

When Bad Times Made for Good Poetry

Also by Robert Sheppard:

Poetry

Returns

Daylight Robbery

The Flashlight Sonata

Transit Depots/Empty Diaries

(with John Seed [text] and Patricia Farrell [images])

Empty Diaries

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Criticism

Far Language: Poetics and Linguistically Innovative Poetry 1978–1997

The Poetry of Saying: British Poetry and Its Discontents 1950–2000

Iain Sinclair

When Bad Times Made for Good Poetry

—episodes in the history of the poetics of innovation—

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Cover: Bob Cobbing and Maggie O'Sullivan launching her
Magenta volume *A Natural History in 3 Incomplete Parts*
at the New River Project, June 1985.
Photo of uncertain provenance, courtesy of Maggie O'Sullivan.

CONTENTS

Introduction: The Life of the Writing	7
1 Informing the Nation: The Manifesto of the Poetry Society (1976)	14
2 Allen Fisher's Apocalypse Then: Between <i>Place</i> and <i>Gravity</i> : Technique and Technology	31
3 John Hall: The Price of Houses the Cost of Food: The Poetics of Not Writing	55
4 'Whose lives does the government affect?': Looking back at Tom Raworth's 'West Wind'	68
5 When Bad Times Made for Good Poetry: Iain Sinclair's <i>Autistic Poses</i>	81
6 Ken Edwards' <i>The WE Expression</i>	94
7 The Colony at the Heart of the Empire: Bob Cobbing and the Mid-1980s London Creative Environment	108
8 Beyond Anxiety: Legacy or Miscegenation	134
9 Poetry and Ethics: The Saying and the Said in Tom Raworth's <i>Eternal Sections</i>	141
10 Talk: The Poetics of Maggie O'Sullivan	156
11 Factice and Fracture: Resisting the Total in Allen Fisher's <i>Gravity as a Consequence of Shape</i>	181
12 Everything Connects: The Cultural Poetics of Iain Sinclair	199
Epilogue: What I regret about the poetry scene at the moment	215

This book is dedicated to Patricia Farrell,
Gilbert Adair, Adrian Clarke, Peter Tingey,
Gavin Selerie, Ken Edwards, Penny Bailey, and John Seed.

INTRODUCTION: THE LIFE OF THE WRITING

I have long held the view that the power of poetry is precisely that it both reveals itself—its poetic artifice is its undeniable facticity laid bare—and conceals itself, leaving the reader feeling that he or she has not finished, could indeed never finish, the work of reading. The text is inexhaustible in terms of both form and content and in terms of the unstable relationship between them. The writer is also strangely both present—as artificer—and simultaneously absent, from the poem; once the poem is read the only agent in or around the text is the reader. Any poem is thus a site of human unfinish twice over. I have long suspected that under, within or around, the language of a poem, lies another language, or aspect of language, perhaps a rhythmical energy, that is not reducible to discourse. As such, the poem seems to withdraw from social and historical comprehension, but this is only apparent. On occasions these aspects of otherness suggest alternative readings of reality, and reading poetry becomes an imaginative and transformative act, with political and ethical import. Poems evoke in the attentive reader a permanent state of potential astonishment. Analysis does not distil that thrill; it turns it to knowledge, something communal (and historical, because subject to change and revision), to be shared.

Every critic—even a poet-critic—is also an historian, if only to say that this text was written before that text, whether or not there is a connection between the two events. To say that a text was written in 1975 or 2010 is to evoke, however hazily, context for text. As a writer who thought his main obsession was poetics as a writerly speculative discourse, it is a surprise to find myself producing so many lightly historicised readings.¹ The commitment to poetics means a determination to study poets' oeuvres rather than individual poems, and to study the cluster of what, in one of my episodes collected here, I rather severely call "operational axioms" apparent across the oeuvre, itself a distinguishing mark of what has come to be called linguistically innovative poetry, which often embraces the sequence, the serial poem, the book-length long-poem, the extensive project, the time-based intratext, the unfinishable life-long work, over the crystalline excellence of the finished verbal artefact (which is not an argument against lyric energies but an argument about creative assemblage). The commitment to "process" in Allen Fisher, or "transformation" in Maggie O'Sullivan, or to both in Bob Cobbing's "processual" poetics, outlined in episodes

here, is matched by a focus on the scope of the poetry as a whole, and upon “the very subtle thinking that surrounds” poetry, as Badiou puts it.²

In one episode the term linguistically innovative poetry appears at an historical moment (and one in which I had a role). The opinion piece ‘Beyond Anxiety: Legacy or Miscegenation’, was delivered to the opening panel of the 1994 ‘Writing at the Limits’ Southampton University conference; the term resonated throughout subsequent discussions so that by the end of the day the term was freely used of work that well-exceeded my original definition. In short, the American delegates started to use it of their own better documented avant-gardes. My concern as a critic for the *British* context of this writing and for its developing poetics long ago dictated socio-historical parameters to which I rigorously adhere, but which have unexpectedly plunged me into reminiscence since this is a “poetry scene” in which I have moved, not as passive observer and chronicler, but as poet and activist, with a body of work and poetics of his own.³

The other episodes of this book are recent, some previously unpublished and written especially for it, as attempts to contribute to questions about the history of this British poetry and, more particularly, its poetics as a speculative writerly discourse. (I have adopted the term episode to suggest that my history is episodic in nature rather than continuous, or epic; my attempts at continuous history are to be found elsewhere.)⁴ The history here is partly the stories of communal occasions and provisional institutions: the presentation of an avant-garde manifesto by officers of the Poetry Society during the dying days of the radical take-over in the 1970s; the attempts at public discussion by Ken Edwards at a London Sub Voicive reading and the offering of public talks by Maggie O’Sullivan at Buffalo and Vancouver in the 1980s and 1990s, for example. Yet the collection also offers close readings of less public events which I regard as of singular importance: the home-made gestures of Iain Sinclair’s fascicle publications in the 1980s; the serial small press presentations of Allen Fisher’s *Gravity* sequence, in part and whole between 1983 and 2007; and the appearance of Tom Raworth’s “sonnets” with their extraordinary poetics of creative linkage, their ethics of engaged reading. An unsensational event, the renunciation of poetry writing by John Hall, is comprehended in terms of the intersection of personal (professional) and political histories, but inaugurates the

development of a new poetics of performance writing for the twenty-first century that connects with the theorising and artistic practice of Hall's younger colleagues like Caroline Bergvall.

It should not be too surprising to find me offering reminiscences and what has come to be called "thick description" at times. My attempt in 'The Colony at the Heart of the Empire: Bob Cobbing and the Mid 1980s London Creative Environment', and in parts of 'Ken Edwards' *The WE Expression*' to re-construct the poetry community I experienced in my late twenties and early thirties, from diaries, memories, published sources and other records of events (as well as the attempt in the former to account for every individual named in terms of subsequent activities) obsessively sketches grounds for a sociological comprehension of such a community; questions of writerly poetics are never occluded, though the 'Creative Environment' episode avoids conventional literary criticism. I rejoice in my precocious discovery of this "underground" poetry in the early 1970s that allows me to mix memory with formal academic examination, to suggest passage from pupil to poet, schoolboy to scholar. The geographical and historical incompleteness of my eye (and ear)-witness accounts should be obvious. They are not meant to be representative, rather emblematic. A sore throat or a tube strike could throw the spanner of contingency into the great work of record. In my episodes on the cultural poetics of Iain Sinclair and on the public poetics of the Poetry Society I adopt the formal descriptive sociological languages of Basil Bernstein and Pierre Bourdieu, in contrast to anecdote and thick description; in the case of 'Everything Connects: The Cultural Poetics of Iain Sinclair' I attempt to critique the Sinclair mythos.⁵ But my theoretical touch is as light as my historical one; only in the episode 'Poetry and Ethics: The Saying and the Said in Tom Raworth's *Eternal Sections*' on Raworth's sonnets does theoretical language dictate the episode's argument.⁶

I trace a movement of artifice within, against and skipping around, giving the slip to, the grain of history, not determined by it, but produced out of it, and returning into it, if only into the history of poetry. Poetry lacks direct social efficacy, whatever the 'Manifesto' of the Poetry Society hoped, and whoever Iain Sinclair tries to will into celebrity with his mythopoeic connectivity. It is a history (mostly "bad times") marked by the blanket cloud of Thatcherism (and its

approaching thunder and its resultant devastation), mediated variously by the TV imagery of Barry MacSweeney; the quiet aphoristic activism of Lee Harwood; the textual discontinuities approximating atavistic street-life in the work of Bill Griffiths; the formal civic resistance of Allen Fisher; the menacing queues of Sinclair's government offices; Tom Raworth's wide-eyed panorama of Thatcherite Britain in 'West Wind'; Ken Edwards' concentration upon the first person plural in both poetic and political discourse; the principled retreat from poetry of John Hall; and in the reactions of many poets not treated here. Slightly earlier, the affair of the Poetry Society caused a split in the alternative British poetries that took some years to heal. My episode 'Allen Fisher's Apocalypse Then: Between *Place* and *Gravity*: Technique and Technology', while concentrating on a reading of Allen Fisher's pamphlet, also acknowledges that the background to this extraordinary sequence (which I am tempted to see as a pivotal hinge between the British Poetry Revival of the 1960s and 1970s and the linguistically innovative poetry which followed) is the feeling of "entrenchment" felt by radical poets at this time (one mirrored by Sinclair's autistic retrenchment). The significance of my title 'The Colony at the Heart of the Empire' is that the London poetry scene in which I participated from 1983 was an underground urban network of unaffiliated creatives ignored by the cultural mandarins of the surface, and unknown to those who might have responded positively to it at ground level. It was a semi-autonomous cultural field, in Bourdieu's terms. Unscarred by the goings-on at the Poetry Society and too young to have witnessed the sixties, I found this artistic milieu of personalities, pints, performances, publishing, polemics, poetry and poetics demanding, intimidating and exhilarating.

A theme that surfaces episodically is the materiality of the text, its appearances in books as objects (and beyond). While I criticise Sinclair for his fetishism of the book, his eulogies to the scent of print and the feel of paper, the material conditions of printing, assembling, publication and (non-)distribution are not mere external facts to the life of this poetry. In Sinclair's own case, I consider the severely limited edition of the aptly entitled *Autistic Poses*; in Allen Fisher's, the booklets assembled into the collecting trilogy of *Gravity*; in Bob Cobbing's case, the publishing of hundreds of pamphlets, many of his own work, in

which production is indivisible from product, where form is content in a material sense—and which extends into performance as the continued life of the writing, not just as book-launch or promotion. Forgotten texts and realisations, like Gilbert Adair's 'Frog' project and Clive Fencott's 'Permanent Waver' project are described in performance, and open an under-reported pre-history of contemporary "performance writing" and "cyberpoetics". Paul Buck and David Barton are tracked curating performances and demonstrating artistic practice, respectively, though the former is also recalled as a conduit to contemporary French poetry and thought. However, I hope I avoid the mythic in the deliberately heavily footnoted presentation of the 'Creative Environment' episode, though it is difficult not to make Cobbing's Writers Forum workshop and press seem heroic in its radical consistency, in its self-belief in the absence of reflective validation, and in its generosity to a range of writers in both print and performance.

The selection of episodes here is not an attempt to elect a pantheon. I trust I am being honest, rather than disingenuous, to suggest that my choice of subjects is dictated as much by my sense of being unable to write convincingly on some poets I admire, as much as by my evident choices and enthusiasms, or by my having treated some writers at length elsewhere. Others have been subject to poetic tributes and homages.⁷ To anyone familiar with my critical work it might seem unusual that the names of Lee Harwood and Roy Fisher are infrequently mentioned, but my editing of, and contribution to, the *Salt Companion to Lee Harwood* has muted me for the time being; Roy Fisher I have written of in a number of places. To Paul Evans my service has been editorial.⁸ Three writers—Allen Fisher, Sinclair and Raworth—are treated twice, from differing angles, although the attempted comprehensiveness of *The Poetry of Saying* is not repeated. My selection of poets is predominantly male, although my treatment of Maggie O'Sullivan's extraordinary poetics is the longest in the book. Paula Claire, Jennifer Cobbing and Hazel Smith are captured briefly in performance. This absence is partly to do with past creative environments which were, as I have ventured to speculate elsewhere, particularly intimidating for women (the down side of the poetry's emphasis on authorial presence and performativity).⁹ That this has changed recently is not reflected in my (largely) historical focus upon the "bad times"; I have yet to report in full on the better times that followed.

All of these episodes have been written in the conviction that the most vital poetry of our time(s) is to be found represented, or indicated, within. Why then have such critical writings—my own as part of a swelling chorus of commentary—appeared to have little effect on literary valuation as a whole (although some earlier figures, J.H. Prynne and Roy Fisher at least, are beginning to receive the attention they deserve)? I suspect we are dealing with delayed effect; what was enacted poetically during the “bad times” after the long sixties ended in about 1974, has yet to seriously affect survey representations of British poetry, and this makes my task more urgent. While I resist Sinclair’s construction of “re-forgotten” artists as talismanic outsiders, manic outriders, I have fashioned this book as an intervention into the arguments concerning the past, present and future of linguistically innovative poetry (and of poetry generally) in the hope that it can move perceptions of post-sixties poetry along. After all, every poem—feet fixed in its history—is stretching towards its future, that is towards any moment when it is read (only to be read again, as I suggest in my opening remarks). Poems are coherent deformations and reformations of the matter of history into the manner of poetry, and it is their transformative, disruptive, power, precisely their inability to affirm, as Sidney asserts, that characterises the force of art.

Criticism, however, *can* affirm (yet all its statements, including this one, partake of a necessary provisionality, however firm the affirmation). My study *The Poetry of Saying* found its primary audience within the scholarly community (partly on account of its appearance in hardback and its price). *When Bad Times Made for Good Poetry*, by choice of material, form, and publisher, is offered as an artefact within the poetry scene. It aims, of course, to impact upon the academic study of poetry, and it may prove relevant—as a work tracing poetics as a discourse of writerly conjecture and provocation—to creative writing as practice-led research (or research-led practice). But its chief aim is to influence readers and writers within the creative environments of the poetry themselves, which is why I include, and conclude these episodes with, a recent opinion piece on what I regret most about the poetry scene now.

Notes

- ¹ See my 'The Necessity of Poetics' on the *Pores* Website, Birkbeck College: 2001, www.bbk.ac.uk/pores (published in expanded form as a booklet, *The Necessity of Poetics*, Liverpool: Ship of Fools, 2002), as well as 'Poetics as Conjecture and Provocation: an inaugural lecture delivered on 13 March 2007 at Edge Hill University', *New Writing*. Vol 5: 1 (2008): 3–26. My blogzine *Pages* (www.robertsheppard.blogspot.com) carries a serial catalogue of poetics under the title 'The History of Poetics'.
- ² Badiou, Alain. *The Century*, Cambridge and Malden, MA: Polity: 11.
- ³ Most of my poetry is available as *Complete Twentieth Century Blues*, Cambridge: Salt Publishing, 2008, *Warrant Error*, Exeter: Shearsman Books, 2009, and *Berlin Bursts*, Exeter: Shearsman Books, 2011; some of my poetics may be read in the Salt volume, in *Far Language, poetics and linguistically innovative poetry 1978–1997*, Exeter: Stride Research Documents, 1999; and in *net/(k)not/-work(s)*, London: Ship of Fools, 1993.
- ⁴ See chapter 2, 'The British Poetry Revival 1960–1978' (35–76), and chapter 6, 'Linguistically Innovative Poetry 1978–2000' in my *The Poetry of Saying: British Poetry and Its Discontents 1950–2000*. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2005. These chapters are also to be found serialised on my blogzine *Pages* (www.robertsheppard.blogspot.com) under the title 'The History of the Other'.
- ⁵ This is a continuation of work on Sinclair in my monograph *Iain Sinclair. Writers and their Work*: Northcote House: Plymouth, 2007, whose final chapter began the thoughts unfinished here.
- ⁶ This is, in essence, a summary restatement of the theoretical position of my 2005 critical survey *The Poetry of Saying: British Poetry and Its Discontents, 1950–2000*. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press.
- ⁷ These include creative responses to the works of Veronica Forrest-Thomson, Alan Halsey, Robert Hampson, John James, and Scott Thurston, as well as to older figures like Mina Loy and Anne Sexton.
- ⁸ See my edition of, and introduction to, his poems *The Door at Taldir: Selected Poems* (Exeter: Shearsman Books, 2009).
- ⁹ See *The Poetry of Saying*: 161–4.