his work may not be generative, as his own idols/models/favourites’s were.” Still, influence can be measured retroactively as well, as it were: “Joyce, Flann O’Brien, Williams – they are beginnings, and we know this if for no other reason than that Sorrentino built upon what they began” (112). And, perhaps most to the point, Davies concludes by putting his finger on what seems to be the most unsettling, unfashionable, and thus marginalizing aspect at stake – the purposeful un- or anti-literariness of Sorrentino’s poetics: “Sorrentino’s fiction is bleak, is unpopular, perhaps because it is ‘high’ literature with no interest in romanticizing the literary [...] Sorrentino’s writing, for all its sensuality, is literature that loves literature, but is not broadly *in favour of* literature” (112).

Ali Alizadeth’s “Rupturing Dante: John Kinsella’s ‘Divine Comedy,’” discusses John Kinsella’s recent, 2008 poetic project, *Divine Comedy: Journeys Through a Regional Geography – Three New Works*, in the context of a broader question of whether and how modernist or avant-garde sense of experimentation is possible in contemporary poetry. Alizadeth’s claim is the following:

[C]ontemporary poets can rejuvenate the avant-garde and revive the rebellious commitments of the Modernists—to seriously challenge the power of literary centres and the dominant cultures—if their poetics is situated *within* the traditions, forms and themes they aim to transgress. [...] Through *rupturing* and hence transforming the situation of literary conservatism from within—an event

intrinsically grounded in the very site to be sabotaged by the radical poet—a truly and effectively modern/contemporary poetry can be achieved. (131)

The irony, then, is that following Alizadeth's meticulous reading of how this poetic "event" (theorized on the basis of Jacques Derrida and Alain Badiou) takes place in Kinsella's poem, is his concluding avowal that "it can be safely assumed that the poetic establishment on the whole is not likely to be particularly receptive to Kinsella's challenging project" since a work like this is bound to "seem 'obscure' to a general reviewer in a daily newspaper" and its "non-mimetic voice" must seem "unsatisfactory to such readers" (148).

Moving on from individual authors and their particular marginal positions from which to challenge the center are types five and six, the one concerned with radical formal innovation, the other with experiments in the medium. Johanna Drucker's playfully ironic essay, "PWars (after Caesar)," traces the genealogy of Language Poetry as opposed to the late Romantic and Modernist poetry ("the Language Poets also surpass most of the Romantic Poets in valour, since they contend with the Modernists in almost daily struggles, whether they repel them from their websites, or themselves attack their publications") and as rising "from the plains of Stein's materiality, Yeats's mythologies, Reznikoff's polyglot sensibility, and Zukofsky's relentless attention to forms" (188). However, Drucker also offers an aesthetic delimitation of the early "LangPo" movement, which is one of discontinuities rather than departures:

LangPo were confined on every side by the nature of their approach; later this would be clear, that they were hemmed in on one side by the procedural, a very deep and powerful technique, which separates them from the lyrical tradition; on a second side, by the conceptual, which separates them by an enormous gulf from the traditionalists, who keep bringing observation and epiphany into their works; and on the third, by the vast commitment to difficult language, which separates them entirely from the common culture. (189)

Bridging experimental tradition with contemporaneity is Livio Belloi & Michel Delville's co-authored piece which explores the significance of the loop as a constraining device in the experimental fiction of Gertrude Stein (1874-1946) and the cinema of Martin Arnold (1959-). In the authors' understanding, the loop is to be conceived of as "a structuring device which 'returns upon itself' and thereby undermines traditional expectations regarding narrative and descriptive progression and closure," a device which, for Stein, has a "liberating effect which lies in its capacity to challenge dominant modes of representation and undermine the linear transparency of descriptive and narrative realism from within" (199). Bridging both literary and film studies, the article does make a case for considering the loop as a "fundamentally transdisciplinary and transcultural model which straddles the boundaries between established generic categories" (209).

Jena Osman's contribution, though focusing on its one major representative—Bern Porter (1911-2004)—discusses the entire aesthetics of found poetry. The primary question, already, is that of the form – many of Porter's books exist "only in manuscript form or as one-of-a-kind artist's books which are archived at special collections libraries," which makes Osman wonder "if Porter had lived in a time of scanners and web browsers, would his output and career as an artist have been less underground?" (210) Predating such a time, Porter's interest in "'converting' the throwaway products of capital led to the works he called 'founds,'" products which consisted of disposable printed matter—magazines, newspapers, advertising circulars, junk mail—and which he broke down "so as to change how they were perceived" – Osman insists that finds are not so much collages as "distillations and re- (or de-) contextualizations" (212). Apart from Porter's concern with purely aesthetic, or more widely social or environmental, aspects of production, both industrial and artistic, which Osman documents on the basis of his entire career, his ultimate interest lay in "how a work of art

could transform the attention, for a shift in awareness could lead to an alternative set of responsive actions” (223).

Stephanie Strickland’s essay, “Poetry & the Digital World,” opens up the sixth type of marginality, one springing from experimentation with the very medium of writing: “Born-digital poetry is a ‘next staging’ that has arrived, an infant art, practiced throughout the world and now affecting print itself. Known variously as electronic, digital, cyber, hypermedial, hypertextual, ergodic, or net literature, it can be searched out using the full set of these terms” (224). Strickland likens the challenge that electronic writing has meant for the technology of print to the Einsteinian turn in physics: just as after Einstein, space and time are no separate, objectifiable containers of reality, nor are they such after the advance from printed page to text-on-screen. In electronic literature, the convergence of text, sound and image as coded information allows the possibility “to grasp, to replay, a single potential expressible in multiple fundamental manners” (226). As such, electronic writing is an extremely fragile, mobile, indeed ephemeral form, “in closest approximation to nothingness.” Asks Strickland in conclusion to her brief, yet quite compelling exposé, “might it bring the newness we need, as we fully come to realize that the future will live *only* under the conditions that we ourselves have produced in this era?” (229)

D.J. Huppertz’s piece, “Dionysus in Drag: On Flarf,” deals with one possible kind of “newness” brought about by the electronic medium for which Strickland’s conclusion called – Flarf poetry whose practice of “reconstituting contemporary ‘speech’ [...] into poetry” has become “commonly known as ‘Google-sculpting’” (231), yet whose use of search engine collage is no end in itself, serve as it does the purpose of intervening into “the spectacle of contemporary American media culture” in an innovative and socially valuable fashion. This fashion is then examined by Huppertz through an analysis of four exemplary Flarf texts – K. Silem Mohammed’s *Deer Head Nation*, Drew Gardner’s *Petroleum Hat*, Nada Gordon’s *Folly*, and Sharon Mesmer’s *Annoying Diabetic Bitch*, demonstrating how poets of the Flarf collective expose the possibilities of a truly postmodern parody—now, that is after 9/11, useful more than ever—“by bringing together America’s most sacred and profane into uncomfortably close proximity” (248).

The last contribution to the collection, Allen Fisher “Complexity Manifold 2: hypertext,” closes off *Hidden Agendas* by means of a sustained reflection on some of the themes already dealt with, here approached with a broad critical apparatus and in a more synthetic fashion. For instance, the troubled relation between demand of the establishment and individual artistic activity is, here, thematized as follows:

Private pretence and public affirmation, particularly in terms of recommending a range of ethical activities, lead poets to a range of addresses, from engaged involvement to escape. What poetry is capable of through deliberate and detailed poetic investigation, of poetic form and the variety of vocabularies used, often leaves the best poetry incapable of matching the public demand for continuous and liner expression, ostensibly the demand for complete meanings. (256)

After the plethora of essays dealing with the recent past or aspects of contemporaneity, it is to the future that Fisher ultimately turns in his piece, addressing two contemporary proponents of ethically/environmentally committed art – the visual artist Gerhard Richter and poet Joan Retallack, in particular her essay, *The Poethical Wager*, an extended passage from which—dealing with the necessity of ambivalent, even self-contradictory art—neatly summarizes Fisher’s own stance:

Because it seems that what is most meaningful to our complex species will never make complete rational sense, will always defy paraphrase and description, may be wonderful and frightening at the same time, that is, approach paradox, genres that wholly depend on principles of identity, sequential narration, non-contradiction can only be of limited help. They're not generous or improbable enough to encompass a complex realist perspective...optimism may be best understood as a constructive form of pessimism... (272)

Both Richter and Retallack, ultimately, embrace a poetics with ethics, which for Fisher is “a needed emphasis if human beings think they are going anywhere at anytime at all” (274).

Such are, then, the six types of marginality as they evolve throughout the collection, from presses and poetry readings to individual poetics to radical experiments with the form and/or medium. However, there are three essays so far left aside that together form yet another—the seventh—type of marginality, one in which the critical discourse with its formal prescriptions itself becomes marginalized and free rein is given to the memory and personal bias of the critic as an engaged participant in the described art scene. Lou Rowan’s “If only the Imagination...” deals as much with Jerome Rothenberg as with *The New York Times*'s analyses of the decision process leading to “Obama’s tragic, nightmarish escalation of his war upon Afghanistan” (129). Stephen Muecke’s “‘Something Wrong? Oh, must be Ghost...’ Writing Different Existences” with Paddy Roe (1912-2001), but not so much with his poetry as with the “living ghosts” and “encounters with strangeness” in his, or indeed anybody’s, experience, and not so much with his life as with feelings prevalent among the bereaved at his funeral. Finally, Michael Rothenberg’s marvellously poignant “The Real & False Journals” forsakes even the form of prose argumentation and builds the memorial to Philip Whalen (1923-2002) out of scraps of his poetry, diary entries, letters, conversations (both with and without Rothenberg’s participation), musings, disconnected memories, meditation practices, shopping lists, and telephone messages. The *critical* discourse, in such pieces, becomes subservient to what we have seen it override in earlier essays – the wonderfully retentive and faulty archive of every individual’s personal memory.

It would be completely beside the point to accuse *Hidden Agendas* of omissions, incompleteness, idiosyncratic taste, personal bias or lack of contextualization, simply because neither comprehensiveness—let alone all-inclusiveness—nor objectiveness—let alone officiality—are among its aspirations and goals – which is brought home already in Armand’s introduction which speaks of the volume as “ghosted” by another one restricted to a virtual existence only, and provides a list of the plethora of other writers, movements, journals, publishing houses, etc. that the collection *might have addressed* (4). The point is, rather, to realize that such a “ghostly” volume, or indeed any other collection devoted to such or similar idea, would of necessity—provided it were undertaken and executed with the same critical erudition, devotion, and attention—arrive at a typology similar, if not identical, to that of *Hidden Agendas*. For indeed, if one can speak of *marginalization* and *avant-garde* as in any way convergent in contemporary literature and art, “it is only to the extent that each evokes a certain state of affairs in relation to which a critical ‘situation’ might be said to be operative (in the sense that both terms describe a project)” (3). This review could do little more than trace the typology of these projects as they evolve throughout this wide-ranging, well-informed collection and to commend them for inspection and reflection to further critical writing.