Encouraging Signs

Also by Rupert M. Loydell

Poetry

Wildlife (Shearsman Books, 2011)
The Fantasy Kid (Salt Publishing, 2010)
Boombox (Shearsman, 2009)
Lost in the Slipstream (Original Plus, 2009)
An Experiment in Navigation (Shearsman, 2008)
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The Smallest Deaths (bluechrome, 2006)
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My Kind Of Angel: i.m. William Burroughs
(A Stride Conversation Piece, 1998)

Encouraging Signs

interviews, essays & conversations

Rupert M Loydell

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Encouraging Signs

i.m. Brian Louis Pearce and Dennis Milner,

and for Tony Lopez, Phil Terry & Robert Sheppard:

five of the best teachers anyone could have.

Author's Note

This collection of interviews and essays is only one of many possible books that I could have compiled from my files. Other versions might have included selections focussing on the visual arts (particularly painting), the arts & spirituality, music, teaching and pedagogy, or an anthology of book and/or music reviews. There are two texts I was sorry to not include and would like to point the reader to. The first is a sprawling and in-depth interview by Dee Rimbaud which is posted on his website, the second a dialogue with Mike Ferguson about schools and creative writing, first published in NAWE's *Writing in Education* magazine, and more recently re-published on the Salt books website. Thanks to Dee and Mike, and also to the many other interviewees who have not been included.

I see this work as part of my poetics, which Robert Sheppard has previously articulated as tentative and ever-changing; work of many sorts that is useful to critical and creative thought and practice. I hope it may be as useful to the reader as it has been and remains for me.

I have in the main resisted the temptation to edit, although I have corrected errors and occasionally cut parts of longer interviews. I have also sometimes retitled (or titled) the pieces, and in one or two instances added short introductory passages. These are within square brackets; introductions are otherwise original.

I would like to thank all those who gave permission for interviews to be republished, and for their kindness in originally undertaking them. I would also like to thank the publishers who originally published them: Patricia Oxley, Alistair Fitchett, Jeffrey Side, Peter Samson, George Ttoouli, and the editors of *Geometer, Third Way* and *Golden Handcuffs Review.* However, the biggest thanks of all must go to Tony Frazer at Shearsman for agreeing to publishing this book and for patiently helping to shape and edit it.

Shattered Preconceptions

Questions for David Kennedy

I always find it interesting how my preconceptions are so often shattered. I confess I had David Kennedy down simply as one of the editors of *The New Poetry*, a book I, along with many other writers, have always found curiously titled and notable mostly for the absence of the "new" within its pages. I had assumed that David Kennedy would be stuck in the curious timewarp of The New Poetry era, probably writing grim realist narrative poems.

How wrong I was! Last year I got my hands on a copy of Kennedy's *Cornell: A Circuition Around His Circumambulation*, a quirky mix of prose poetry, fragmentary essay and concrete poetry; and also The Fiery Chariot, an even stranger pamphlet exploring the world of alien abduction, with the mix this time including calligraphic work, illustrations, letters and poems. But it was the copy of *The President of Earth, a New and Selected Poems* [published by Salt] that really showed me how utterly wrong I'd been. Here were intelligent, accessible but syntactically slippery and quirkily written, poems I was sorry to have previously missed. Section 2 [of 3 sections in the book] especially intrigued me, and I read and re-read them before emailing David Kennedy about how he'd written that particular set of poems. After an initial email conversation I asked him if he'd be prepared to undertake answering some questions for Stride, a kind of email interview. The questions were sent to him early in October and the final answers emailed back in November.

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Rupert Loydell: The President of Earth *is subtitled "new and selected poems" but it doesn't read like a "traditional" selected, where the poet chooses 2 or 3 poems from early books, and then wodges from later books—it's much more organized as a book in its own right.*

David Kennedy: The book certainly does reflect a concern with shape and coherence. The "new and selected" merely reflects the fact that the poems date from the period 1987 to 2001. If I'd put in all the poems I'd ever written that I still thought were any good, the book would be very different. I didn't want to end up with a book that would have been akin to an album of snapshots. I wanted something that would be more interesting for the reader. And when I started to choose work, I realised that although plenty of the early poems still "stood up" they weren't really

anything to do with me as either a poet or a person now. I do think that your relationship to poems—your own and others—is a renewable journey to somewhere that changes as and because you do. Once I'd started to reject and select poems in that way, then other themes seemed to emerge. One of those themes is the future. Anyone my age—early 40s—will have grown up with ideas that by the year 2000 we'd all be living in domes, traveling by monorail and not working because robots would be doing all that for us. Clearly, that hasn't happened—everyone seems to be working harder and longer than ever before and the government's talking about raising the retirement age to seventy. So I'm interested in exploring the lack of fit between what we were promised and what we've actually got, and particularly the way we still want to believe that the promise has come true. The title poem talks about that when the speaker says "This is the future I read about in school". 'Remembering the Future', which is a kind of oblique elegy for my father, engages not only with the past's ideas of the future but also with the way that, particularly in England, ideas of the future and the past are inextricably linked.

You've stated recently that despite using processes such as collage, you still wish your poems to be clear to the reader, particularly in the way they use language. Is this to do with style and vocabulary or are you still concerned with some kind of "message"? The first part of The President of Earth*—which are perhaps earlier poems?—might suggest this is the case. Indeed, some of the poems in the first part of the book are more "ordinary" as poems, with a punchline/ epiphanic ending.*

You're referring to the email exchange that preceded this interview. I think what I said was that I wanted to use plain language; but I meant that in the sense of unadorned not transparent. About half the poems in Part 1 date from the early to mid-1990s when I was interested in using poetry to think through cultural, social and political questions. I'm certainly not interested in messages but I am interested in responding to ideas, to things that are happening culturally, politically, etc; and I do want my readers to think. The poems in Part 1 are also a reaction against "I'm a poet—dig my lifestyle, feel my pain" anecdote poetry—e.g. here's a poem about our new house/new baby/last holiday/recent tragedy. I'm actually quite revolted by the ease with which a lot of poets write about their own lives and I also think it's a kind of substitute thinking in the sense that they're using apparently intimate facts about themselves to manipulate readers into feeling and thinking. I don't want my poetry to be a ready meal quick

fix of carbohydrates made tasty with too much salt and sugar. That's why the poems about my late father—the three-part 'Father and Son' and 'Remembering the Future'—are quite oblique when compared with a lot of poems by sons about fathers. Or rather, I was more interested in exploring what it means to write poems of mourning and remembrance as opposed to just "doing" mourning and remembrance while being true to my own experience within that. When I was sitting by father's hospital bed as he lay dying, I did think that the blankets looked like all that peculiar matted stuff you used to see on the nose cones of space capsules; and when I was writing the poem many years later it occurred to me that death is a little like going off into space, into a cold void. But I didn't feel any need to say "Ooo look, it's just like…" I want to leave some work for the reader to do. It's what excites me as reader as well as being connected to my belief that the most important work in poetry generally is done by readers anyway.

To focus on the first part of *The President of Earth* specifically, it's called 'Histories' and that responds to a number of things. First, the ideas that have been around for a while—which I don't buy—that we're somehow at the end of something or have arrived at some kind of final destination. That's what is being mocked in the title poem as "the world's dream"; and is perhaps causing a little more anxiety in the two part 'Postmodern Scenes': "I miss the old stories, their creaky plots:/At least you knew where you were in the…" Second, and more, importantly, the fact that we're surrounded and bombarded with all sorts of stories that have pre-scripted roles for us. We buy into—maybe we're actively bought by—some of these stories without even realising it; and because the stories have to work through their various stages, our world changes and we're changed too. The hardest thing to do, in art and in life, is first to understand that we live inside change and then to step outside change and see it happening, understand its effects. This is one of the things that poetry is uniquely placed to do. It's partly what I'm getting at in 'A Walking Lunch' when the narrator wonders whether he's a "causeless effect" that perhaps not even "a double reading" can explain. It surprises me that you find some the endings work like punchlines or epiphanies. That rather assumes that the "I" in the poems is the same person as the David Kennedy you're interviewing—which certainly isn't the case. Thinking about the poems in those terms makes the apparent epiphanies and punchlines a lot less definite and more open to question.

Part 2, 'Cities', is a very lyrical series of poems that clearly relate to each other in some way (lines re-appear from other poems throughout the section; they all have the same shape on the page) and yet resist traditional interpretation

as a sequence of poems and indeed, sometimes resist any obvious "meaning"; yet they are playful and lyrical. Can you tell me about this group of poems?

It interests me that you focus on the lyrical elements. The poems have been called surreal and compared to Adrian Mitchell, which doesn't really catch what they're about. I think the lyrical material that is present would probably seem excessive in a more conventional context but seems to work in poems that are generally excessive anyway and constantly swinging from one mood to another. One thing I've been trying to think through critically recently is the idea that poetry is concerned with different types of excess. For example, it's often a form of play-in-language that wouldn't be permissible in other contexts. Similarly, it's a place where all sorts of things can be expressed that are otherwise unwanted or culturally homeless. I discuss this in more detail in the essay 'Reading The Reading: Poetry as Loss, Excess & Speaking With Dead' in the *Words Out Loud* volume that Mark Robinson recently edited for you.

The poems in 'Cities' are all I wanted to collect from a sequence of 50 16 line "free sonnets", as I like to call them. The poems were written in an intense burst between February and April 1993 and revised a little later that year. I was looking at the original ms. when I was choosing poems for *The President of Earth* and it surprised me how many seemed to be a case of "first thought best thought" which is usually something I'd distrust if not entirely reject. I started with a set of 20 which were collaged from several old notebooks full of stuff that I'd never found the right home for. What happened during the writing of the first 20 was that I started to use the last line of one poem as the first line of another. After a while, I just carried on free-writing and the collaging started to become using anything that was happening as I was writing. And using the last line of one poem to start the next became more a case of responding the mood of the line or taking it as a signpost. It was as if the poems became like ambient music in that they became atmospheres or environments that seemed able to contain whatever I wanted them to.

Part 3 of The President… *is for me a quirky voice play, where a lot of very interesting poetry is almost disguised by the allocation of it to different voices; I wanted to just read some parts of it, to let various sections stand on its own. You call it 'An Entertainment', a strange, slightly antiquated term these days. Can you tell me how the piece was written?*

The impetus for 'Gardens' comes from a number of places. I became very

interested in the Renaissance, fascinated by court masques etc. So the subtitle probably comes out of that. In fact, I hope it describes the fact that 'Gardens' is serious fun as opposed to just being quirky. I've also been doing a lot of reading of and thinking about pastoral recently too, particularly in terms of trying to understand how it's surviving. Some people argue that pastoral survives in environmental and feminist ecological writing. But it seems to me that one way it's surviving in poetry is self-reflexively, so that you get a kind of meta-pastoral going on. As I said earlier about mourning and remembrance, not just "doing" a genre but exploring its implications, even its practicalities.

The piece began as a series of notes and lyric fragments and just grew out of that. The "call and response" section which ends it—'Garden of rhetoric instruct us', "Garden of retirement entangle us"—was actually written first with the idea of having a section that explored each type of garden. But I decided this would be overdoing it; and I hope that the three gardens that are explored—'Love's Etcetera', 'State's Mirror' and 'Soul's Ease'—suggest a way of thinking about other meanings of gardens. The history of gardens and what philosophers and writers have taken them to mean is absolutely fascinating. When you go into it you find that gardens have always been tightly bound up with ideas of nation and nationalism and selfhood. There's a couple of great books Pluto Press brought out in the 1990s called *Gardeners Delight* and *Bread And Roses* by Martin Hoyles. The second one is a survey of gardening books which shows how political ideas got remodelled in horticultural terms. And I was struck by the fact that the image of the garden and gardeners is of individuals working alone and yet there's all these other voices literally clamouring away in the background. I couldn't conceive of it not being "broken up" as you call it.

You run a small press called The Cherry On The Top; and you've recently begun editing and publishing a magazine about poetry and poetics called The Paper. *Can you tell me more about these activities?*

The Cherry On The Top Press began for two reasons. First, because I often produce work which I want to get out into the world quickly to people who I think might be interested or pleased to receive it. Second, because I produce a lot of work which falls outside the usual definitions of poetry and which I can't imagine anyone else wanting to publish in the way I want to publish it. Some of the poems in part 2 of *The President of Earth* were first published in *The Elephant's Typewriter*; but the remainder I published in *Cities* which was an A3 folded card, a kind of poetry tabloid.

The next thing I did after that was *Four True Prophecies Of The New State* which I guess comes under what people call visual text and was a response to turn of the millennium anxieties as well as to people finding an image of the Virgin Mary in a bag of pork scratchings and to the myths about Princess Diana that are all over the internet. That was first published as a set of four A5 printed cards; and is now in a second edition as four printed A4 sheets in a plastic folder. It includes a gospel based on aspects of the Diana myths; and a cut-up of Nostradamus. After that, I brought out my book on alien abduction, *The Fiery Chariot*, which is in the style of a seventeenth-century pamphlet and mixes texts and graphics and even has a music hall song in there. The Cornell pamphlet, *C: A Circuition Around His Circumambulation*, which Alan Halsey published with his West House Books imprint, was originally a handmade artists book published in a limited edition for the 2000 London Artists Book Fair. I've recently published a newly-discovered Cold War document, *Spook Rota*; and the first two instalments of a part-work called *Teach Yourself Criticism*.

The press doesn't just function as a personal vehicle. I publish things by other people which don't seem to fit easily into the usual categories. For example, Stephen Vincent's *A Walk Toward Spicer* is a short but highly resonant prose piece which literally retraces Jack Spicer's regular Sunday walk around the North Beach area of San Francisco; but also manages to say something about his ideas of creation being a process of dictation from outside the self. Later this year, I'll be publishing *A Pocket Dante* which is a collaboration between myself and Bill Herbert.

I've been thinking about doing a magazine for years but I've never been very convinced by the rattle bag approach to poetry magazines because hardly anyone's work gets shown to its best advantage. There's got to be a better way of doing things which is why *The Paper* has themed issues; only publishes invited work in an attempt to get a group of like minds together; and aims to give contributors quick answers and useful feedback during the editorial process. It seems much more interesting and valuable to get a group of people writing on pastoral or performance or lyric because there's a chance you might tap into things that are circulating in the larger culture. That's certainly happened with the current issue—no.5—which is mainly devoted to elegy. And, of course, you find that different contributions play off and inform each other in surprising ways and therefore do something that's more like our wider experience of reading, writing and thinking.

[*Stride*, 2002]

Aggressive Interview #1: Rupert Loydell

Gists & Piths: *The "avant garde", "experimentalism" in poetry, all that stuff: waste of time, yes?*

Rupert Loydell: Not at all. My own inclination would be that the avant-garde is where interesting stuff happens and then in due course filters back into the mainstream. Media and literature are fickle things and what is derided at the time often turns up later to surprise us: see, for instance cut-ups and collage and the '90s phenomenon of mash-ups in music.

But the people who care about experiments in language, they don't matter, do they, in a wider society?

Who is to say what affects society? I don't know anyone who is out to "change the world", more that they are interested in language. On a personal level I've learnt that being able to be approachable and talk about my work in plain English wins over audiences.

So who actually matters when it comes to reading poetry? Why?

Anyone who is pushing boundaries. We all need amusing and entertaining, but the things that change the world are films/music/poems/novels that challenge us and make people think. On the poetry front, I for one am tired of shaggy-dog poems with a punch line. I'm far more intrigued by the big projects of Rachel Blau DuPlessis, Tony Lopez and Charles Olson.

There is an implication in some circles that without experimentation coming from the margins into wider society, society would stagnate. (Well, it's an idea I put forward in classes for debate.) But a common criticism of the avant garde is that it has sometimes (e.g. Eliot, Pound, et al, pre-World War 2, or Mottram, Griffiths, et al, 1970s) taken disproportionate control of mainstream channels in order to promote minority interests, to the detriment of wider readerships. You say, "Who is to say what affects society?" but this is an example of someone taking the reigns and controlling. This is bad, yes?

If people understand how language (or paint, or photography, whatever) works then they can understand a wide variety of art forms. Postmodernism

suggests linear narratives & histories are an outdated construct and that lots happens simultaneously and in a network. I would agree with this notion.

I would also argue that we live in an age of more and more diversity and smaller and smaller audiences. We can do what we want and probably find an audience for it. I don't know many poets, avant-garde or not, chasing fame and fortune. They, and I count myself in this, simply want their work read—and, in the main, the internet now facilitates that process.

Society and the media manipulate and are manipulated. That seems the way of things to me. I'm inclined towards democratic anarchy and individual responsibility—the latter means I would encourage people to think for themselves and engage with life in the fullest sense, including the arts.

I don't really want to get into a Mottram and Griffiths debate again. I think the Poetry Society saga they were involved in has been blown out of all proportion by both sides. I am on record elsewhere, and am happy to be so again, saying that actually in the late 70s and early 80s the exciting poetry stuff was happening elsewhere in London anyway. I didn't expect the Poetry Society to be relevant or exciting, there was too much improvised music & film, performance poetry, postpunk music, and exciting visual arts and dance/performance theatre going on to worry about damp rooms in Earls Court, or who was controlling the duplicator in the basement.

You say "the avant garde is where the interesting stuff happens", but this is relative. If the "interesting stuff" is only interesting to a minority, then surely it is merely "stuff that interests geeks"? You point out that some stuff does cross over, like cut up and collage techniques, which implies that the geeks get left behind. Do you think geeks deserve more recognition for what they do, or should they continue to work in obscurity and let people with a better understanding of the mainstream carry their ideas across to society? And why?

Who you calling a geek? As I said in my last answer, the world has more and more small networks. I'm happy in my network[s] of readers, colleagues, friends, publishers, students and fellow writers. Human beings all have different tastes, and that's fine.

We all need entertaining at times—so sometimes I watch TV and sometimes I like funny rhyming poetry—but I can't abide people telling me they are writers when they don't understand how language works and what it can do. You don't have to like Jackson Mac Low or Charles Bernstein's poetry, but it's not incomprehensible: if you move beyond content, the

poems work in the same ways that mainstream poets do. That is the work is constructed with language, with words, deliberately organised and arranged for the viewer (even if a chance procedure has been used in the writing process).

I always get my students to approach a poem with that in mind, to accept it as finished work the way the author wanted it—and to engage with how it has been made and what it might be doing, then on to content and what it says, and lastly whether or not they like it (which I'm not that interested in anyway; we're usually looking at poems to find out about poems, not the students' tastes).

And to close, a two part question about "shaggy dog poems with a punch line": Why are you tired of them? And, given the prevalence of this kind of work in current publishing, doesn't this suggest that it has more importance to poetry's readership than you give credit for? [I'm thinking partly of Pound's loathing of "How to write" manuals, but his feeling that there was something a student of language and writing could learn from them—but what?]

I'm confused that you think marketing and mainstream publishing has anything to do with readership? We all know the "big" publishers don't sell a lot of poetry books apart from a few authors (Carol Ann Duffy, Roger McGough, Ted Hughes, etc). It's fashion and marketing, and I don't worry about it.

I've played some of those games in the past as a publisher, sometimes to good effect, but basically they absorb a lot of time and effort that can be better used actually publishing work and getting readers. More than ever, with print-on-demand and the internet, and the current state of the mainstream book trade, it's easier than ever to sell books and find readers. However, it's harder than ever to break the financial and fashionable strangleholds of the publishers who cling to the outdated publishing model of warehousing long print-runs, and investing huge amounts of money supporting teams of staff and wining & dining competition judges. Those days are gone. Salt and Shearsman prove it—they are currently where the poetry powerhouses are.

As for why I don't like poems that are shaggy dog stories… I don't want to know answers, I want more questions. I don't want to empathise with an author, I want to be told something new. I don't want confession, polemic, opinions, wise thoughts or epiphanies. I think there are more interesting things to be said and more interesting ways to say them. That probably

makes me a geek in your reference terms above, but I can honestly say I want poems to challenge, excite, confuse and astound me. Small-minded narrative squibs usually don't do any of that. I like poems I can return to time and time again; that continue to befuddle and confound, amuse and irritate me.

I really do think that works, such as *The Waste Land* and *The Cantos*, Berryman's *Dream Songs*, *The Maximus Poems* and others, last because they can't be pinned down, however many books get written about them. They continue to intrigue, because of their very ambition, complexity and language. We need more ambitious writers—whether they are revitalising a traditional form (there seems to be a spate of sonneteers around at the moment) or creating their own projects. Rachel Blau DuPlessis's *Drafts* project is just such an intriguing and ambitious work; Robert Sheppard's *Twentieth Century Blues* project also.

[*Gists & Piths*, 2008]