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The Bottle Imp

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From the Vibrant Margin:

Literary Journals at the Scottish
Book Exhibit, Philadelphia 2006

It is an open secret that the official text of "literature" is produced in the margins of culture. What Jerome Rothenberg has said of American poetry could equally be said of Scottish writing: "the mainstream of [Scotland's literature], the part by which it has been & will be known, has long been in the margins, nurtured in the margins, carried forward, vibrant, in the margins." It is in the margins, for example, that the actual work of writing and publishing occurs. Literary journals glossy or xeroxed, distributed among friends and colleagues, or made available online; readings at conferences, in bars and in bookshops; exchanges between writers in person or via the internet; the work of chapbook publishers and of small presses: all this represents the "underground economy" of creativity, the crucial zone in which "spiritual/corporeal exchanges" between writers actually occur.

Among the many good things about the emerging Scottish presence within the MLA is the deep commitment of all involved to such exchanges. One immediate consequence is the on-going effort to bring Scottish writers to the annual conference (the 2006 conference featured readings by Liz Lochhead and Theresa Breslin). Another result is the display, at the exhibit stand, of literary journals actively engaged with Scottish writing in the international context. This year's exhibit focused on three journals that have shown a marked interest in such work: *The Manhattan Review*, *Pequod*, and *Painted, spoken*. All three are labours of love, produced by extraordinary author-editors. All three are instances of the vital underground economy in creativity that Rothenberg so eloquently describes.

Established in 1980, Philip Fried's *The Manhattan Review* is digest-size and professionally printed with a glossy card cover

that typically features either black-and-white photographs or artwork. The *Review* has been described as "a leading force in the effort to increase multicultural awareness in the world of poetry"; certainly, since its inception, it has placed a distinct emphasis on international writing, especially writing in translation. Scottish-affiliated writers Polly Clark, John Burnside, and Robin Fulton have all been visitors to the pages of *The Manhattan Review*. The journal's most recent issue (Vol. 12, No. 2) headlines with the work of the Scotland-China Translation Project, described as a "unique collaborative project between four UK poets and six Chinese poets which took place in both China and Scotland in 2005." It includes translations of Zhang Wei, by Clark, and Yang Lian, by the ever inventive W.N. Herbert. Fried is interested in featuring more Scottish poetry in the *Review*.

Another New York publication with a consistent interest in Scottish writing is *Pequod*. This handsomely produced, now wildly occasional, literary review features poetry, stories, essays, and cover artwork and has been edited by writer Mark Rudman since its early days in the 1970s in California. It is rich in aesthetic and intellectual ambition. In fact, to read through back-issues of *Pequod* is to encounter a roll-call of luminous names, from Paul Auster, to Charles Simic, Mario Vargas Llosa, Robert Walser, Eugenio Montale, Joyce Carol Oates, and many, many others. Rudman has long been drawn to Scottish writing and, over the years, has published work by, among others, Kathleen Jamie, Robin Robertson, Alan Warner, and Carol Ann Duffy. The current issue of *Pequod* (#48-50; 2006) runs to some 382 pages and includes poetry and fiction by Robin Robertson and Ian Rankin; an interview with Rankin (touching on Scottish crime fiction; "disorder and invention"; and social themes in the Rebus novels); and a review-essay (by myself) on Christopher Whyte's translation of Sorley MacLean's Modernist sequence *Dàin do Eimhir*. Robertson's poems, as ever, are presented with a clarity that turns on a knife edge. Rankin's Inspector Rebus glowers from the page, skeptical and scabrous, and even fitfully tender.

Painted, spoken has been edited in London since 2001 by the indefatigably generous and inventive Scottish poet and critic Richard Price. Of all the journals described here, *Painted, spoken* is the most visually modest, closer in aesthetic to a zine than to a conventional literary journal (it typically consists of about 20 stapled pages). In spirit, too, it is appropriately

idiosyncratic, disseminated for free, in exchange for a stamped addressed envelope, to readers swift enough to snap up the mere 100 copies produced per print run. There's something of a samizdat feeling about this and the plain, paper cover of *Painted, spoken* suggests an unmarked door behind which poets and writers are talking, creating, translating, reviewing, and, no doubt, arguing over the eternally vexed point where extremes meet. Price makes no bones about his preference for maintaining coherence and continuity amongst contributors and for keeping the journal itself at something of a remove from the conventional literary market. Past issues have featured the fresh talents of, among others, David Kinloch, Peter McCarey, Tom Leonard, Simon Smith, Jen Hadfield, Edwin Morgan, and Fanny Howe. Given Price's critical role in the Informationist movement, poets of that particular stamp (such as Kinloch and McCarey) are prominent; *Painted, spoken*, however, is open to other forms of writing too. The current issue (#12) includes work by Michael Shayer, Victoria Bean, Hugh Epstein, and Virna Teixeira, as well as the latest excerpt from McCarey's hypertext serial *The Syllabary*. Issue #12 also introduces *PS*, the new prose supplement to *Painted, Spoken*; this inaugural addition is dedicated to *Migrant* magazine, edited in the late 1950s by Shayer and Gael Turnbull, and of key importance in fostering exchanges between American Black Mountain poets and writers of the Scottish, English, and Canadian avant-gardes.

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Works Cited

—Jerome Rothenberg, "Pre-face," *A Secret Location on the Lower East Side: Adventures in Writing 1960-1980*. New York: The New York Public Library and Granary Books, 1998.

—*Multicultural Review* (Vol. 2. No. 3), 1993.

How to get the Journals

Information on how to obtain *The Manhattan Review* is available at **www.manhattanreview.com**.

Copies of *Pequod* can be purchased directly for \$15 from Mark Rudman at 817 West End Avenue, #4A, New York, NY 10025.

Copies of *Painted, spoken* and *PS* are available "almost for free" in exchange for an A5 envelope with appropriate postage (UK, 2 first class stamps; US, \$1 postage).

In the UK write to: Richard Price, 24 Sirdar Road, Wood Green, London N22 6RG. A limited number of copies are available in the US from: Fiona Wilson, 390 Riverside Drive, #7E, NY, NY 10025. Select past issues can be viewed online at **www.hydrohotel.net**.

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