

**Robert
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***The Anti-Orpheus:
a notebook***

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Selected other publications by Robert Sheppard:

Poetry

The Lores (Reality Street Editions, London, 2003)

Empty Diaries (Stride, Exeter, 1998)

The Flashlight Sonata (Stride, Exeter, 1993)

Daylight Robbery (Stride, Exeter, 1990)

Essays & Poetics

Far Language (Stride, Exeter, 1999)

Tin Pan Arcadia (Salt, Cambridge, forthcoming)

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The Anti-Orpheus:
a notebook

*a speculative
art pausing for breath*

– Adrian Clarke

‘What might a poem be, elsed?’ asks Pearl in the last *Empty Diary*. ‘To be poetri
& not poetre at th same tiyme,’ Khalid Hakim replies.

*

The Limits of Poetics

‘The otherness that is brought into being by an act of writing ... is not just a matter of perceptible difference. It implies a wholly new existent that cannot be apprehended by the old modes of understanding and could not have been predicted by means of them; its singularity ... is absolute.’

Derek Attridge

*

Untitled or Unlikely Processes of x

Blasted by the sky there is meat description, scraped-
From the land and left in giant rolls. Make up your mind
In what court to use an ordinary declarative
Sentence to make your journey quicker. Once
Upon a time there was me longer than you’ve been you,
A habit of not having habits crowned with a rim of light.

*

Signature Style: an essay

The ethics of signature are surely at stake when one receives an anonymous letter from an individual making a grave accusation against another. The question of authorship is doubly at stake when the letter accuses that other – let's not name him Orpheus yet – of an act of plagiarism.

The letter, effacing its authorship as entirely as possible (it is from one of 19 people) contains the accusation that the one not yet known as Orpheus has claimed authorship of work that clearly belongs to another, and has effaced that origin – that author – entirely.

The group had already misunderstood Barthes' strategic polemic for the death of the author, but here is an as-good-as-dead Barthesian author complaining that a particular text was (allegedly) made up of quotations from other texts, as Barthes had once (again, overstating his case) maintained of all texts.

The offence is, of course, in the alleged dissembling; there's no doubt about that.

Yet The Pseudo-Orpheus' essay *is* a tissue of quotations, but most are acknowledged. It does not display the signs of blatant plagiarism: the presence of a ghostly author behind some of the words, and nothing between the rest, the faint stench of glue where passages have been stuck together.

I cannot reply to this anonymous text, not simply because the reply can have no address. The ethics – the claim to stand by the word – are all in that act of signature, the sense that a text is authored.

Please write soon,

Yours, *etc* ...

*

Pentimento Reggae

Pentimento literally means repentance, but it also means an artist's change of mind: behind the head of Eurydice (crying of course) is a Hadean bush, or not *quite* a bush, rather: what *should* be a bush, what *could* be a bush, but is, in

fact, a bush drawn over the original head of Eurydice.

The artist changed his mind. And we can see this change of mind.

Or was that another occasion, the music and the words chiming with an experience that never happened?

I was pleased to see the book, some papers, new poems, in Linton Kwesi Johnson's hands, as performative testimony to the *written* act amongst 'a bubblin bass/a bad bad beat'....

*

Lucretius warns: 'Better the swan's brief song than that cry of cranes/Spread by the south wind through the clouds on high,' (twice).

*

Fiction

Once upon a time there was a sailor and he was in love with the most beautiful woman in the world. But, of course, this was before he had become a sailor, and she was not, at that time, regarded as beautiful. So I had better begin again....

That was the dream whose very words Orpheus woke up to, with. It seemed to him an auspicious opening for the tale. But was there more he could invent? Begin again:

When the sailor looked out over the flat ocean, all he could see was her laughing face; nearer to shore, when he could no longer see her, the cry of the gulls imitated her laugh, but mockingly, as if to remind him that, however many girls there might be in this port, not one of them would approach the crystalline beauty he felt she she she she - his heart leapt as he mentally typed: Eurydice! - possessed, though each (again mocking) would remind him of one or the other attribute of her beauty.

He was aware that he had dreamt an ending to the story too, but he could not recall it. He could not even remember whether it had been a happy ending or not. Rather than having been completed, or even abandoned, this story was simply a hook without a line, a plant without a payoff. A shade.

*

i *Product*

The taste of glue on my tongue as I look at the pile of envelopes on the floor. WITHIN each is a scribbled note, and some recent poems, printed in a fashion, with a title and press names, that we might call 'published'.

the books on the shelves are 'published', wrapped in covers, neat, and, practically speaking, firm enough to hold the pages together at least for a time.

Next to this word processor is an inch and a bit pile of loose papers. I refer to this – in hopeful potentiality – as 'my book'. One day, printed, published – it will find its way on to the shelves of people's homes. As my pamphlet will find itself, stuffed into between my spined publications, or thrown in a box kept for 'this sort of things'. Perhaps some will become a rare book in 30 years time. Perhaps some will be thrown away, unread, within 30 minutes of arrival speed of writing speed of delivery.

(then played back through ReadPlease2000)

*

Poetry interrupts history, muses the 'facts',
makes the said of hegemonic (or non-hegemonic) history
the saying of poetry,
which will create anew; *mutually interruptive*
a new said of non-history
for only the said may bear witness.
against amnesia not by covering the past
or by re-covering it
but by allowing a utopian counter-memory
to refute and argue with historical events.
against anaesthesia by keeping the poetry
of saying saying saying,
the reader assembles the parts.
a history must always be shown

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in 'tensions between aesthetic representation and history' (Tim Woods)

The danger lies in the possible violence against the other (the past) by making it the same (present in the present as the present). There has to be a responsibility towards the past, that does not violate its otherness (that's its very power

to read *us* as though *we* were other)

A textual otherness to distance the
material.

avoiding poetic and historical naturalizations
to make history memory in the sense that it is a contemporary exercise
and counter-memory in so far as it resists tradition

situated ,
its
situation
must be
visible

an ethics of attention

AS ETHICS INTERRUPTS POLITICS
the monolith

a poetics of

enjambement (versura) – creasing syntax with a (metrical) limit,
decreasing sense in sound

caesura – punctuating the metrics with a
space for thought

focal (vocal) shifts – speed of, creating a ‘metric/weight’,

a
Levinasia
n
interruptio
n

*

twiced.

*

Poetics and Praxis

All this talk about the impossibility of art is impossible. (Yes, let us throw paradox back into its teeth!) Is there art? Are there not only art-objects (including events)? Art is an idea, a concept perfectly possible, in the sense of *potentially* offering existents, but is precisely *impossible* because it has no goods to display, like a bankrupt salesperson. The goods are not even damaged.

Perhaps poetics did become detached from praxis, but perhaps it is our duty, thinks the latest Orpheus, to repair the damage. There’s no hope, surely, in burning the house down to see its frame, yes, Agamben’s final image.

Poetics are the products of the process of reflection upon writings, and upon the act of writing, gathering from the past and from others, speculatively casting into the future.... (fades)

*

types) *Robert* (autoprompts: *Sheppard*

*

A-Z

thin voice

zoning

reside : desire

‘crimes against hospitality’

the ominous monolith

thing Voice

I saying

So, for example, is the sky open for business? does the page square up? not said

*

An Orpheus for Emmanuel Levinas

It has been said that Orpheus could make *things* sing, that trees uprooted themselves for the joy of dancing to his song.

Shall we then still speak of his now silent voice as a saying? As an eternity of separate utterance? As a continuous suspension of the thematization of the said?

Is not thematization precisely his Hades now? Where he and Eurydice dwell as narratives, wherein themes gather themes? Wherein, in one popular refrain, he is fixed as the self-gratifying lover who could not bear

not to re-confirm his masculine love at the greatest expense to his beloved?

Orpheus attempted the purest of sayings – a saying that turned the tides to the waves of his voice – to rescue Eurydice from the realm of the said. But, as he turned, in his saying, to say (what we shall never know), towards Eurydice, she turned instantly to shadow. Her voice, her touch, her breath, were lost. What Orpheus had yet to say had become already said, frozen on his trembling lips.

Imagine his mad power, if you can, tuned to the howling of wild beasts, in his anguish, the furrows of his empty verses churning the Thracian fields. Like William Burroughs after him he foreswore the company of women. The lyric voice, unleashed, wordless, howled back at the things that now crouched obdurate, separate and silent. He howled for the sheer humanity (that is: its inhumanity) of the lyric voice and its separation from things, separation from self, as – after his dismemberment – his head, separated from his body, sang enough to make the trees weep, if they had been human.

*

Post

cards. The first quoted Barry MacSweeney:

At Sparty Lea the trees don't want Orpheus
to invoke any magic
they dance by themselves

The second quoted Shelley:

Language is a perpetual Orphic song

and so on

*

Permissive regime

leather jacket kneels
crackling sheen and grinning zips –
fleshed invitation

*

Finite Selection

erase sunlight by some synaesthetic
posture long enough for him to admire the
fingers moving across
last night to replace the scat
dismiss as lurid onanistic
talk about Dylan, Lennon, Costello
slipped across
controlling circumstances. The Russians were
the horrors since I last wrote here
into a watery musical sheet of sound
sentences that fit into boxes
in a number of senses
he stood and felt the cold wind of the winter's
touch a ghost-ice chilling him

*

*On finding a famous quotation from Adorno and realizing that it was Holocaust
Memorial Day*

Verse after Auschwitz? –
Each word blackens on the page;
I don't sing: I croak.

*

Process

The letters form into words and then into chains, phrases, sentences. They fit into boxes which, by their titles, invite certain characteristics to be written into existence. A box might suddenly change the typeface within it, as though the language were imprisoned. The frames of boxes build up to form what is called the template, a brash set of elastic rectangles that stretch as they are filled with words – processed, we say, as once we spoke of peas.

We mind Ps and Qs at this task, and the 24 other letters and the innumerable other signs of which we are sovereign. After a day four templates are filled and ready to be sent, into the cybernetic ether.

*

after Mallarmé, after Gomringer, after all

Imagine a project as a 3D space in which nodes would hang to constellate texts around them. Lines of connection.

Isn't a constellation formed by how you see it from a point in space? Texts would change constellations as my position to them changed, as new texts are added.

*

Parklife

The lake was frozen, almost entirely, although it was not thick ice that the seagulls slipped across, squawking for food and for the hell of it, it seemed to Orpheus. The ducks found the small part of the lake not frozen and dabbled in the water and dug into the muddy banks, slightly fractious with each other's company.

Further off, up the path that leads away from the lake and to the road, the grass either side glistening with frost in the sunshine that burst across the perfect blue sky, five or six crows, blue-black against the frost, had found a pile of crumbs a man had dropped for them, and were quietly eating – unlike the

gulls who fought each other in the air for a scrap until they had all lost it.

Every description, despite the joyful unfolding of its precision, seems to carry a moral imperative, as though humankind is incapable of leaving phenomena to themselves, without having designs upon them, showering them with shoddy desires.

The ducks in their corner, heads tucked in wings, woke as Orpheus walked by, to chatter, anxious. Instinctual withdrawal from the human embrace.

*

Voices Within

Otherword is other-
wise, is wise in the face of

the world and the
word. It turns away from

the world to let it be: snow
falls on its own melting.

The new wild order: slice
certain pages from the *Book*

Of Songs; write or rot. I
keep another book of unsung

notsongs near my hand, to turn
to song, thought's counterpoint.

*

Post

Writing in ancient forms shifts in the mouths of the dead.

*

A Voice Without

To say and not say at
the same time, or

at a different time to not
say and yet say –

eversaying, yes-
saying, nosaying,

truthsaying, lying,
neversaying so that it

closes into what has been
said; to say that I

am not saying, to not
say that I am not

saying, or at a
different time to say that

has been said, but *this*
will never be said, quite

simply, quite inexplicably,
has never been nor gone,

has arrived without arriving
at what has been, has left

without leaving what is known,
disappears into the unknown

which is left behind, as
never before, said.

*

Orpheus turned to Eurydice's face, to approach her in difference. You cannot *lead* another out of servitude, Hades, cannot but face that otherness. The act turns response to responsibility. And yet the turn turned her, othered her, utterly. As she had been hostage, so he would be,

her mute substitute, her spoken witness.

What he said speaks to us as saying's shade, *history*

That turn towards Eurydice, since any saying to be heard must be embodied in the said, *finally*, was inevitable

Orpheus was enacting a truth about poetry

He knew better than to speak for *her*, ventriloquizing her lamentation, giving voice to that which must remain unvoiced

He refused to moralize her, to turn her again to themes within themes
his responsibility he knew was to join her again
after madness

after dismemberment if only in the words of later poets

after the loss of *his* words

to love her

he knew he would sink his final saying

in the dark pool of the said

the defeat its fate as witness the death and yet the future of all poetry

after his /

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