Interviews Through Time
Also by Roy Fisher

POETRY

*The Ship's Orchestra* (Fulcrum Press), 1966
*Collected Poems 1968* (Fulcrum), 1968
*Matrix* (Fulcrum), 1971
*The Cut Pages* (Fulcrum), 1971
*The Thing About Joe Sullivan* (Carcanet Press), 1978
*The Cut Pages* (Oasis Books & Shearsman Books), 1986
*A Furnace* (OUP), 1986
*Birmingham River* (OUP), 1994
*The Dow Low Drop — New and Selected Poems* (Bloodaxe Books), (1996)
*The Long and the Short of It — Poems 1955–2005* (Bloodaxe), 2005
*Standard Midland* (Bloodaxe), 2010
*Selected Poems* (Flood Editions), 2011

ESSAYS / INTERVIEWS / PROSE

Roy Fisher: *Nineteen Poems and an Interview* (Grosseteste Press), 1975
Tony Frazer (ed.): *Interviews Through Time and Selected Prose* (Shearsman), 2000
2md revised edition (Shearsman), 2013.
Peter Robinson (ed.): *An Unofficial Roy Fisher* (Shearsman), 2010
Roy Fisher: *Occasional Prose* (Shearsman), 2013
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Introduction

The origin of this book lies in my conviction that Roy Fisher’s interviews, all of which are now very difficult to find, contained a great deal of information that would be of use to readers and students of his work and should therefore once again be made available. The interviews that had hitherto been published—the majority of them between 1970 and 1985—tended to concentrate on his earlier work, and thus arose the idea of commissioning a new interview which would concentrate on the period starting with the publication of *A Furnace*. This second edition has permitted the inclusion of a further interview, with John Kerrigan, which amplifies the material in Peter Robinson’s 1999 interview, itself commissioned for the first edition of this volume. These two final interviews are presented complete.

Our concern throughout was to focus on poetics, with a little biographical leavening, and the interviews that have been plundered to make up this narrative were chosen with that in view. This is no reflection on the other interviews, which often covered the same themes or were, for various reasons, more ephemeral in nature. Each of them in fact has something to offer, but those selected here offered more and enabled us to avoid too much elision from one interview to another. Simply republishing the originals as they had appeared would of course have led to innumerable overlaps and anachronisms. In view of this we decided that a cut-and-paste approach would be the better option and would serve to lend an air of narrative logic to the whole proceedings.

The first edition also included some short prose works by Roy Fisher; these are excluded from this edition and have been transferred to a new volume devoted entirely to the author’s prose, *Occasional Prose*, published simultaneously with this edition.

Tony Frazer
January 2000
Revised March 2013
Interviews Through Time
Beginnings

John Tranter: Let’s look at the matter of poetic development. Where did you begin as a writer when you first decided you wanted to write poetry rather than prose, or make movies or whatever else you might have wanted to do? And where did you learn to write from? Did you learn to write from English models, or from models in other languages?

Roy Fisher: I started at the age of nineteen, from the first place I could find anything which I thought crudely exciting enough to break the rather grey surface of my mind. I knew there was something that I wanted to make. I didn’t know what it was. All I’d studied up to that stage, and had felt any sympathy with was a sort of statuesque nineteenth-century diction. Matthew Arnold was my idea of sensible development from the heady stuff like Keats. Had I started writing in that mood, all would have been lost, I think. But I knew better than that, and was completely stuck, and literally had—it may be a very common experience—a feeling of something wanting to be made, but not telling me at all what it was. I got in through reading surrealist or neo-surrealist texts, things like Salvador Dalí’s autobiography, or Dylan Thomas’ prose works.

The first poem I wrote, when I was nineteen, was a cheap trip through Dylan Thomas’ stage properties. Nobody who’s read me in print since would believe that. I still own the poem somewhere. I’ve never revealed it to anybody. I started in from steam heat, by raising the temperature and melting the language, and writing a lingo that never was. I went very far from conversation. I don’t think I was very conversational at that stage. So I wrote in a special fine language and continued to do that, getting a bit more educated in what I did along the way. I remember writing the first thing I published—it was in a student magazine—it was a sort of King Lear dramatic monologue, where the old man is going out in a rather quiet way to die, and in the forty or fifty lines of this monologue he not only copies certain writers but he also alludes to them by quotation: Eliot, Yeats, Lorca, Rilke, Rafael Alberti, it was quite a catalogue. I went through the book, you know, being very eclectic indeed.

JT: I think Eliot said that poets learn to write by being other writers for a while, and then moving on to another one.

RF: I was being all of them, at that period. Then I went on, I got more of a smell of what the hard stuff was like. Oddly enough, from Robert Graves, who was surfacing, again, about this time. He was having one of his periods of being interesting. This was the early fifties. The White Goddess had come
out and that interested me very much. Too much, at the time. I was interested in the really very tough but committedly imaginative strain that there is in Graves. You know, there is part of his poetry where he really means business, and I was interested in the not very decorated style of writing that he had, the style that was very close to a brusque off-hand conversational style. I learnt some things from that.

RF: I started writing when I was about twenty, and I wrote some student poetry. I had no contacts at all, nor did I for a long time afterwards; and then I started doodling again when I was about 24 or 25 in an utterly, classically corny thing, and listening to one of those local radio things on what is now Radio 4, West Country Poets; I was working in Devon. It was a sort of situation where you're utterly short of five quid and your wife says: “Good God, you could do that.” So I wrote sort of imitative, Poetry Review—1950s period Poetry Review! —poetry under a pseudonym. I actually wrote a con poem pretending to be by a retired brigadier; it was semi-automatic too (my wife was doing automatic writing and I was just picking words out). And I wrote some sonnets which were the sort of thing a retired military man of sensitivity might write about the view in the Middle East, a place where I had never been. I sent them up to Charles Causley who ran the programme, and I had a note back saying: “these are very promising, but I don’t think they quite come off. Please send some more.” So I then sent some of my own things which were not terrific poems in any way, but they were technically interesting, and they broadcast a few of them, and from then on I felt that I existed a bit and I could pay the gas bill out of these tiny bits of money the BBC paid. But in terms of what one knew at that point, I was reading anything but what would make an O.K. poetry. I had read some poems—but that was late—I had read some Wallace Stevens; I had not read any Williams; I had not known what was going on; I had a thoroughly heterogeneous non-O.K. taste because I had no contacts. I was reading Rilke, I was reading Stefan George, Apollinaire, anything that came up, but I was not in touch with anybody else who was writing at all, and consequently had no programme. After that, by one or two quite tenuous things, I had a poem, a very late romantic poem, in a little magazine called The Window which John Sankey was running; Gael Turnbull saw it and for some reason—his ostensible reason was that it reminded him of Irving Layton—recruited me for Origin. That brought me immediately into the barrage of Cid Corman’s correspondence and that, at the age of 26 or 27, started to teach me something about the actual language and the recent history of poetry. Again, to be historical, whereas I could turn
out a poem which was not committed in any particular direction and George Macbeth would broadcast it; and when I was appearing in Black Mountain spin-off publications and achieved a bit of an identity in that, the English establishment of the time did not want to know.

JT: What about the influence of the English “Movement” poets of the fifties, did you ever feel drawn to want to write in that style at all?

RF: No, I couldn’t even mimic it. I can do imitations of things but I couldn’t understand enough of what made those people tick, even to send them up.

JT: What about Larkin? Larkin was one of them but his writing style is very impressive, even to a young writer, I’d think. Even if you don’t like it, you have to respond to it.

RF: Yes, I had a sort of near brush with Larkin. Larkin was about eight years older than I am. It was the point where I started having some currency, the things I’ve been talking about happened when I was a student around the early 1950s. I then stopped, and purely by this sort of chance that happens to people who are just sitting in their bed sitting rooms wondering what to do in their nights off, I wrote one or two little pieces without any content to them, without any meaning. They were little decorative fantasy pieces, and I sent one off to local radio station. It got broadcast. Then I had a thing in a magazine called The Window, which was a not very establishment-minded little magazine, John Sankey ran it. Whereas the Movement people were coming through things like Encounter and The London Magazine, they were hitting the mainstream, and if you weren’t that, you weren’t going to get in. And Gael Turnbull saw it in The Window—he’s a person of very mixed background and a congenital outsider—he was collecting material for a guest-edited number of Cid Corman’s magazine Origin, the first series. And he was completely free in what he chose. Gael was temperamentally not interested in the English mainstream so he went sniffing around the outside.

One of the people he chose to be in this issue of Corman’s magazine, along with me, was Larkin, who seemed to him not typical of the English and also obviously very good. I think at that stage the full biliousness of Larkin’s outlook on life hadn’t come through in the verse, and Larkin was not a man who was making pronouncements about the century having moved on too fast. He hadn’t cultivated his Eeyore qualities, the persona he developed in
middle life. Larkin was sent a complimentary copy of the magazine, to see what kind of magazine he was going to be in. He opened it and—I don't know whether it was the impact of what he read, or the fact that his book was coming out shortly—he sent by registered post a countermand to withdraw all his material. So he wasn't published along with Irving Layton and Charles Olson and Larry Eigner and untidy people like that. But our paths were close together for a little while there.

JT: That must have been an interesting moment in English literary history. If only one could have realised what the past and the future would have looked like in fifty years time...

RF: Well, if he'd been in the magazine, I don't think that sort of thing would have stuck with him. He wasn't interested in opening the experience out.

I found it a very windswept world of the mind to get involved with that, and to find that suddenly I was getting correspondence course lessons from Cid Corman. He was telling me what was happening in Black Mountain. This was the mid-fifties. It was a completely new world. And as an ordinary crusty young Englishman I found it new. I went some way along with it, but I wasn't ready to run with it all the way.

JT: So you read the American writers but at a bit of a distance, and it was a distance you wanted to keep. Was that because of where you were born?

RF: I'm a Midlander, which is a very particular sort of race. It's supposed to be nowhere at all. I haven't got the near-nationalism which Basil Bunting has. He had himself referred to as a “Northumbrian”, because Northumbria was an old kingdom, and its language is descended slightly differently [from other kinds of English] and its political institutions and its exposure to invaders from Scandinavia, and the way it was treated by the Norman French invaders; all this gave it a different fate from the body of England. I'm a Mercian, if Bunting was a Northumbrian. I come from the no-account bit in the middle.

I'm—because of what in England we call “social class”—I come from the thing called the “working class”, and I didn't go to one of the older universities, and I've never lived in London. I'm a provincial. Someone in a review said “Fisher's subject matter is, I suppose, always 'the provinces'”. Which is everywhere else but London and Oxford and Cambridge, and one or two rather well-to-do spots around that way. It doesn't mean much, but it affects the way you behave, and what you root for and what you snarl at.
JT: It also helps to determine where you appear in print, doesn’t it?

RF: It can do. One mustn’t caricature, and certainly the people I think of as being on Establishment railway lines will fight back indignantly if you imply that certain ways are open to certain people and closed to others. But I think it certainly happened in my generation that… it’s quite easy to be invisible. I don’t mind being invisible if it gives me independence. But there were times when you could feel more invisible than you wanted to be, simply because of the very strongly metropolitan habits that England has. There’s the “express route” through into anything to do with the media of print and broadcasting. There are exceptions. But traditionally it would go from a “public” (i.e. a private) school, it would go very commonly to Oxford, it would go into London. And the habit of starting a magazine, the habit of being in contact with people who are published, the people who have access to radio and so forth, it comes rather quickly, and there’s a network of passing favours and getting things done. Which means that people can be on their feet and up and running in their early twenties. And that happens to a lot of people.

JT: Some of them are aware of it. I was reading a recent autobiographical piece by Thom Gunn. He said he left England and went to America partly because of how easy it was, he saw, for him and his friends to get into print in London. He went to Cambridge, and he said he went down to London, and he found it very easy to get reviewed well by his friends. For him I don’t think there was any point in any of that at all, because it didn’t have anything to do with what you were worth as a writer.

RF: He’s a good guy from that point of view. The carry on of that quick burst into celebrity that Thom Gunn had, it lasted him for twenty, twenty-five years in this country. He’d come back for a reading—I met him at a reading full of parties of schoolkids, and he was surprised. He says no one pays this much attention to him in the United States, what’s it all about? It was the momentum. I remember picking up the London Magazine in my early twenties, and saying “Who’s this new poet? He’s got a come-on. He’s got a style.” And there he was, bam bam. Ted Hughes the same. It’s not to be sneezed at. Whether that road through into publication affected the way people put things down, whether it makes them less shaggy, uncouth or odd—I wouldn’t call Ted Hughes other than shaggy, uncouth and odd, in his early days, and his Yorkshire-ism is very strong—but at the same time it may give you an idea of know-how about what it is to write a publishable text. Just as if someone said to you at an early age “Come and help me make this movie—hold this”—you’ll know
something about making a movie, other than you would know if you sat in a pub for fifteen years saying “It’s going to be a great movie, I can see it all in my mind’s eye,” and you’d never been on a set. I think there are things like that, that work. And this has not got much to do with poetry, as poetry, but it may have something to do with the medium in which poetry exists.
The Sixties: from City to Matrix

Eric Mottram: How did City come to be published in Living Arts in 1963, then?

RF: Either John Bodley, who was a reader, or Theo Crosby, who was an architect, nicked it up and was interested, either by something in its literary properties, or because it talked a great deal about bricks and mortar and streets and townscape.

EM: Something that fitted the programme of the magazine.

RF: It appealed accidentally.

EM: Did you submit City to Kulchur magazine or did they invite you to?

RF: No, I suddenly found it was there. I had never heard of Kulchur magazine. What I used to do—a picture of an enormously passive career is building up—what happened was that Gael Turnbull was in California and I would automatically type stuff up and send it to him and was in touch by letter a great deal; I would just routinely send stuff, and he was fully into, as I was only partly, the extremely widespread and active correspondence which was going among the alumni of Black Mountain College and some people they had picked up by the way, for five or six years afterwards. People like Lita Hornick who was running Kulchur magazine, would say, ‘Have you anything interesting in your bag?’, and Gael was one of these people who had work to send out. Indeed, I didn’t hustle any of this work, but I was constantly finding work had been taken, and strange things would happen such as: very shortly after I had heard of any of these people at all, I got home from school in Devon one afternoon and my wife said there was a man called Louis Zukofsky who had been here all afternoon, with his little boy and his wife and a cellist who stood on his head on the mat, and he didn’t know who you were—as well he might not have: I’d published nothing and I had only had a quick glance at something of Zukofsky’s. I might have found conversation very difficult but my wife had entertained him by telling him how she thought he should pronounce the name “Eliot”, whom he was on his way to see, and his chief interest had been whether he should address him as “Mr Elliott”, or “Mr Elyot”. That sort of thing would happen through this network. The idea of this stuff as we now have it, fed in rather hefty chunks in college situations, and published, is very different. I was one day writing to Cid Corman in
Matera, and Jonathan Williams would show up on the doorstep with a camera another day; it was that sort of thing.

**EM:** What about Stuart Mills and *Tanasque*? At what point did he get interested in you? Did you contact him first, or, did he contact you?

**RF:** The astonishing thing about that is that he and I constitute an old boy network; we both went, some years apart to the same school, and it is not a school that anybody else ever went to, except a band leader called Jack Payne. This will infuriate all the other alumni of that school if they ever hear it said. But it so happened that Stuart Mills sent me, at some time or other, a load of stuff, city poetry, stretches of which, quite literally, I couldn't distinguish from my own writing. It wasn't imitative either, but we had lived in the same place and he was trained as a visual artist, which puts him somewhat on my side of things anyway. As a child, I was a graphic artist and painter, chiefly; I had very little to do with books; I still wouldn't call myself the bookish type. But Stuart must have picked up the city thing; in fact he was running a bookshop and he just started calling, visiting his mother-in-law in Birmingham.

**EM:** And then began to publish you?

**RF:** Yes.

**EM:** I think one of the best reviews appeared in *Tanasque*, by Stuart himself.

**RF:** Of *The Ship's Orchestra*. Yes, by Stuart and Simon Cutts, the co-editors.

**EM:** It was quite rare, at that time, to have an article at all, was it not? With all respect!

**RF:** Right. I think there were three reviews altogether of *The Ship's Orchestra*.

**EM:** One last group of questions, Roy, I would like to get to. I want to get to the use of metrics and the use of conventional prosodic methods. Do you remember how in a rash moment I recently asked you to write six hundred lines of iambic pentameters, since I wanted work for *Poetry Review*?

**RF:** And you got paid out didn't you?

**EM:** I got paid out, but it was partly a challenge, obviously, to get
you going; but I would like to know what you think of the use of poetic conventions. Do you ever consider them?

RF: Yes

EM: If you do consider it, at what point do you say no, and what do you say yes to?

RF: This has occupied me a great deal because I am ... I have to pause and think this out because it is so important to me. If I am anything of any interest it is because I enjoy innovation and I can think best in a fairly radical position; the further I can take that, the better I work. At the same time, by temperament and upbringing and everything else, I am extremely hidebound or timid, if you like—I'll apply any word to it—slow off the mark, unwilling to let go all sorts of fruity and fulsome sides of literature, and I always want to find ways of taking some of the richer and more meaty sensations of writing or of the arts into more and more radical situations. Consequently, I find extreme formalism very appealing from the outside but quite hair-raising if I try to do it myself. Concrete, for instance, is for me dazzlingly right but physically quite beyond me. What happened, I think, in a lot of my writing, was that I was still trying—and this is partly to do with the sluggishness of my education, and slowness to start—the fact is, and I haven’t mentioned this, but I would want to put it on the record, that I am very conscious, or have been very conscious, of things like class of origin, extreme provincialism, things of this sort; I am the opposite of metropolitan. And I was still struggling away, trying to get big effects in pentameters quite late in the day, and even after working in much freer forms, and much better, I think in the late fifties, was still going back and writing things like ‘Five Morning Poems’ (which are published in Matrix at last) which is in orthodox lines because I still wanted to get something out of those lines, or go round the back of Wallace Stevens and so forth. At the same time, I would never want to align myself with the kind of argument that still pops up about tension metrics and things of that sort. I don’t want to engage in this. The only point of using any form is to create freedom forms and not to do things about impositions of order on chaos and that sort of rubbish.

But beyond that, what happened was that when I started writing, I found it difficult to write at all, to be an artist. This is a personal struggle—that I find it a great step, in my book, to commit a work of art, and one not to be taken lightly. There is a difficulty there, and also I can remember having a great sense of technical difficulty, in learning any techniques at all, to get from point to point. There came a time, I suppose around the early sixties,
when I realised, somewhat to my surprise, that I could write whatever I could think; that verbally I had, in fact, a fair degree of fluency, and if I wanted to work up an impression of virtuosity—without making any comparisons—of the type, say, that Robert Duncan revels in like a great fish in the sea, I could work out some version of this kind of thing for myself which would show my faculties at large in a technical way. I then immediately clammed up and felt rather puritanical about it, and decided that that gave me a freedom to work in prose and to work in a much more taciturn fashion. I then decided that Wittgenstein’s T ractatus was a very splendid sort of stylistic influence for one to adopt, and I paid far more attention to the T ractatus as a mode of lineation, say, than to any poet. And similarly, in more recent years, I have enjoyed the way Cage’s thinking moves in his writing more than almost any poet.

EM: It is this that excites you, isn’t it, that movement from one thing to the next, exploratively?

RF: Exactly. Linearity for me has very little to do with any of the things to do with breath or verse line and so forth; it has much more to do with the linearity of concepts, with the way in which ideas, mental experiences, line themselves, and can be taken through time sequences. I still stick a great deal to writing in linear sequences rather than doing things, which I know you have seen, where I work spatially out.

EM: That seemed to be important. You did one radical work I saw, and it was supposed to be part of a series; what happened to that?

RF: I did some more, and I found them in a sense easier to do and pleasant to do, but they were not carrying any of the sort of load of mental experience that I wanted them to carry, and I felt that there were probably other people who were graphically more gifted than I was who, could do that kind of thing better.

EM: Is the compositional procedure here, this linearity, a linear association procedure, and if so, do you check it afterwards?

RF: No.

EM: You let it stand.

RF: I let it stand, but sometimes cut. The ideal procedure for me, to date, over the work that I tend to like to stand by now, is to have an intensely
realised starter, something which is more alive than I am, an idea that is more alive than I am, sitting there. This is why I have a block, probably.

EM: By “idea”, you would also mean a painting like the Monet waterlilies for ‘Matrix’?

RF: No, it has to be something which is taken in, something that is within me, I’m talking of an insight which could be any stimulus you care to offer, nearly always take a chance stimulus. A lot of my poems are in fact chosen by pricking with a pin in a book of photographs and odd pictures, newspaper pictures and things. But the ideal procedure for me is to have an intensely realised starter and then I work something on the starter, and then I work the next thing on the things I’ve got so far. So the world is completely subsumed until the last moment of writing, and then I write further. *The Ship’s Orchestra* is a model of this. I cheated or relaxed in some way; I wrote it particularly on certain paper that I had—I often do this—write inscriptions on certain paper, actual physical paper. And I then had a starter. I cheated insofar as I had certain revolving themes which I would feed in when the thing started to slow down so that I had numbers of little themes which kept coming round; but basically I would perfect every step and cut it and phrase it so that it would stand, and then I would write the next piece on the support of that, which meant that I could no longer alter what had gone before. So that I adopt, in fact, complete linearity of composition. The one thing I can’t do is to sketch and to tidy up afterwards. I don’t have a sense of a large overall form.

EM: That is, you feed into the automatic, as it were, a programmed action?

RF: Yes. It is a thing which Renoir used to do in his paintings, which was to try to have his painting at any moment in a state where it was balanced, so that if he stopped painting, he would have a picture. I like that.

EM: It is very like the abstract expressionists in America, too; at any given moment the thing is finished. But then you have got the problem that they all had, how do you know when to abandon it?

RF: You want to stop.

EM: Just that.

[Member of the Audience] When it’s done.