‘An intuition of the particular’
Also by Ian Brinton
Brontë’s Wuthering Heights, A Reader’s Guide (London: Continuum 2010);
An Andrew Crozier Reader (Manchester: Carcanet Press, 2012);
Poems of Yves Bonnefoy I, (Oystercatcher Press, 2013)

Also by Peter Hughes
The Interior Designer’s Late Morning, Many Press 1983
Bar Magenta (with Simon Marsh), Many Press, 1986
Odes on St. Cecilia’s Day, Poetical Histories, 1990
The Metro Poems, Many Press, 1992
Psyche in the Gargano, Equipage, 1995
Paul Klee’s Diary, Equipage, 1995
Keith Tippet Plays Tonight, Maquette Press, 1999
Sound Signals Advising of Presence, infernal methods, 2006
Minor Yours, Oystercatcher Press, 2006
Nistanimera, Shearsman Books, 2007
The Sardine Tree, Oystercatcher, 2008
The Summer of Agios Dimitrios, Shearsman, 2009
Behoven, Oystercatcher, 2009
The Pistol Tree Poems (with Simon Marsh), Shearsman, 2011
Interscriptions (with John Hall), Knives Forks And Spoons Press, 2011
Regulation Cascade, Oystercatcher, 2012
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‘An intuition of the particular’
some essays on the poetry of Peter Hughes

edited by
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‘An intuition…
Introduction:
‘a tuning-fork against illusion’

In his Parisian lecture to the ‘Association des traducteurs littéraires de France’ in 1976 Yves Bonnefoy suggested that we must come to understand the nature of poetry translation as poetry re-begun. And in any new beginning there is a new creation as was recognised by Bernard Dubourg, the translator of both J.H. Prynne and Anthony Barnett, when he addressed the issue of the art of translation for Grosseteste Review volume 12 in 1979. Dubourg claimed that to translate is to find yourself a twin, “to light upon a twin to which you can forthwith claim the minority”:

The technique of translation, of which no one can properly define the items, serves to conceal the fact that a good translation contains a greater number of possible senses than the original, being the result of two labours instead of one, and it’s for the reader to profit by it.

When Peter Hughes’ twenty English versions of the sonnets of Petrarch appeared in October 2012 from Oystercatcher under the title Regulation Cascade it came as a delight but no surprise since, after all, here was a poet who had already collaborated with fellow poets, notably John Hall and Simon Marsh: after all, the versions of the Italian fourteenth-century poet are another collaborative effort. In his own contribution to this volume of essays, ‘Pulling on the Feathered Leggings’, Marsh refers to the ability Hughes has to “blend and transform” and this quality, a translation of one world into another, a metamorphosis in which a moment of Heraclitean movement passes into “the idea of a poem”, is perhaps nowhere more clear than in these new versions of Petrarch.

The first poem in the volume presents a thrust of understanding towards the Italian poet’s sonnet 34, ‘Apollo, s’ancor vive il bel desio’, where the god’s dashing pursuit of Daphne is merged with another of his roles as patron of poetry. As the fleeing nymph, the Laura / laurel of Petrarch’s focus on love, merges into a tree so the fleeting ideas of the invisible become stationary and defined, halted as it were in the lines of a poem:

I invoke the idea of a poem as perpetual enactment of pursuit
of passion of flight forever turning
into your damp cavern & formation

With a glance over the shoulder at Keats’s “leaf-fringed legend” of “mad pursuit” Peter Hughes calls up his Muse to assist in the act of metamorphosis “as living light changes this appearance” and that which was movement becomes stilled. Clarity dispels darkness, “l’aere disgombra” now “surfaces through you-tube & saliva” and both “night” and “ground” move via the poetic act “through air & all is increasingly clear”. In one graceful dance ideas take on palpability and a thought becomes a poem.

Peter Hughes translates Petrarch’s Italy into a landscape of the Norfolk coast and sonnet 35, where the early Renaissance poet wanders “Solo e pensoso i piu deserti campi”, becomes

I walk that lonesome road until it ends
in scabby paddocks rank with thistle
vacancies of unregarded salt-marsh
& hissing shingle slopes down to the sea

With the meditative mourning tones of Nathaniel Shilkret and Gene Austin, in the 1927 song ‘The Lonesome Road’, the style of the African-American folk song measures out the imprisoned distances of Petrarch’s “vo mesurando a passi tardi e lenti”. This recent Oystercatcher is the first section from Hughes’ planned opus of Petrarchan translation and more is to be expected from both Like This Press and Gratton Street Irregular. Thirty more of them, sonnets 67–96, under the title Soft Rush, have already appeared in a limited edition from Red Ceilings Press and one of these, ‘Erano i capei d’oro a l’aura sparsi’, evokes a world where the memory of sensual beauty ensures that the poet’s relationship with his lady does not simply dwindle into age and forgetfulness. Hughes’ version opens with the tension of what is and what is not:

a deft breeze slightly lifted surprising
qualities of fair hair woven with light
from her eyes extensive swathes of elsewhere
via memory into now where she is not

That precise use of “deft” has a painter’s eye that has captured the briefest of moments opening out into a landscape of the past. A breeze that slightly lifts the hair becomes the door to a wealth, “extensive swathes”, belonging
once “where she is not” and brought into the “now” along the via / path of memory. The sonnet concludes with a sense of continuity that takes us into the future and the original Italian, with its image of a heart wounded by a bow that has lost its potency, becomes the domesticity of relationship which finds form in the togetherness of a walk through wild weather:

where weird late sun slants downwards through storm clouds
out over a desolate valley road
we’ll walk unaccompanied tomorrow

The togetherness of the first person plural in that last line is tinged with a sense of mortality and the isolation of a movement towards death which is always “unaccompanied”.

Reviewing *Behoven* for Todd Swift’s online magazine *Eyewear* I quoted from George Steiner’s 1997 book, *Errata*, a deeply moving collection of autobiographical sketches. Writing about musical criticism Steiner suggested that whilst “talk” enlists “metaphor, simile, analogy” in a more or less impressionistic way, music, coming before language, is a “primal burst out of nothingness”: the fall of man can be seen as a withdrawal into the rational explanation involved in verbal expression. Languages appear as registers of separate particularities after the collapse of Babel and Steiner re-created his early years in terms of those very aspects of the particular:

I grew possessed by an intuition of the particular, of diversities so numerous that no labour of classification and enumeration could exhaust them. Each leaf differed from any other on each differing tree… each blade of grass, each pebble on the lake-shore was, eternally “just so”. No repetition of measurement, however closely calibrated, in whatever controlled vacuum it was carried out, could ever be perfectly the same.

A focus upon the particular and an awareness of the unrepeateable nature of the perpetually moving universe are both central to the poetry of Peter Hughes and it is no accident that when interviewed by John Welch he should have talked of the journal he kept which became reduced to “some isolated fragments which seemed to re-enact a mood, the experience of being there, a condensation of language”. Early in that interview Hughes talked about his childhood and the “clues” that led him towards poetry. For instance being taken to the libraries every week he remembered choosing non-fiction books about “Space, dinosaurs, rocks” and recalled a Primary
School teacher who would entertain his pupils by bringing in “moles that had been run over, bits of pheasant that had tarmac sticking to them” and who would play his pupils lots of music: “all this to generate poetry.” These autobiographical fragments of memory inevitably call to mind the conversations that Basil Bunting had with Jonathan Williams, Descant on Rawthey’s Madrigal (gnomon press 1968), in which the Northumbrian poet recalled his father’s close concern with histology:

There was in those days an animal shop in Newcastle and he had an arrangement: when an animal died he would be called at once and go and remove the particular glands he wanted to examine before anything else was done. So he managed to have lions, tigers, leopards, monkeys, all sorts of things on his list besides the small animals he could buy for the purpose. The house was sometimes full of lizards that had escaped from their box in the cellar.

It was this background that prompted Bunting to tell Peter Makin in December 1984 that “Suckling poets should be fed on Darwin till they are filled with the elegance of things seen or heard or touched”. In a similar manner the young Hughes tramped through the Berkshire Downs where “there was no distinction between the poetry and place or poetry and history” and it is this palpability, this sense of exactness, an understanding of how language evokes place that prompts so many of his poems to be what Derek Slade quotes as “events in language rather than vehicles for sentiment or anecdote.”

However, the poetry of Peter Hughes is much more than just a world of particularity and he has, time and again, threading through his work the ability to condense the universal into the field of local habitation and name. Confronting the inescapable nature of mutability he recognises both the impassioned cry of Lycaon, clutching the knees of the nemesis Achilles in Book XXI of the Iliad, and the inevitability of the Greek hero’s response. As he puts it in the opening lines of the second movement of his ‘Quintet for St. Cecilia’s Day’:

I don’t think any significant distances have been covered since the landlord traipsed by with servant and bandy gait a couple of days or weeks or centuries ago.

This oeuvre of poems provides the reader with, in the words of Steiner, “a tuning-fork against illusion.”
An Interview with Peter Hughes

This interview was conducted by John Welch at Peter and his partner Lynn's home in Hunstanton on the north Norfolk coast in 2009, and concluded by email.

JW: How did it start?

PH: My first encounter with poetry—I suppose it was at school. My parents took me to two libraries every week, the one in the village and the one in Cowley. But most of the books I chose would be non-fiction. Space, dinosaurs, rocks. Or endless series of Biggles and Just William stories. Then I had a teacher at primary school called Michael Strangeways who was quite young—it was probably his first teaching job. I can remember when I started at that school in 1961 there were various old teachers, reading from ancient Janet and John books and stories about gormless rabbits. I can’t remember learning to read, but it was strange having these very old-fashioned teaching methods where an old person stood in front of the class and talked to you and if anything bad happened would say “I have a solution for everything. Philip spat at Linda in the playground and he will therefore sit behind the piano and fill this jam jar with spit and won’t come out until it’s full.” Contrasting with all that was this young teacher, Michael Strangeways, who would pile groups of us into a minibus and drop us off at various locations in the Berkshire Downs. It must have been entirely illegal, I would think. He would make little clues as to where each group had to go and they would be in rhyming quatrains or written in runes—he was a Tolkien aficionado, and had read us The Hobbit. So we’d peer at these scraps of verse and try to relate them to the map and what we could see around us. Or he would bring in moles that had been run over, bits of pheasant that had tarmac sticking to them, and play us lots of music—all this to generate poetry. We didn’t do any Maths for the whole year in his class that I can remember. But I was lucky enough to be in his class twice, with another teacher in between. I think the first time I became aware of poetry was through him. Poetry, I mean, that seemed worth attending to—as opposed to nursery rhymes or fey effusions about birds being gleeful.

JW: So you first encountered poetry through these “clues”?
PH: Yes... and through writing poetry and doing drawing and painting in response to music, and through going out along the River Cherwell, or on these strange excursions to the Berkshire Downs where landscape and history, the history of landscape and history of language, were all interwoven. He would take some of us off on a Saturday, again through the Berkshire Downs, past Wayland’s Smithy and White Horse Hill. There was no distinction between the poetry and place or poetry and history. To him it seemed a natural way of relating to the world. I don’t know if he was a poet. All that was extremely important to me, the fact that an adult could be passionate about it.

JW: It sounds remarkable. And as you say he couldn’t work like that nowadays.

PH: No! The next thing I can remember in terms of poetry, at school, was reading Hardy in class, *Far From the Madding Crowd*, and having an almost visceral reaction to bits of writing. There’s a bit where Boldwood is walking across a field one morning, preoccupied, with his veins bulging, his jealousy working overtime. He looks down at his boots covered with colour from the buttercups. They had become bronzed with this effect. It’s one of those moments where you see something in writing for the first time, something that you yourself have experienced, and it somehow seems wrong, it seems improbable, intrusive almost, that somebody else has noticed that. One of those moments which seem to validate your own experience as being worthy of being written. At the same time, of course, what you read is changing what you see. But I can’t remember quite how I got involved in writing outside of school. I wrote songs—I did a lot of music as a teenager and wrote songs for little bands I was in. Then I had a year out of school and worked as a milkman, then hiring out boats, then working as a stagehand. I got to know Shaw’s *St. Joan* very well! I went to art college for a year, left and went down to the Scillies.

JW: *Why did you leave after a year?*

PH: I wasn’t getting much out of it and I went down to the Scillies in the Easter holidays, fell in love with the place and wanted to go back. I ended up spending a year, doing some farm work, and a lot of reading. I kept a sort of journal and ended up throwing everything away except for some isolated fragments which seemed to re-enact a mood, the experience of being there, a condensation of language. That led naturally into trying to...
John Welch & Peter Hughes

link some of these pieces into free-standing poems. The following Autumn I went off to Cambridge to do a degree in English. I realised that was what I wanted to do. That was at the “Tech”, the Cambridge College of Arts and Technology. John James was teaching there, and Nigel Wheale.

**JW:** Were you actually taught by them?

**PH:** I was taught briefly by Nigel. He did a seminar on Shakespeare’s late romances. He’d only just got there. I don’t think John ever taught me. But I started reading his poetry. And Nigel would lend me books of American poetry.

**JW:** What year would that have been?

**PH:** I was there from 1978 to 1981. There was quite a lot going on, because there was the Cambridge Poetry Festival. There was a big international presence. I became more aware of European poetry through the festival. But it was coming to an end. Later, in 1991 or 1992, it would be “replaced” by the CCCP.

**JW:** For a time there was a fringe festival as well. I remember reading with Nigel Wheale at the fringe.

**PH:** Yes, I did too. My first reading. It was terrifying. In fact it was Nigel who asked me if I sent poetry off anywhere. I hadn’t, so he gave me three or four suggestions, one of which was The Many Press. I hadn’t sent anything off to any magazines at that point. I’d ended up in Brighton, after I’d graduated. I sent you those poems from there, I think. I went to a party, stayed the night and ended up staying several months and getting a job delivering parcels. I arranged to do a part-time M.A. at Sussex, with Andrew Crozier. But I unexpectedly got a grant to do a full-time course. At that time, the only post-graduate course in modern poetry was at Stirling, so that’s where I went.

**JW:** I remember getting those poems, and they struck me as very accomplished.

**PH:** I was very startled to have them accepted. It was a great moment!

**JW:** So you’d been at Cambridge, and had been in touch with two people
who were connected to what had been going on in Cambridge poetry from the mid-1960s. John James in particular was in at the beginning. So was there a growing awareness on your part of all of that?

**PH:** I don't think I became really aware of that till after I’d left, strangely enough. When I went to Italy in 1983 to work I started buying books from Peter Riley’s list, and it was really then that I started to explore, firstly through John James' work, some of the other things that were going on. There was the anthology *A Various Art* which came out, in 1987, edited by Andrew Crozier and Tim Longville. Then work from the small presses, including yours.

**JW:** So you were “doing the TEFL”, teaching English as a Foreign Language, for many a rite of passage at the outset of a career, and you actually stayed in Italy for quite a long time?

**PH:** I went to L’Aquila in September 1983, and then moved to Rome after about six months. I wasn’t paying very much attention at that time to other people’s writing and I wasn’t thinking very much about stylistic issues, I was just aiming to respond to being in Italy. I was writing *The Metro Poems*, which hovered around a sonnet shape, but were quirkier than my earlier things. Then *Bar Magenta*, with Simon Marsh. I moved back from Rome to Cambridge just in time for the first Cambridge Conference of Contemporary Poetry, at which I’d been invited to read. In the early ’90s. I think that was Nigel’s doing too.

**JW:** Yes, *The Metro Poems* had more of a sense of random elements brought together. A combination of the rural and the urban—Rome is quite a small city of course—and also a strong presence of the sea, and an interest in the night sky.

**PH:** Yes, sea and night sky. When I was a kid, my parents were always taking us off camping, several times a year. We got close to the sea and night sky every few weeks—sometimes a bit too close. I remember hanging on to guy-ropes, as the tent rose into Welsh downpour, like a malignant kite. When I was in Scotland, and then the following year in the even colder environment of Abruzzo, the night skies were quite stunning, with very little light pollution up in the Apennines. I’ve always found—and this may go back to Hardy as well—that juxtaposition of the very small and
transient with the biggest possible, and the way those things move against each other, stirring. I look back at some poems of mine and think “that's a religious poem for atheists”. Billowing awe and wonder on a cosmic scale held down by a few plastic tent-pegs. Reminds me of Doug Oliver’s comment in ‘An Island that is all the World’: “What does it mean to talk of spirituality in poetry when no religious belief lies behind the enquiry?”

**JW:** *Was Rome important in other ways, as the “eternal city”. A lot of your references are quite gamy, corruption and other forms of louche behaviour. Your Italian did get very good?*

**PH:** Yes. I ended up doing a lot of translation work. But I was there for several years so it did have a chance to improve. I had some exciting times. Romantically complex years, to say the least. I think I’d always been fairly withdrawn, but being in a new environment in a new country, and behaving in a new language, I found very liberating. I was brought up as a Roman Catholic, not very strictly, and spent my teenage years despising the Catholic church and everything about it. I wouldn’t have been able to look at religious painting or listen to religious music with any patience. Another thing that happened in Rome was that I fell in love with baroque art. And the gaminess of Caravaggio was part of that.

**JW:** *And also Saint Cecilia? You have a number of poems addressed to her.*

**PH:** The embracing of all that imagery in a way that was freed from what were for me previously repressive religious experiences was very exciting. I became obsessive about tracking down paintings and sculptures, doing the rounds of Rome and elsewhere. I kept my teaching down to a couple of days each week and would go off on endless train journeys all over Italy. The St. Cecilia theme brought together all the arts, of course. And Frank O’Hara somewhere said we weren’t allowed to write about her any more—so I did.

**JW:** *I stayed with you in Rome on two occasions—I have written about it in my prose book Dreaming Arrival. For me it was a sense of continuity that struck me, where the emperor appears to metamorphose into the pope, and the vestal virgins become nuns. I remember you taking me to a church once where women go who are trying to get pregnant, and the goddess Juno has turned into…*
PH: The ‘Madonna of Childbirth’ in Sant’ Agostino. Yes I can see the statue, by Sansovino. And I can see the local deities and nature spirits turning into the pantheon of saints. There’s a good Caravaggio there too—the grubby soles of peasant feet foregrounded. It was the opportunity to spend some years walking not just past but through those spaces, by Borromini for example, the statues of Bernini, the paintings of Caravaggio and all the rest … I still feel it’s part of my “home”. I did a piece recently called ‘Italia’ which had thirty sections, one for each of the Italian provinces. Italy is still there in my writing, partly because of my ongoing collaboration with Simon Marsh. Today I’m expecting The Pistol Tree Poems Number 58. There will be 106 in total, simply because the first one I did and sent to Simon happened to have fifty three lines. He wrote back a mirror image of it, with fifty three lines. So for number three I did fifty two lines and he echoed that. We’re half way through in terms of the number of poems but in terms of the mass of writing we’re getting quite near the end.

JW: So there’s an element of process here, using arbitrary procedures. But also an element of improvisation? As musicians might improvise?

PH: Yes, very much so. Picking up elements from previous poems which may lie fallow for half a dozen sections or more, and then re-emerge like a thread to be woven back into the sequence. And introducing new material which may initially seem completely at odds with what’s gone before. Contrasts in tone, register. Embracing the “unpoetic”. We did use to play music together when we shared a house as students in Cambridge. We both played guitar. Simon still plays every week and plays with bands. I’m not sure how that’s going now because he’s bought a house and moved out of Milan, but he still works in Milan four days a week.

JW: And is music still important to you?

PH: I got to a point, back in England when I was deputy head teacher in a primary school in Cambridge, when I was still trying to do music (mainly saxophone by this point) and painting and writing and I ended up doing pretty much nothing in a satisfying way. So I stopped writing for a couple of years, stopped the music apart from joining an informal group of jazz musicians who met a couple of times a month, and concentrated on painting. I did Cambridge Open Studios for several years, with four weekends a year which I did in Peter Riley’s bookshop. It wasn’t really
until May 2006 that I started writing again in a very purposeful way. By then I knew that I had to leave teaching, and school management. The first *Pistol Tree* poems were about that time and I started writing the poems that went into *Nistanimera*, which was published by Shearsman. Salt had done *Blue Roads*, a sort of selected poems up to that point, and it was time to start again.

**JW:** *So improvisatory techniques, which you’ve evoked for instance in ‘Keith Tippett Plays Tonight’, which came out as a pamphlet in 1999, were an influence?*

**PH:** I’ve often found that the writing I’ve enjoyed most has been written at some speed, sometimes while listening to music, though I don’t tend to do that so much now. It still interests me as a way of informing writing. For example I did a long, over 70-page, poem called ‘Berlioz’ not so long ago which again was about getting back to writing and putting the instruments up in the attic, the saxophone as well as the guitar. It was interesting thinking about writing using the composer’s career and the different ways that he’d composed and performed, as a sort of metaphor. But it’s a kind of narrative poem too. (Something else you’re not allowed to do.)

**JW:** *Simon Marsh stayed in Italy, but you decided to come back…*

**PH:** My first wife and I came back when our son Tom was about two. I was more reluctant than my wife. I certainly wanted to stop doing TEFL. In a way I had almost stopped when Tom was born. I’d cut down my teaching to about two days a week. I worked for the Italian National Bank, for a helicopter factory down in Frosinone and I worked for the Italian army at one point. The Italian contribution to the war in Afghanistan about the time of the Russian withdrawal was to train the Pakistani army to clear minefields. And there was an amazing variety of mines left behind, ranging from 1940s wooden Czechoslovakian box mines to the very high-tech fibreglass things that were dropped from the air, and primed by contact with the ground when a fragile glass phial of acid would start eating away a thin metal wire. They would teach me about mines in Italian in the morning, we’d go to the Officers’ Mess for lunch. After lunch I would teach it to them back in English. All that was quite surreal. A long table covered in coffee cups and bits of grenades. I’d cut down the teaching to spend more time with Tom, so I started doing more translation work. I wish we’d had the internet then. I spent hours delivering translations around Rome.
**JW:** Were there any Italian poets that meant a lot to you, or that you had had contact with?

**PH:** I read the highlights of Italian literature in the years I was there. The person that ended up meaning most to me was Pasolini. I still find it fascinating the way that he brings together the personal, political, local, cosmic, dialect and formal resources. He writes about very ordinary, untouristy aspects of Rome and Italy, but using quite formal means sometimes, Dante’s *terza rima* for example. So you get this interesting juxtaposition: classical, very resonant form and earthy accounts of poverty and corruption, which I find compelling. And his prose was great. Regular thorns in the sides of a corrupt, sanctimonious establishment. Nothing has changed there. Berlusconi’s party appears to be the product of *mafiosi* think-tanks.

I went to Italy knowing (in translation) some Dante, then some of the earlier 20th century poets. Ungaretti, Montale, Quasimodo, Sereni, Fortini. Once there, I became interested in more recent work. Andrea Zanzotto seemed to be in a category all of his own, though he was sometimes linked to a ghostly school of Neo-Hermeticism. Amelia Rosselli, who lived in Rome, is a significant voice. Then the more self-consciously avant-garde writers—Giuliani, Sanguineti, Balestrini, Porta. But this was a generation born in the 1930s. With the internet, it’s now possible to be much more aware of contemporary Italian poetry through sites such as Absolute Poetry, GAMMM and Nazione Indiana. Linh Dinh has translated some of that work recently. Gherardo Bortolotti, Marco Giovenale and Michelle Zaffarano, for example. So, funnily enough, I’m more in touch with it now than I was then.

**JW:** So you’re back in England. You stayed in teaching?

**PH:** I worked in three different schools in and around Cambridge—five years in each. The damage done to teaching and learning in the primary phase by successive governments since the 1960s is extraordinary. I wasn’t very good at implementing certain government initiatives, which led to a bit of tension now and again. So I’m glad to be out of it. Lynn and I celebrated by spending seven weeks in Greece in September and October 2007. Kelvin and Melanie Corcoran kindly lent us their house. The Shearsman book *The Summer of Agios Dimitrios* was written there, in the Mani.
JW: *The next thing of yours that the Many Press published after The Interior Designer’s Late Morning was Bar Magenta which had poems by you and by Simon Marsh, though these were not collaborations in the sense you were describing just now. But you’ve been doing a lot of collaborative work recently?*

PH: Yes, my poems in *Bar Magenta* were written when I was living in the Veneto. I lived in Vicenza for two years. Again, I took on just enough work to get by so as to leave room for exploring the north of Italy. Train connections were good so I could be in Verona or Padua in 20 minutes. I spent a lot of time in Venice. It was a wonderful opportunity to get to know the north.

Collaboration is important to me. I’m currently involved in a project with Carol Watts called ‘Fretworks’. The sequence is evolving, as it should, in ways which couldn’t be anticipated at the outset. Last year I worked with John Hall on a sequence of pictures and texts called *Interscriptions*. John is very experienced at working with text in a visual way, to create textual pictures. I wasn’t, so it was a privilege to work with him on that. The collaboration with Simon is my most substantial collaborative undertaking though. We’ve been very lucky to have the hospitality of Peter Philpott’s *Great Works* site. The poems have been appearing there since May 2006.

JW: *You referred earlier to your painting. When did you start painting?*

PH: I don’t know. I can’t remember not painting. I do remember having to change schools when I was 16 because they wouldn’t let me do Art A-level. It wasn’t academic enough. They tried to make me do Economics instead. So I left. There’s often a strong graphic element to my painting—not necessarily drawn lines, often *sgraffito* marks which expose the underpainting. I usually start in acrylic, to get colour and strong texture in quickly, then oil on top. I like cutting back through this in forms suggestive of text or musical notation—though they are usually neither. I’ve always been fascinated by the way the arts echo through each other. At the moment I’m working on a group of pictures which incorporate text more explicitly, for an exhibition in September.

JW: *In 1995 Equipage published Paul Klee’s Diary. His work means a lot to you?*

PH: Yes. His dedication to art was exemplary—as a painter, a poet and a
musician. I don’t tire of his work. Klee, Miró and Kandinsky were my three favourite painters. I suppose now the very idea of using paint to produce paintings seems to many an antiquated way of making art. But for me it’s still compelling. Klee’s range is very great. His art is extremely inclusive.

**JW:** How did you go about excavating these poems from his journals?

**PH:** I came to inhabit those journals as one does a favourite novel, often re-read. Then I made many of the episodes chime with similar ones in my life, which then provided some of the detail. So much of the writing ends up having nothing to do with Klee in a literal way. But I hope I was respectful to the spirit of his journals. My procedures were not very purist. They never are.

**JW:** How do you situate yourself with regard to current tendencies on the British and American poetry scene? There’s that not always clearly-defined but nevertheless quite powerful them-and-us sense, with its attendant paranoias—”mainstream” and “experimental” or “avant-garde”.

**PH:** I sometimes get the impression that the poets who interest me most are regarded with suspicion by extremists on both sides. How would you situate Kelvin Corcoran, Andrew Crozier, Roy Fisher, Michael Haslam, Randolph Healy, John James, Denise Riley, Peter Riley, Maurice Scully or yourself? (And I’m sorry there’s only one woman in that particular list). Well, like them, I tend to write in standard English sentences. But I am not interested in a poem which seems entirely envisaged from the outset—in which there is nothing unexpected. The kind of poem which knows where it’s going and concludes by patting itself on the head for getting there. I’m attracted to clashes and jumbles of the felt, the thought, the multi-voiced and dissonant. Some poetry which is considered “innovative” is actually quite conservative in that it inhabits a fixed range of ideological and aesthetic conventions. I’m not interested in writing within a convention. And a lot of innovative poetry is still prim. It is suspicious of humour, sex and the intoxicated. I would like to ship in more of those things, from outlying districts if need be. Also, I don’t feel particularly “British”. Maybe because my mother is Irish. Maybe because I feel more at home in a European context.

**JW:** When we were having dinner with Anthony Mellors recently you did describe very interestingly your fantasy of a sort of “affectless” poem!
That was just a parody of a certain kind of Creative Writing Class outcome. A poem designed by a committee. Bits of discourse snipped from the media, instruction manuals, political speeches, songs, adverts etc taped together—with any authorial or dramatic voices strictly suppressed. So it would be an “objective” reflection of the world. It wouldn’t really. It would just be faulty reception on a second-hand radio.

**JW:** What about the Oystercatcher project?

**PH:** When I got back to writing I wanted to get something “out there” quickly, so I published *The Sardine Tree*, my sequence based on Miró. I hadn’t exactly planned to run a small press. I sent that pamphlet to several people, including John Hall. He told me about his own Miró poem—and that ended up being the next Oystercatcher. Then it kept going. I invited various poets to send work. One of the first was Andrew Crozier, but he was already too ill. A couple of people didn’t respond at all. But most responded with warmth, enthusiasm and generosity. I’m pleased to have poets who have been writing since the 1960s as well as those who are relative newcomers. The Oystercatchers of Rufo Quintavalle and Alistair Noon, for example, are their first books. This is certainly not the case with Peter Riley or John Welch. Rufo lives in Paris, Alistair in Berlin. Lisa Samuels is an American in New Zealand. I like the fact that not all the books come out of that manic vortex of cutting-edge art practices which is Hunstanton.