



Linda Kemp, 'Book Review: Robert Sheppard, *The Necessity of Poetics* (2024):' (2025) 17(1): *Journal of British and Irish Innovative Poetry*. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.16995/bip.18564>



Book Review: Robert Sheppard, *The Necessity of Poetics* (2024)

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Linda Kemp reviews Robert Sheppard, *The Necessity of Poetics* (2024).

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The title *The Necessity of Poetics* suggests that this book is going to offer a defence of poetics. In the cultures of literary and other creative practice discourses the word 'poetics' is frequently deployed both very specifically and surprisingly generally. At one end we have 'poetics' as a defined practice, such as the Preface to *The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry & Poetics* which opens "Poetics, the theoretical and practical study of poetry, is among the oldest disciplines in the West, one of those founded by Aristotle [...]"¹ At the other end of this imaginary polarity we have 'poetics' as a catch-all encompassing anything from a captivating landscape, to an abstract painting, to ballet, to academic discourse, to critical theory, to poetry itself; a potentially endless list of objects, activities, landscapes and so on. Within the discursive space of this Journal, we might consider whether, say, Roland Barthes' *A Lover's Discourse* is a poetics and/or if the oeuvre of Sean Bonney constructs and/or enacts a militant poetics.^{2,3} Do we consider poetics to stand outside of a poet's corpus of poetry, or is the poetry itself the poetics? We might consider the academic journal operating under the name *Poetics* which boasts a \$3,390 (before tax) charge for open access publishing and describes itself as "an interdisciplinary journal of theoretical and empirical research on culture, the media and the arts" encompassing the academic disciplines of "sociology, psychology, media and communication studies, and economics".⁴ The word 'poetics' as a determinant or piece of terminology may be doing some long-established heavy-lifting following the lineage oftentimes in the West traced back to Aristotle; it might be an adjective for something beautiful, and it may be a currently contested site within the practice of poetry. Such indeterminacy could be good news for poets of course, thriving in the indeterminacy of gaps – or 'noise' – in the language.⁵ It is less clear in this context of indeterminacy why the claim for a *necessity* of poetics may need to be established. In the chapter 'The Necessity of Poetics' Sheppard discusses,

Two prominent examples of poetics in my own research area of American language poetry and British linguistically innovative poetry are Allen Fisher's *Necessary Business* (1985) and Charles Bernstein's 'The Artifice of Absorption' (1986) [...] Without repeating a comparative analysis available elsewhere (Sheppard 1999b), these two formally hybrid texts constitute exemplary poetics. Fisher's text is an essay collaged into interviews with poets. In it, or rather, through it, he manufactures a poetics for himself, one that others may use and develop" (101).

Here we see, in Fisher's 'necessary' in *Necessary Business*, and Sheppard's foregrounding of method in "through it", a foreshadowing of Sheppard's methods, and his title 'The Necessity of Poetics' for both chapter and book. Situating his poetics in the company

of Fisher and Bernstein, Sheppard locates his poetics in the traditions of British linguistically innovative poetries and American Language poetry.

The Necessity of Poetics brings together various forms of written documentation Sheppard has generated over decades, spanning from experiences in the 1970s to material written recently. Poetics forms the unifying theme of these pieces, moving from the notion of poetics in general, poetics specifically in the context of linguistically innovative poetries, and Sheppard's own poetics in relation to his poetry. The pieces in the book are presented "[...] broadly in reverse chronological order" (7). The first part contains recent poetics, the second section "concentrates on works that attempt to define the discourse of poetics" and the final section contains some of Sheppard's "first attempts at poetics, often of a communal nature, aimed at creating a poetics for a poetry scene or group, mostly now, but not wholly, of literary historical interest" (8). This tripartite approach captures a broad sweep across Sheppard's poetics without claiming definitiveness or completeness. The provisional is important for Sheppard's thinking of, in and about poetics; we may reflect on Sheppard's long-running *Pages* blog where he muses on forthcoming reviews of this book.⁶ Encountering this during the writing of this review I find myself pre-empting Sheppard's reflections on my review and make my claim now that even this review is provisional. Sheppard will reflect on my review following its online publication and his reflections will be incorporated into his corpus of poetics and in doing so change the ongoing reception of this review. Another example of the ways poetics can operate as the provisional in the context of a poet's writing.

Sheppard's Introduction to this selection of writings includes a gloss for his use of the word 'poetics' which he locates as "writerly poetics [...] because I want to limit it to the writings that writers write about writing" (7). Sheppard's curiosity about his own writerly practices is also evident in his Introduction; "Even more curiously, I've never managed to produce a *definitive* essay on the topic" (7), although with his essay 'The Necessity of Poetics' containing around eighty definitional statements Sheppard makes a reach towards the definitive. Indeed, what may appear to be one of the paradoxes of the book is Sheppard's simultaneous reaching towards definition and method and a pulling away from conclusion. This apparent paradox may arise from the tension between the pedagogical demands of Sheppard's locus as an educator, and resistances inherent in the linguistically innovative poetries in which Sheppard's creative and critical writing is contextualised and socialised.

The socialised experience of being a poet in community is characteristic of how Sheppard writes about his writing and in part accounts for the self-interrogation with which he approaches his writing practices. Long-term readers of Sheppard's work will

be familiar with this self-reflexive approach, seen for example in Sheppard's *Pages* blog.⁷ In Sheppard's self-reflexivity we see praxis modelled, demonstrating how the creative-critical can mobilise into a lively and interrogative poetics. In the Introduction the contemporaneous Sheppard reflects on his poetics written in previous decades and his evolving revisions and additions to his earlier thoughts and statements on, about and around poetics;

Whenever I refine my sense of poetics (if that is what I am doing in my restlessness) I find that the definitions I assembled in 1999 usually prefigure my later ways of thinking – and *making* (for making is at the root, etymologically, as well as practically, of poetics). The one that resonates most as I write now is my assertion that poetics is not a blueprint but a thumbnail, and the associated suggestion that the writing produced may not be *described* in the poetics (that the writer was deluding herself, or that something else happened in poesis). That this qualification extends to the poetics of my own work marks each utterance I make as provisional [...]" (8–9).

The reflective approach Sheppard applies to writing about his own writing offers a model for students who are tasked to reflect upon their own writing practices in educational contexts such as schools and universities but also in the proliferating number of independent workshops and research-adjacent community contexts. Whilst Sheppard's self-reflective approach appears to be intuitive insofar as it predates his formal transition into a career as an educator, *The Necessity of Poetics* shows that his work as an educator has informed his approach to poetics as reflective thinking about writing poetry. Tucked away in the Appendix of the book is the short essay 'The Education of Desire' which as the note below the title says, is "[A text written for A Level students of English Literature]" (210). We can speculate about why this piece appears as an Appendix, and its relatively straight talking language might be one reason, however, it can also be read as a sort of key for the reader unfamiliar with the environment in which Sheppard's writing and academic work is socialised and situated as it outlines a context for innovative or, as one of the subtitles has it here, 'Revolutionary Poetry'. Dated to 1988, 'The Education of Desire' marks one step in Sheppard's journey through pedagogical work as also a working thought of poetics and the reflective thinking that necessarily underpins a poetics.

So much for scene setting. Let's take a closer look at the book. The first section comprises recent poetics which are offered in six pieces of writing. The first section, 'Poetics in Anticipation: Shifting an Imaginary, towards *British Standards*', offers a poetics towards Sheppard's transpositions of Romantic sonnets, *British Standards*, a book of poetry published simultaneously with *The Necessity of Poetics* and thereby

inviting comparison of the two books. Whilst this review is not going to do that comparative piece of work, the reader can discern from 'Poetics in Anticipation' the role poetics serves for Sheppard. These 'Poetics in Anticipation' are dated 17 June – 2 July 2020 which time stamps this poetics and their preoccupations. As we are already in the future in relation to 2020, we may consider that 2020 will be historically chained to the global Covid-19 pandemic, the consequences of which we have yet to fully discern. These poetics speak into that future such as,

The danger is the move from the NHS being 'powered by love' to 'there are more important things than living', from *Black Lives Matter* to 'I need a haircut', from declarations of human rights to the extermination of human 'rats' (19).

The next piece, 'Pulse: All a Rhythm', dated 2016–2018, offers a substantial consideration of that which is usually described as 'rhythm' in poetry. Considering metrical invention as a method of writing poetry and as a poetics Sheppard writes,

I re-read passages of *Chapters on English Metre* by Joseph B. Mayor, published 'Cambridge: At the University Press' in 1901 (a blue-stamped copy once belonging to the Bombay Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society), wondering at the supposed intricacy of metrical invention, inversion, substitution, metamorphosing. Tables, charts, parsings, scanning. A whole imperial exercise to show the assumed mechanisms of Shelley, Milton, William Watson, as though their listenings and judgements had been fully conscious" (33).

The discussion of metrical feet, quantitative metres, "[a] whole imperial exercise to show the assumed mechanisms [...]" intervenes with nebulous notions of poetry as somehow separate from real world politics by foregrounding the imperialism undergirding supposed methods and methodologies for composition. In directly addressing the politics of prosody and as Sheppard describes it here, pulse, a wider readership is invited into this conversation. Instead of a poetry which is legitimated through its conformity to established patterns, rhythms, of metrical feet, Sheppard is arguing that,

Pulse renders sensible the poetic work as it goes, surging, pushing and pulling along a line, a cognitive tool.

What does the poem *intend*, as it is flooded with cognition, and as the reader fulfils its intention, by unfolding it? This is not just a question of the role of the reader in completing the poem (which still pertains) but the act-event of 'concretizing' it [...] Blast the body with the pulse and its own pulse will quicken (or slow) in response" (44–5).

The second section of the book opens with the eponymous 'The Necessity of Poetics' which is dated '1999/2000/2002/2011' signalling the ongoing work of poetics Sheppard has undertaken. The piece is divided into sections which approach 'poetics' through varying lenses: 'The Identification of Poetics', 'Metapoetics: Definitions of Poetics', 'Poetics as Discourse', 'From Aristotle to Nomadic Poetics: Some Examples', 'The Flavour of Poetics' and 'Don't Explain'. The piece offers simultaneously an insight into the author's own poetics, his academic and intellectual consideration of poetics, a pedagogical tool for teaching poetics, and a point of departure for future writing. 'The Necessity of Poetics' shows thinking in continual movement which for Sheppard is linked to the political imperative of constant renewal underpinning revolutionary poetry. In the opening section of the essay Sheppard writes of "the force of resistance towards poetics (in this country anyway)" (85) speaking towards the UK/England where Sheppard's writing life is located. It is refreshing to see this articulated, not least from Sheppard's position within the academy, as it has perhaps – until very recently – been taken for granted in the context of university education that the student will learn prosody and then understand it as a fixed form, in other words poetics packaged up by the education system as a reified system or method. Sheppard is making the case for the opposite of this and in so doing makes the case for the *necessity* of poetics as a rebuke and resistance to imperialism in all its insidious geopolitical, social, emotional, intellectual, harmful forms.

The 'Metapoetics' subsection builds a poetics through a gathering of different descriptors of poetics, evading conclusion whilst aiming for comprehensive coverage. In the 'Poetics as Discourse' subsection there is a wonderful comparison between poetry as world-building and that other Modernist bureaucratic discourse of world-building, the social sciences:

One has to admit there is also a refreshing lack of a need for discursive legitimization. Unlike the body of knowledge built up in the social sciences, for example, where references to the theories of Weber or Kuhn (or Foucault, of course) are almost obligatory if the discourse is to be *legitimate*, it is not thought necessary to refer (back) to the poetics of Alexander Pope or Ezra Pound, S.T. Coleridge or Clark Coolidge as 'authorities' in quite the same way, in order to demonstrate that the discourse is legitimate – part of the discourse rather than outside of it, professional rather than amateur – amongst the fraternity of its users' (93).

Here Sheppard invites a direct comparison between the social sciences and poetry and in doing so finds the social sciences somewhat wanting in their authority through

their continual need for legitimation through citation to predecessors. Poetry, on the other hand, is shown to be an embodied form of knowledge and meaning-making, one which lives and breathes, indeed has ‘pulse’, as Sheppard describes it elsewhere in this book. Pushing this further, social sciences are seen to offer an ongoing development of theories, where poetry is embodied as experience.

‘Poetics as Conjecture and Provocation’ gets up to the mischief one might hope to hear at an inaugural lecture, which is the origin of this piece. There is a provocative aside couched within a discussion of misunderstandings of poetics, which is worth quoting in full to appreciate the unpacking that takes place within the parentheses:

Another effect of the comparatively obscured or hybrid nature of poetics is the misreading of it as though it were a variety of literary theory or literary criticism. If you still think they are the same, consult Jon Cook’s excellent anthology *Poetry in Theory* – another product of UEA by the way – the contents of which fall into three broad (sometimes overlapping) categories: literary theory (written by philosophers and theorists, which is constructed at a high level of generality and, it has to be confessed, a low level of specific textual reference; it is alarming how much Lacan seems to squeeze from one line of Mallarmé); literary criticism (which is usually textually specific around themes or authors, such as Barbara Herrnstein Smith’s ‘Closure and anti-closure in Modern Poetry’ or excerpts from Thomas Yingling’s *Hart Crane and the Homosexual Text*); and poetics, an altogether tattier affair written by creative writers themselves, often in forms which evade formal academic discourse, such as Charles Olson’s seminal and expressive ‘Objective Verse’ essay (129–30).

There is a great deal to consider here but let us zoom in on that discussion within parentheses about “[L]iterary theory (written by philosophers and theorists, which is constructed at a high level of generality and, it has to be confessed, a low level of specific textual reference; it is alarming how much Lacan seems to squeeze from one line of Mallarmé)” (129) and the work done in those words “it has to be confessed”. The shame and embarrassment of a whole cottage industry is witheringly demolished in this aside. The inaugural lecture this piece derives from dates to 2007 by which time theory-driven approaches to poetry were long established and recognised as a legitimate way to parse literary texts in the academy. This too is political, and the reader might consider Sheppard’s reflections in relation to citational practices in social sciences and the citational practices which inform literary theory. In each instance the embodied experiences of the poetics and poetry, and the beautiful literary text, are excised by theory.

The final section of *The Necessity of Poetics* covers Sheppard's early articulations of poetics. There is much of interest to be found here and the work these poetics achieve of situating these communities of poetry practice in their historical context is invaluable. Personal anecdote can do the work of historical materialism and does so here. Sheppard dates an encounter with Bob Cobbing to November 1973, with an exposition of in-person encounters and their consequences:

Cobbing eschewed discussion entirely in favour of performance and example. My commitment to poetics as a speculative, writerly discourse proceeded from this perceived lack (170).

Poetry and community are presented as inseparable. Then what happens?

Nobody had invented the term networking – and there were very few courses in Creative Writing to teach such skills to student writers. Which was just as well: it's unlikely that the radical forms of artifice being nurtured in London would have been taught much in higher education. The whole relation of this poetry to the academy is a fraught one" (170).

It is worth reflecting that Sheppard is writing about the period of the mid-1970s/1980s here and at the time of writing this review of Sheppard's book the teaching of innovative poetry has become extremely widespread in UK Higher Education. Consequently, the relation of this poetry to the academy may remain a fraught one but it is now fraught insofar as, having been subsumed into institutional life and the rationalisation of metrics and measurement which accompanies all institutional life, the revolutionary potential which Sheppard locates in this poetry, is denuded. It seems unlikely that revolution in the UK is going to emerge from REF, KEF or TEF.⁸

The Necessity of Poetics is a book of many riches. What this book achieves is threefold. Firstly, there is insight into the workings-out of Sheppard's poetry or at least the outworkings he has chosen to share. Secondly, there is a significant contribution to the discourse of poetics for the innovative and experimental practice of poetry. Thirdly, an important contribution this book makes to the field and practice of poetry is the historical positionality in and through which this milieu of poetry practice is situated.

It is tempting to follow Sheppard's declarations of provisionally as I attempt to wrap up this overview of Sheppard's achievement with this book. In protesting poetics as provisional, Sheppard comes close to defining the necessity of poetics.

Notes

- ¹ Roland Greene & Stephen Cushman, *The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry & Poetics* 4th ed. (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2012), pp.vii.
- ² Roland Barthes, *A Lover's Discourse: Fragments* Trans. Richard Howard (London: Penguin, 1990).
- ³ For example Sean Bonney, 'Notes on Militant Poetics', *Journal of British and Irish Innovative Poetry* 14:1 (2022), doi.org/10.16995/bip.9255 and K. Sharma-Patel, 'Bonney's Militant Poetics: Revolutionary Aesthetics, Politics and Black Poetics', *Journal of British and Irish Innovative Poetry* 14:1 (2022), doi.org/10.16995/bip.4723.
- ⁴ *Poetics: Journal of Empirical Research on Culture, the Media and the Arts*. Available at: <https://www.sciencedirect.com/journal/poetics> [Accessed 3rd April 2025].
- ⁵ For indeterminacy see for example Marjorie Perloff's *The Poetics of Indeterminacy: Rimbaud to Cage* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1981). An example of the workings of noise can be found at Nat Raha in conversation with Laynie Browne, Lee Ann Brown, and Sophia DuRose, *On Nat Raha's "[subterranean/dreaming grace roots]"*. Available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=i8VzqZgwsMc> [Accessed 3rd April 2025].
- ⁶ See Robert Sheppard <https://robertsheppard.blogspot.com/2024/10/reviews-of-necessity-of-poetics.html> [Accessed 3rd April 2025].
- ⁷ See Robert Sheppard's *Pages* blog: <https://robertsheppard.blogspot.com/> [Accessed 3rd April 2025].
- ⁸ REF, KEF, TEF refers to the metrics of assessment used in UK Higher Education, "The REF is the UK's system for assessing the quality of research in UK higher education institutions" (see: <https://2029.ref.ac.uk/>). "The Knowledge Exchange Framework (KEF) provides a range of information on the knowledge exchange activities of higher education providers (HEPs) in England" (see <https://kef.ac.uk/>). "The Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) is a national scheme run by the Office for Students (OfS) that aims to encourage higher education providers to improve and deliver excellence in the areas that students care about the most: teaching, learning and achieving positive outcomes from their studies" (see <https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/for-providers/quality-and-standards/about-the-tef/>) [Accessed 2nd April 2025].

Acknowledgement

I would like to thank Lila Matsumoto for comments on an earlier draft and for invaluable discussion.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

