

*The
Robert Sheppard
Companion*

SAMPLER

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edited by

SAMPLER
James Byrne &
Christopher Madden

with a preface by
Charles Bernstein

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Aesthetic Justice

CHARLES BERNSTEIN

So much of the aesthetically radical poetry of our time closes in on itself, hoarding its virtue or harboring the secret of its style.

Virtue, in the last word, is corrosive to style.

Aesthetic justice is when ‘form becomes reform,’ to quote one of Robert Sheppard’s suite of poems published here. In Sheppard’s poetics, reform doesn’t mean ameliorative improvement. Reform is a mark of poetry’s capacity to reformulate without final conclusion, to think outside formulation.

In Sheppard’s writing, essays and poems, we hear the clang of discourse: the warp, but also the whoop, of everyday life. His work will never stand for election. It resists even the self-election that is the sign of a poet’s despair of (or for) polis.

Aesthetic justice is the onward movement of the imaginary smashing into the possible. But aesthetic justice is also *dwelling in a now* that burrows ever deeper into its refusal of thematic deliverance.

Sheppard’s voices (discrepant discursive registers, transcreations, heteronyms) don’t call out to us as readers, as in a well-mannered lyric, nor do they call out to each other, as in a story. Rather the voices, the textual shards, call out to themselves, self-reflexively, as in — a poem is the cry of its vocations and the measure of its resistances.

Forms calls us out to ourselves: *calls out to*, a kind of aesthetic hailing; but also *calls us out*, exposing us, laying us bare, vulnerable, guilty as charged, without defense.

Sheppard has been a champion of British poetry that actively resists the complacent and the convenient, the merely competent. That has meant evading bullies who would ‘banish us,’ to use Dickinson’s phrase. Sheppard’s aesthetic justice has never been *just* for him; his social imagination is at one with poems, essays, teaching, and editing. His work is restlessly agile, generous at heart. Or so the essays in this book propose in their various insistences.

Otherwise innovation is just a fancy new saddle at the mind’s rodeo.

August 15th 2018,
Provincetown, Mass.

Introduction: A Sheppardian Social Poetics

JAMES BYRNE

Most writers make a contribution to literature but the great ones extend the literary tradition. Robert Sheppard belongs to the latter group as one of the most influential poets of his generation, someone who has been able to further our understanding of innovative poetry and poetics in a remarkable writing life spanning over forty years.

The present volume is a collection of thirteen chapters on Sheppard's writing. This structure intentionally reveals him as one who works in several modes – mostly as poet, but also as critic, editor, teacher, inventor (as Pessoa did before him, Sheppard has invented several heteronymic authors). We include key interviews, a roundtable discussion between contemporary poets about the writings and legacy of Sheppard's work, a comprehensive bibliography, reference index and a brief selection of the author's most recent and unpublished poems.

Sheppard's poetry can be read as 'linguistically innovative', emanating from the British Poetry Revival of the 1960s and 1970s. Barely out of school shorts, Sheppard sought to develop his sphere of influence early, tracking down Bob Cobbing in November 1973 and Lee Harwood (September '74), thus beginning lifelong correspondences with both poets and all this before attending the University of East Anglia where he studied English Literature. He interviewed Robert Creeley in 1984, six years before publishing a full collection of his own. Crucially, however, Sheppard's aesthetic remains distinct from the poets he sought out and is different to other linguistically innovative poets he met early on, such as Gilbert Adair, Maggie O'Sullivan and Adrian Clarke. His hearing for the poetic line and musical ear – sharp as any poet I've known – remains unique.

One of the ways Sheppard has extended the poetic tradition in England (where he has lived all his life) is via a complex reworking of poetic forms – or, rather, a 'reforming' of forms, as Charles Bernstein highlights in his Preface to this book. For Sheppard, as it was for Creeley and Charles Olson before him, 'form is content' and this melding is made possible, once again, because of the importance of musicality in

his writing.¹ For Sheppard, there always has to be an element of swing in the language. It's not that he puts language under pressure as such; language *is* pressure. Enjambed lines frequently work as hinges, which often allows for multiple readings of individual poems. In the opening chapter of this volume, Robert Hampson considers Sheppard's early poetics via influences such as Cobbing and Harwood (but also Roy Fisher and John Seed), exploring how form and/as content involve(s) a necessary (more organic) fracturing or disruption, a dislocated sense of narrative.

As Bernstein has noted, Sheppard's poetics is social, open, generous. One of many rapid-fire statements in *The Necessity of Poetics* asserts that a 'reason to make your poetics public is to test it, to build a community of writers'.² His approach to poetry encourages collagic, communal ways of reading. At the end of *Empty Diaries* (1998) he alludes to 'strands' which operate through individual poems to produce constellations of meaning(s). In *The Poetry of Saying*, he extends Valentin Vološinov's social theory to suggest that utterance, but also thinking itself, is essentially a dialogue with the world.³ Crucially for Sheppard's poetics, the poem *is* social, a space where the reader is able to enter as an active participant. *Complete Twentieth Century Blues* – one of three Selected Poems to date – affirms this in a section entitled 'Poetic Sequencing and the New', which states: '[t]he aim [is] to activate the reader into participation, into relating differences, to sabotage perceptual schema, to educate desire.'⁴ *Complete Twentieth Century Blues* provides the reader with a non-linear way to read Sheppard, playing with the idea of the 'Complete' or 'Selected', as often reinforced by publishers. This navigational way of reading Sheppard forms the basis of Mark Scroggins's chapter in this book (along with Alison Mark's, one of two writings revised specifically

¹ This idea of 'form as content' was written down by Charles Olson in 'Projective Verse', who attributes it to Robert Creeley. See 'Projective Verse', *Poetry Foundation* <<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/articles/69406/projective-verse>> [accessed 18 August 2018]. (Interestingly, as mentioned in *The Wolf* interview republished in this book, Sheppard scrutinises Olson's manifesto: 'Olson has always seemed too literal to me, and like most prosody, his looks less clear the more you look at it.' 'The Wolf Interview' [with Christopher Madden], *The Wolf*, 29 [Winter 2013], pp. 59-68 [p. 62]).

² Robert Sheppard, *The Necessity of Poetics*, Edge Hill Ormskirk edn (Liverpool: Ship of Fools, 2003; originally 2002), p. 4.

³ Robert Sheppard, *The Poetry of Saying* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2005), p. 7.

⁴ Robert Sheppard, *Complete Twentieth Century Blues* (Cambridge: Salt, 2008), p. 83.

for inclusion in this volume). Within these various dialogic networks, Sheppard's poetry is what some would call 'difficult'. But the writing is no less socially recognisable for this. Sheppard has never compromised his poetry with overarching concerns of accessibility, of being understood. Instead, he is wary of the artificiality or insincerity that might arrive from the completeness of thought. His thinking here is foregrounded in Veronica Forrest-Thomson's theory of 'poetic artifice', which he has written about in each of his three major critical works, *The Poetry of Saying: British Poetry and its Discontents, 1950-2000* (2005), *When Bad Times Made for Good Poetry* (2011), and *The Meaning of Form in Contemporary Innovative Poetry* (2016). The opening chapter of *The Meaning of Form*, 'Poetic Artifice and Naturalization in Theory and Practice', is as clear an explication of Thomson's ideas as has been written. Introducing *When Bad Times Made for Good Poetry*, Sheppard clarifies his position towards (in)completeness in relation to his own personal aesthetic when he writes: 'Poems are coherent deformations and reformations of the matter of history into the manner of poetry, and it is their transformative, disruptive, power [...] that characterises the force of art.'⁵

Along with 'the education of desire', the 'matter of history' reformed/deformed is explored in many of Sheppard's poems. History, generative of the Latin 'historia' (to inquire), provides a frame through which to read several of his books, particularly *Warrant Error* (2009) and *Berlin Bursts* (2011), two of the poet's most impressive single volume collections. In the month before collecting materials for this introduction, it was interesting to note that parts of *Warrant Error* are being translated into Spanish and 'Prison Camp Violin, Riga' from *Berlin Bursts* has been selected as *Guardian* 'poem of the week'.⁶ This, to the passing observer, might suggest a resurgence of interest in Sheppard's work. But the fact is he's a meticulously prolific poet who has never been away from the cutting edge of British poetry. Sheppard cares little for the corporate circus of prizes and mainstream jostling for position and this recent interest, though overdue perhaps, acknowledges how Britain is often slow to catch up with its practitioners writing ahead of the zeitgeist.

⁵ Robert Sheppard, *When Bad Times Made for Good Poetry* (Bristol, Shearsman Books, 2011), p. 12.

⁶ The *Guardian* republication, with a commentary by Carol Rumens, was published on 23rd July, 2018: www.theguardian.com/books/booksblog/2018/jul/23/poem-of-the-week-prison-camp-violin-riga-by-robert-sheppard.

Interestingly, *Warrant Error* ('war on terror' – Cobbing's sonic influence working here) is revealed by Adam Hampton as deploying a 'political language [that] seeks subterfuge, conceals its true depths, cloaks its ideology by appealing to the interlocutor as a political being, preying upon their ideological biases'. This, again, reveals a writer who requires something of the reader. *Warrant Error* is a socio-political text, but one that is, like history itself, interruptive (of itself) and on the move.

The creative work published at the end of this volume opens with selections from Sheppard's 'The English Strain', a satiric yet fierce response to BREXIT and some of his most polemical writing to date. But there is no departure from some of the linguistic 'subterfuge' of previous collections. Given his subject matter, the temptation here might be to carefully chronicle Britain's decision to leave the European Union. This kind of passivity for Sheppard wouldn't do. Whether ventriloquizing Boris Johnson via Thomas Wyatt or awakening Elizabeth Barrett Browning's 'Sonnets from the Portuguese' to the ongoing political horrors of the twenty-first century, Sheppard is able to form activist responses to the times through which we live without sacrificing his linguistic range. 'The roof of our love-nest hosts noisome finches; / it's infested with mice scratching at your cricket bat. / On Sky News you applaud the Smithole President.'

Throughout his eleven full collections, we find a serious poet with a terrific sense of humour. This is rare among British poets of Sheppard's generation, many of whom remain chained to the bland social realism (or what I might call self-indulgent lyric miserablism) that comes from a nation still in love with Larkin. Sheppard, by contrast, celebrates language (even when serious) without ever forsaking the ethical. Smut, sex or sexual innuendo are able to act as a mirror tilted back to the violence that emanates from within our shared sense of history. Sheppard is willing to reveal the language of sexual power. Again, readerly participation is important here: he presents his findings – (over)hearings, observations – and, if we choose, we might add a layer of thinking, of desire enacted. There is dare in operating like this, depending on who or what is being observed. Sheppard is a breaker of taboos. At The University of Liverpool, soon after the paedophile disc-jockey Jimmy Savile died, I heard him read a poem as if written in Savile's own voice. The audience faced themselves facing the unspeakable (this poem is mentioned in Tom Jenks' chapter 'God's not too pleased with me': Robert Sheppard's Poetics of Transformative

Translation', which also considers Sheppard's reimaginings of Petrarch). Elsewhere, Sheppard has dug up The Earl of Rochester from his sadist grave in *Fucking Time* (1994), as the title suggests never holding back on the erotic. Parts of *Empty Diaries* narrate the lives of female characters and 'Wiped Weblogs', a recent series of poems, is written through the female voice. However, it would be wrong to think Sheppard's intensity and sensitivity to his subjects dips in any way. Presenting a range of examples from both of these texts, Joanne Ashcroft documents 'an alternative vision of female subjectivity, one which offers women another way of being seen and, more importantly, of *seeing*.'

This last point about the seen and the seeing is important to Sheppard's poetics, from the point of view of how he constellates observation alone – the eye as an active recorder, unblinking. Sheppard is non-stop, a writer on high alert. In countering the sharpness of the blank page, he doesn't wait for the misnomer of 'inspiration'. Instead, he prefers to write daily, notationally, is a considerable diarist, twitterer, blogger.⁷ During one of our many dialogues about writerly process at Edge Hill University, where I worked with him for four years, Sheppard told me that he often writes (sculpts?) from a large block of text, from which individual poems might emerge. Since retiring as Professor of Poetry and Poetics at Edge Hill, he is busy as ever, a fact unsurprising to anyone that knows him, not so much *retired*, more a full-time writer.

The seeing and the seen also bring up Sheppard's sensitivities towards the self and other, in which he cleverly reckons with the idea of a poetry of saying alongside that which is said. In *When Bad Times Made for Good Poetry*, he quotes Emmanuel Levinas: 'Language as *saying* is an ethical openness to the other; as that which is *said* – reduced to a fixed identity or synchronised presence – it is an ontological closure of the other.'⁸ For Sheppard it's more complicated than this since 'the *saying* must exist in the said, as ghost to its host'. This interrelationship suits his open, social poetics which, though not looking to close down his writing into 'saidness', acknowledges the relationship between what is written (*saying*) and what is read (*said*).⁹ The reader is on hand, creative,

⁷ His blog, a large archive of materials related to his work and frequently referred to in the chapters of this book, can be found at: www.robertsheppard.blogspot.com.

⁸ Emmanuel Levinas, 'Dialogue with Emmanuel Levinas: Emmanuel Levinas and Richard Kearney', in *Face to Face with Levinas* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1986), pp. 13-34 (p. 29).

⁹ Sheppard, *The Poetry of Saying*, p. 13.

part of the commune. Nikolai Duffy explores these ideas of saying/said, self/other, detailing why Sheppard, ultimately, prefers the concept of ‘unfinishing’. Like Allen Fisher in a later chapter, Duffy also focuses on Sheppard and his interest in music. For Fisher, Sheppard is, above all, a ‘blues man’, who carries through his poems the trace of damage and/or disruption, something that inevitably affects both the form and content of his poems. Duffy, relating Sheppard’s writings to the importance of rhythm and musicality (as well as Levinas and Jacques Derrida and a questioning of self and other in relation to form), prefers to amalgamate Sheppardian musicality with the discordance of modern jazz.¹⁰ These themes of musicality, self-other, form-content (especially regarding lineation) are also picked up by Christopher Madden, who turns his critical attention to the possibilities of Sheppard as ‘Anti-Orpheus’, exploring the idea of the lyric in his work and bringing together a myriad of key thinkers relevant to Sheppard’s own poetics, such as Derrida, Maurice Blanchot and Theodor Adorno, among others.

Although this book has been edited to include stand-alone chapters, there are, as we have seen, many links and threads, networks, strands. Various chapters in this volume look beyond the act of writing poetry. Scott Thurston had produced a nuanced history of *Pages*, edited by Sheppard, which published a who’s-who of linguistically innovative (mostly UK) poets from 1987-1990, and has been recently republished on *Jacket2*.¹¹ Sheppard’s editorial activity is another important strand to his modus operandi as a communal poet. After editing a transatlantic anthology of poetry and poetics with myself, a few months later he brought together the ‘European Union of Imaginary Authors’ – invented poets written through collaborations with several leading poets in the UK, a project conceived before Britain’s European referendum had indeed taken place, perhaps somehow anticipating it.¹² Sheppard’s dual interest in translation and heteronyms is brought into view here, and is

¹⁰ Sheppard is a huge music fan. He is also a musician (guitar, harmonica) who played various gigs in Sussex, where he was born, before moving to UEA, London and Liverpool, where he has lived for many years.

¹¹ See ‘Pages, 1987–1990, ed. Robert Sheppard’, *Jacket2* <www.jacket2.org/reissues/pages> [accessed 18 August 2018].

¹² The two anthologies referred to here are *Atlantic Drift: An Anthology of Poetry and Poetics* (Todmodern and Ormskirk: Arc Publications and Edge Hill University Press, 2017) and *Twitters for a Lark: Poetry of the European Union of Imaginary Authors* (Bristol: Shearsman Books, 2017).

explored in Zoë Skoulding's chapter, 'European Fictions', which looks at the reasons why a writer would produce 'fake' poets from underneath the fading horizon of the EU. Two further chapters discuss different kinds of collaboration. Patricia Farrell has written about Sheppard's work with the artist Pete Clarke, the 'expressive tension' between text and image and the production of meaning in these works, rather than the 'donation' of a fixed or specific meaning. Ailsa Cox writes a portrait of her former colleague at Edge Hill where, as she outlines, he was a pedagogic game-changer, someone who never compromised in over twenty years of teaching innovative poetry and poetics.

I would like to thank my co-editor Christopher Madden for his expert eye in all our editorial exchanges, for the many conversations we've had about Sheppard's work in which I've learnt a great deal and, above all, for bringing this book to life. Also, a massive thank you to our contributors for their dedication and know-how in exploring Sheppard's work. The backstory of this *Companion* began in September 2015 when I realised it was likely to be the last year of Sheppard's teaching.¹³ The following year myself, Madden, Ashcroft and Jenks arranged for a 'Robert Sheppard Symposium' at Edge Hill which, on 8th March, saw four panels rotate throughout a full day with an evening reading at the Arts Centre. Many people who have worked with or been taught by Sheppard were in attendance.¹⁴ Of course, Sheppard himself started things off, with trademark high velocity. All that occurred has been impressively documented by Joey Francis.¹⁵ Apart from the reading, Sheppard himself decided to keep out of the panels, which he did in a typically dignified manner, offering a short note.¹⁶ We are grateful

¹³ In this case I mean full-time academic teaching. Sheppard has been retained by Edge Hill as a Professor Emeritus, where he still supervises Ph.Ds.

¹⁴ These events were supported by Edge Hill's department of English, History & Creative Writing. Thanks also to Izzy Lamb, the RSS intern who worked tirelessly on the day.

¹⁵ Joey Francis, 'Conference Report: Robert Sheppard Symposium', *Journal of British and Irish Innovative Poetry* <<http://doi.org/10.16995/biip.40>>. Francis, instrumental to the reissuing of *Pages on Jacket2*, has also interviewed Sheppard about his editorial of the magazine. See 'On *Pages*: An interview between Robert Sheppard and Joey Francis', *Jacket2* <<http://jacket2.org/commentary/pages>> [accessed 18 August 2018].

¹⁶ The note that was read was as follows: 'I am extremely grateful that this symposium is happening – and I suppose I should explain why I am absent from the room during its sessions (though I am hanging about the rest of the time!). For one, I would find it almost unendurable to witness the full critical apparatus turned upon my work (which I hope is what will occur). I have heard today described as a 'celebration' of my work,

to all who presented for the Symposium – those not included in this volume and those who are. Myself and my co-Chairs always hoped that what began as the Symposium would culminate in producing a book of this quality. Finally, thank you Robert – innovator, catalyst – for your extraordinary approach to poetry and poetics, for the way you continue to move the tradition forwards.

17th August, 2018
Liverpool

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but I hope it will be an interrogation of it. Secondly, I have no wish to take part in it (even subliminally, by sheer silent presence). I provide the headache (in Beckett's memorable metaphor) but it is not my job to provide the aspirin. My commitment to poetics as a speculative, writerly discourse is in part predicated on the belief that a writer cannot 'read' his or her work, or better had not, that 'explanation' is neither the business of poet or poetics. Thirdly, I am taking a cue from the late Tom Raworth who, when I was about to deliver a paper on his work at the Sound Eye Festival in Cork, told me he was going to explore the city. I have heard of symposia on writers that have been policed by the presence and intervention of the writer. I like to think Tom was telling me what I am telling you all now: that my absence will allow you freedom to express yourselves exactly as you see fit. As it should be. See you later.'