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Review

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REVIEW

Book Reviews

David Toms and Lyndon Davies

David Toms reviews Robert Kiely, *Incomparable Poetry: An Essay on the Financial Crisis of 2007–2008 and Irish Literature* (2020); Lyndon Davies reviews *The Allen Fisher Companion*, edited by Robert Hampson and cris cheek (2020).

Robert Kiely, *Incomparable Poetry: An Essay on the Financial Crisis of 2007–2008 and Irish Literature*, Punctum Books, 163 pp., 2020

David Toms
Independent Scholar
daithitoms@gmail.com

As I write this review, one of the poets Robert Kiely engages with in this essay, Trevor Joyce, has had eleven poems from a new sequence 'Conspiracy' published online by *Chicago Review*. The last of these eleven poems, part of a larger sequence of 144 poems, runs as follows:

> furtive though not concealed
> by intervening objects since
> when storms arise
> is no time to search
> out the complete accounts
> from undivided attention
> to the wretched state of it
> persisting yet despite
> oscillations in the basal
> regions specialized for
> budgetary issues
> must take precedence[1]

As a sequence which concerns itself in a broad way with history the term 'complete accounts' will jump out at anyone who has read Kiely's essay. Much of Robert Kiely's engagement in *Incomparable Poetry* with Joyce's work from the time of the finan-

[1] Trevor Joyce, *from* Conspiracy, *Chicago Review*: https://www.chicagoreview.org/from-conspiracy/ accessed 15-7-2020.

cial crisis in the period following 2008, hinges on Joyce's poem sequences 'Capital Accounts' and 'The Immediate Future'. With only a sliver of the new poem available, it is difficult to say where the 'complete accounts' come into wider consideration alongside 'Capital Accounts' and 'The Immediate Future', but the final two lines, insisting as they do 'budgetary issues | must take precedence' suggest that Trevor Joyce is not yet done with themes so ably unpacked by Robert Kiely in the book under review, thus making Kiely's analysis undoubtedly vital and valuable to what comes next in the work of Trevor Joyce.

But Joyce isn't the only writer to be tackled in this 163-page essay on literature in Ireland following the financial crash. In *Incomparable Poetry*, Robert Kiely provides us with one of the strongest explorations yet of the impact of not just the global recession of 2008 on Irish poetry and writing but a convincing analysis of the way in which the very language of finance and late capitalism is part of the vocabulary of contemporary Irish writing. A poet in his own right, this sharp assessment of the impact of the financial crisis in Ireland on three poets is clear, concise and thought-provoking.

The book chiefly concerns itself with the poetry of Trevor Joyce, Leontia Flynn, Rachel Warriner and Dave Lordan, while also taking in the fiction of Donal Ryan. Of the two poem sequences by Joyce which he explores in the essay, Kiely puts forward the idea that Joyce, by blending an Irish present with the Chinese past via translation and the use of financialised language:

> Poetry is the qualitative practice of what is done quantitatively in accounting, and Joyce's 'Capital Accounts' explicitly points to its status as an act of qualitative accounting in its title. After all, a *capital account* is an account that can tell us the net change in ownership of national assets. (p. 40)

Ultimately, for Kiely 'Capital Accounts' as a poem 'not only shows us how little has changed, but all that must be changed' (p. 57). In a similar way, the same might be said of the poetry of Dave Lordan and Rachel Warriner. The latter especially in her

eleven days (a set of eleven poems with dates for titles centered around the eleven days the IMF were in Ireland to negotiate a bailout for the country) for Kiely offers 'a poetry of lyric protest and agency and fury, but also fatigue' (p.106). It is worth quoting Kiely at length on this:

> If Warriner's sequence has an overall tone, it is one of disappointment. It is disappointed with Irish politicians, the Irish public and, perhaps most interestingly, the protestors. It is not the kind of work which, say, Jodi Dean would decry as a mere celebration of protest as a transformative personal moment, after which everyone just goes home. Indeed, Warriner seems dissatisfied with the protest form itself. For example, the poem '26.11.10' seems to declaim in the lines 'we stride forth | in fury exhibition', but the bombast of 'stride forth' is in irreducible tension with the 'fury exhibition' – the 'fury' is undercut by the 'exhibition', as it is fury performed rather than simply fury itself. The protest enters the clean, clinical, white space of a gallery opening. This sense of disappointment in protestors is also present in '27.11.10':
>
> > halfmasked drinkers
> > crush cans in shows of fury
> > and small children
> > riot over who
> > holds the sign
>
> If this section might also be read as an image of unbounded energy, the general tone of the poems seems to be one of fatigue (the final line closes off in a very final ending, 'sold out and done') alongside a righteous anger which is finding it difficult to select and maintain its sights on a valid target. It is a poetry of protest, but it is also one suspicious of this self-fashioning. (p. 107)

Kiely is rightly enamoured of this approach to writing about protest in the moment while also recognising the limits of what is possible. He continues: 'Warriner's total

investment in the moment, the *now* of the poems, comes at the problem in another way as protest is critiqued for being too time-bound or inadequate as a spontaneous act or performance in a moment within a time-bound poem' (p.108).

In his analysis of Leontia Flynn's *Profit and Loss* and especially of 'Letter to Friends', Kiely alights upon the final stanza of this poem (via Auden, his 'Letter to Byron' and a discussion of the difference between Ireland and Iceland's reactions to the financial crash). Quoting the final stanza, part of which runs

> A dove, an olive branch, a ray of light.
> Who would have thought that only for so long
> might downturns turn down; that the future's bright
> and *black*? That one new Power's age-old wrong
> should find redress, or symbol of redress (p. 85)

Kiely wonders, on the back of the italicising of the word black

> What does Flynn mean when she writes 'the future's bright | and *black*?' Why does Flynn italicize this word? She seems surprised that the future has this colour – that the future is coloured, and that the future is a thing that can be both bright and the darkest of hues, that something can be bright and yet devoid of light. It is obviously racist, and this kind of racism is perfectly palatable for many readers of poetry – that's why so many reviewers can read it untroubled and laud it. (p.86)

Kiely then goes on to contrast it with Fred Moten's essay 'The Subprime and the Beautiful':

> While Moten celebrates the black people moving to white neighborhoods on credit as freedom-fighters, Flynn's poem disengages from black life, expressing violently polite and oblique shock that the future might be coloured, or more specifically, not solely *white*, and thereby exhibits fear of a *black* future.

> From its garden wall rises the specter of a 'western race'-based capitalism as a new means of rallying and closing of the ranks in a shuffle towards, if not profitability, then exclusion. (p.87)

To this end, Kiely concludes that Flynn's poem 'is *messed up*. But here it is, published by a major poetry publisher, sold in bookshops, and lauded in newspapers' (p.87). He concludes ultimately of Flynn's use of the language of profit and loss, the language of capitalism, that in contrast to Joyce and his 'Capital Accounts'

> ends up being a reactionary flailing against an abstracted Blackness, as well as individuals who are gender nonconforming, and indeed anyone who believes in global warming. I have pointed out some repugnant features in this poem, and, while this does not exonerate the poet or poem, the poem is self-aware in this regard and asks explicitly for forgiveness: 'Forgive me'. But the whole poem, including this abject plea, is in bad faith. (p. 87)

Kiely is equally, if not more damning of Donal Ryan's novel *The Spinning Heart*, which he describes thus:

> The novel collapses into solipsism, with no interest in representing the crisis as a complex net of relations and emergent abstractions engorging themselves on living labour; it merely aims to chart the psychological impact of that crisis. We are getting a representation of a consequence, not a representation of the crisis. (p. 100)

By focusing on the recession as it impacts individuals in one small place, 'the cause of the recession is a person, Pokey Burke. There is no sense, in the novel, either that a class of people or a government may have been responsible or that transnational capital may have had an impact. The novel is blinkered in that regard' (p. 104). The novel fails in Kiely's eyes to adequately address the wider reasons for the situations the characters find themselves in. Ryan creates a world in which individuals are at fault, reflecting in its own way – on the basis of this analysis – the idea that all ills

that befall people are an individual, moral failing rather than systemic and structural ones built into the character of capitalistic society.

There are some issues with the essay. Although the form naturally lends itself in its very etymology and origin to a certain degree of being a draft formulation of thought, the writing can feel a little disjointed with the segues being unclear to the reader. This may be in part down to the fact the book began life as various parts of applications for post-doctoral and other research work, which the author states at the outset. Notwithstanding the origins of the book within the specific framework of the research grant application, the sense that it is something of a Frankenstein's monster occasionally comes through in this disjointedness that jars.

In addition, there are a number of historical inaccuracies in the text, which were never picked up either by Kiely or his editors. While this is a work of literary criticism rather than history, it is still important that the historical information provided is accurate. While the highly compressed explanation of the history of Ireland's War of Independence and subsequent civil war is expedient and largely accurate, and may be of only passing interest to readers of the book, the errors that do exist can be glaring to one who knows Irish history well. For instance, Irish accession to the European Union, then the European Economic Community, took place in 1973, rather than 1978.

These gripes show a certain editorial carelessness rather than reflect Robert Kiely's knowledge of Irish history in the broader sense, which is sound, as is his analysis of the country and its twentieth century development taken in the round. They are frustrating precisely because the critical engagement with the texts is so precise and engaging otherwise. Especially delicious is his wry description of Irish civil servant, T.K. Whitaker, who is one of the ultimate sacred cows of the Irish establishment.

Overall, this is an important essay and an especially important intervention in the sphere of Irish literary criticism. In the range of texts it examines, it showcases the varied landscape of contemporary Irish poetry. Moreover, within that range it shows the varied responses to Ireland's dalliance with finance and the ways in which the language and thought structures of high finance can be used to both critique and

fail to critique the place of that same financial power within Irish society and culture. Where, according to Kiely, Trevor Joyce in 'Capital Accounts' manages to blend in his translation of Chinese poetry with contemporary concerns around the financialisation of the Irish capital city, Leontia Flynn's poetry fails to consider the ramifications of its use of financialised language and the negative effects of same.

Incomparable Poetry is a short, sharp and occasionally caustic analysis of Irish literary responses to the financial crisis of 2008. The decade and more since has seen little to give way to optimism about the ever-impending immediate future, and the crisis in our societies that has been ongoing for some time has been compounded by the unexpected pandemic of Covid-19 in addition to the rapidly evolving climate crisis. Kiely doesn't offer much in the way of a rabble rousing end to his essay writing that:

> In the work of Joyce and Lordan and Warriner, it is clear that there is no future other than the future of futures, which must be refused, though they are refused to us. The pie will continue to shrink insofar as it is measured and we're going to have to deal with it. Things *are* ugly [...]. Well, I don't really care that these poems are fucked and remain constrained by the hegemonic imaginaries of their peripheral present, nor am I saddened that they are wounded by history or might be read as more muted than some tub-thumping poems from elsewhere, because literature is not escape. This is what we have, this is part of what there is. (pp. 139–140)

No words of soft comfort to be found there, then. But that's alright because amidst such seismic changes, critical voices like Robert Kiely's and a poetics that is alive to the implications of the language it adopts and adapts from the larger world, will be important in navigating towards something new.

The Allen Fisher Companion, edited by Robert Hampson and cris cheek, Swindon: Shearsman Books, 301 pp., 2020

Lyndon Davies
Independent Scholar
goodiebard2@googlemail.com

Most of whatever it is you might hope for in a companion to the work of a poet/artist as multifariously challenging as Allen Fisher, this book supplies in spades. Its variety of approach and focus ranging from glancing insight to personal anecdote to thematic and philosophical interrogation, from documentary timelines, to in-depth close readings, seems to me (as a vagrant and non-specialist reader of the poet's work) almost exemplary. Fisher himself sweeps into the proceedings in a very lively manner, via the interview with Paige Mitchell and Shamoon Zamir, and later in the email exchange with Karen MacCormack, for a *Philly Talks* event in 2002 which is accompanied by pre- and after- event commentaries from Marjorie Welish, Matt Hart and Rob Holloway. As you can imagine, with so many high-powered intellects in play, there is no shortage of intricately knotty lucubration bristling on; this is not a book for the casual browse. Robert Hampson's introduction is already thinking acutely into the subject as it constructs its brief overview of the literary/artistic trajectory, and none of the articles which follow demand anything less of a reader than the closest level of attention, just as none seem to me less than powerfully engaging, informative and richly thought-provoking. I was going to say illuminating, but, with regard to this writer, artist and thinker, this could probably never be an efficient epithet, since what gets illuminated is often the portal to a vortex spinning off into ever greater complexity.

One slight disappointment, considering Allen Fisher's commitment to his own visual art-practice and the way that has been woven into the work over the years, is the lack of accompanying images. I presume that could have been fixed fairly easily and it would have been a suitable addition to the array of viewpoints brought to the task. Mitchell and Zamir's excellent chapter, part short-essay, part interview,

focusing mainly on a group of early paintings but with plenty of discussion about art in more general terms, has already been published in Fisher's own selection of essays, *Imperfect Fit* (The University of Alabama Press, 2016), with illustrations provided. Here the plates are signalled in the text but not present. This is a shame, as also is the lack of a chapter reconnoitring more recent visual production, particularly the paintings and drawings. It's impossible to think of Fisher simply as a writer who also happens to make art; each mode of production intimately informs the other; each crucial in itself and for the other. Painterly and graphic ways of thinking can be encountered or imagined everywhere in the writings, not only in the obvious cases of text-and-image-integrated concoctions such as *Sputtor* (Veer, 2014), or more classically organised appositional works such as *Black Pond* (Spanner, 2020), but saturating the unillustrated texts, too, through the design of the books, the arrangement of words on the page, compositional procedures, scholarly reference and so on. Some textual passages might seem to have the character of rough sketches, blockings-in, grids for expansion, tonal notes; others something more akin to a thin wash, or a glaze. Blocks of specialised technical or philosophical terminology might occasionally seem analogous to wodged-on slabs of impasto (though that could be pushing it). One ponders also the importance of notions of framing in Fisher's work, not simply as evinced in the application of pre-arranged procedures, but also as theorised via philosophical/aesthetic concepts such as Patterns of Connectedness, Traps, and Imperfect Fit.

As an artist and performer, as well as a writer, Fisher has both conceptual and improvisational instincts. Redell Olsen gives a fascinating account of his earlier engagement with the Fluxus movement, and in particular with the Fluxshoe British tour in 1972, during which he participated in group and solo actions along the lines of those which the Situationist thinker, Raoul Vaneigem, described as 'situations to be lived' (p. 61). Olsen describes some of these actions and performances, some of which followed quite strict procedural rules leading to chance outcomes, whilst others developed along more processual or spontaneous lines. The use of found or ready-made objects, the elision of generic and existential category boundaries (such

as *art* and *life*), led to the production and exploration of works which the American artist and writer Dick Higgins labelled 'intermedia'. Olsen relates Fisher's interest in such modes of action to the writing of *Place* (Reality Street Editions, 2005), which was already under way at this point.

cris cheek describes a live performance called *Vole Volespin*, documented on film by Paige Mitchell. The actions outlined are formal, procedural, repetitive, consisting of a sequence of blind drawings across a range of easels while facing out into the audience. The soundtrack, we read, is at times factitious, the sound of a pencil moving across a page not belonging to the actual drawing process (which of course would have its own sound), its dislocatedness in auricular time and space perhaps forcing one to hear what might otherwise pass without notice. Thinking of these kinds of events with their mix of operational rigour and controlled openness to chance, cheek refers back to the poetry: 'The poem documents the ongoing struggles to apprehend syncretic links using processes of proprioception. The poem embodies the illusive curiosity and immersion of the quest' (p. 70). That notion of 'proprioception', important to Charles Olson, conceptually implicates the body in all this, both as a vulnerability and an enactive potency. The body balances itself within phenomena, locates itself as a system of adjustments, continually readjusted and up for grabs.

Proprioception as Fisher uses the term certainly operates through the interplay of concepts, sounds and images in the compositional dynamics of the poems or artworks and their material realities. It's there in the continually self-modifying relation of the poem or artwork to the universe in which it unfolds and splinters and refolds. The body is in there, literally, the body which senses gravity and responds to it, works with it and rebels against it. Anyone seeing Fisher read and perform will be aware of the vividness of his somatic presence, the intensity of his physical commitment to the text or action in the moment. Pierre Joris implies the importance of this in any appreciation of the work, speaking of the poetry as 'energy enactment' (p. 40). It's interesting to consider how far the sense of this, allied with the aesthetic dynamics referred to above can carry a reader through the writings, offsetting to some extent anxieties around sense-making in an environment where meaning is a contested field at best.

cheek refers to one aspect of Fisher's process as a generator of documents, that's to say as, amongst other things, sites for research, partly through the meticulous cataloguing of sources which usually accompanies the aesthetic events. Via processes of *entanglement* and *decoherence* (to borrow two of Fisher's own terms themselves borrowed from Quantum physics) the work inaugurates a *complexity manifold* spreading out in all directions and into further dimensions. Pierre Joris, seems to imply a parallel, by way of quotation, to the multitudinous Walt Whitman, and to that poet's invocations of healthy labour, the joyous interchange between human individuals and the open-hearted risk of the open-road. He brings Raoul Vaneigem, one of the prophets of Situationism, into it too: what if we conceived the body 'not […] as a desiring machine, but as a creative power, a poetry of beings and things capable of breaking the causal chain, the power of wondering, inherited from childhood and resolved to rewrite the world according to the language of correspondences and analogical signatures?' (p. 45). Acknowledging that Fisher is also the poet of migraine and creeks (creaks) in the ceiling, Joris celebrates a writing tilted towards a vision of health in human and ecological terms, rather than towards the construction of resolved meanings, bearing in mind that health is not 'the homeostasis of a finite system' but 'a relationship – unstable, constantly to be evaluated, tweaked, re-engaged ("will you dance with me world") invented, calibrated, worried over (it's a bone, not a boner)' (p. 44).

For Clive Bush the almost indiscriminate inclusiveness of Whitman connects with a path of concern which brushes up against Fisher's own multi-directional and dimensional *modus operandi.* Discussing *Entanglements* – the second book of *Gravity as a Consequence of Shape* – and of the poem 'Philly Dog: In Memory of Eric Mottram 16.1.95' Bush explores aspects of the relationship of Fisher's work with, first of all, Guy Debord and then Deleuze and Guattari, whose *Anti-Oedipus* and *A Thousand Plateaus* have been staple (and increasingly more commonplace) texts of the avant-garde over the last forty years or so. Although Bush acknowledges the force, in its historical context, of the French philosophers' carnivalesque critique of tyrannical social and epistemological structures, he is very clearly uneasy with the tendency of such

once-revolutionary image-concepts as the 'body without organs', the 'rhizome' and notions of polyvocality in general, to elide and to flatten 'historical complexity and recall' (p. 180), to slide, in fact, out of their revolutionary nexus into positions almost of identity with descriptions of contemporary commodity capitalism. Pondering this process of emptying out (crowding out?) of once potent forms of language, Bush questions Fisher's occasional tendency to a kind of abstractive listing process, enunciating via direct quotation from research sources, without that productive reimagining, sometimes ironic or downright comic, which so often gives so much vigour to the poet's language. 'It is an old problem that Whitman, too, could not get his head round, that in speaking for everyone in a revised general system, the self as particle of the universe in Shelley-like creation and decay, you can lose the specific life, the specific consciousness of the self' (p. 180). (There is, of course, a question here as to how far a notion such as 'revised general system' could ever be relevant to Fisher – not to mention Whitman. Fisher's work is surely only systemic in terms of temporary patterns, procedures and frames, rubrics, plateaus and that continual process of damage and renewal).

I think for Bush, as for William Rowe in the first essay in this volume, where problems of this kind seem to arise they can often be placed under a heading of 'inscape', relating to the psychological/imagistic drama of the moment of the transformation (transubstantiation?) of exterior object into interior subject. Is the poet merely going to tell us this material has been taken in and now 'dwells' in whatever you might describe as a personal or textual interior, or are they going to seek to fully animate the complex immediacy of this event for the benefit of our own affective reinventions as readers. This is actually an old question, of course, for poetry, but no less a valid one for that. Rowe speaks of a certain propensity in Fisher towards a 'fetishism of data' (p. 28) and wonders to what extent, despite his criticism of 'the power-effects of scientific discourse' (p. 28), the poet exhibits at times something resembling a will-to-power, in his deployment of forms of analytic knowledge, as it were over the top of the 'empirical, unimagined "raw material"' of the real. Quoting Fisher, ('local regularity | is deeper than intuition'), and giving the example of 'a map

of south London showing relationship | between underground rivers and pneumonia outbreaks' (*Place*, p. 351) Rowe notes both the logic and the contradiction inherent in the assertion as to the necessity for a knowledge other than or alongside 'that afforded by the phenomenology of the senses' (p. 33). Speaking of *Place*, he draws a comparison between Fisher's data-driven, temporally (and politically) centrifugal approach, and Iain Sinclair's perhaps more intuitively synthesizing and synchronic treatment of the character and topology of parts of London, in books such as *Lud Heat, Suicide Bridge* or *White Chappel Scarlet Tracings,* wherein the ongoing insistences of the past (including ingrained ideological components) are inseparable from the phenomenological particularities of space and place in the present moment, and therefore 'less easily encompassed and controlled' (p. 34).

There are, of course, all sorts of arguments to be had around this. Rob Holloway takes an almost psychodynamic slant on Fisher's use of specialised (abstract, analytic, scientific) language for ethical/aesthetic ends: 'the specific uptake of certain information at particular moments in the poetry's projective performance creates shifts through blockage (at times, Fisher incorporates difficult material as simulations of impenetrability to instil a limit-status of numbness the poetic process and the attention it calls for is then activated against […]. These shifts hold up the knowledges that that information constitutes for critique and reorientation along performative parameters of liberatory action within the inventive sphere of the poem/reader's thinking' (p. 285), catalysing 'break-out from habitual "truth"-frames and the knowledges they institute' (p. 276). An effective 'break-out' can only really be accomplished via

> the difficult task of retaining a full engagement with exactly those habits that would suffocate it. The implication being that such necessary action can only be effectively performed within an aesthetic field due to that field's potential to simultaneously enact radical re-articulations and site the mode of such action in any engaged reader as a becoming singularity in a growing, radicalised community (p. 285).

Along similar lines, talking of *Sputtor,* Calum Hazell says: 'The oppressive prescription and determination of public measures of "truthfulness", that produces our

"lack" of knowledge, is nominated as the precise context for a "confidence" in the subversive powers of poetic in(ter)vention' (p. 199). Of course, one of the crucial drivers of Fisher's language and poetics is the recognition that every category of knowledge, outside and inside, synchronic, diachronic, analytic or sensual are subject to indeterminacy, to a lack of fit, which presumably would include the possible effects of a subversive poetic intervention. Faced with this, a reader cannot always be feeling confident, and it's interesting to catch those currents of uneasiness which surface from time to time throughout this book, with regard to the status of meaning and intention in Fisher's poems. Whilst describing the operation of the 'chreod', one of Fisher's favoured analogical terms for the process of continually adjusted meaning production and its sudden catastrophic discontinuities, Steven Hitchins, admitting the paradox, confesses that he cannot help going on trying to find points of semantic stability in the poetry's 'chaotic textures' (p. 92), whilst striving to retain 'the instability that is part of the poem's generosity' (p. 92). The danger, says Hitchins, for a writer such as Fisher is 'that the use of procedural or improvisatory methods and the production of chaotic terms' could become merely homogenous, although here he appends a quote from Fisher's *Necessary Business* which demonstrates the poet's full awareness of such a danger: '"In certain circumstances a homogenous disorder becomes stable, as catastrophe theory shows, becomes, so to speak, affirmative rather than radical, a difficulty many improvising artists in public fail to see. A new order or organised functioning is established"' (p. 92).

Scott Thurston, in a fine close reading of 'Mummer's Strut', finds a plethora of interpretative cruxes in Fisher's meditation on, amongst other things, the nature of technology and the role and value of the 'technician', in relation to life, art, rhetoric and architecture, mediated here by allusions to figures as diverse as Blake, Kropotkin, Cicero, Pliny, Vitruvius and Michel de Certeau. The stark propositional nature of Fisher's lines in this sequence seem at once to demand a hermeneutically slanted reading, and to render it impossible, in that the paratactic nature of the construction robs us of the necessary intermediate tonal and grammatical equipment for arriving at semantic resolution. For instance, Thurston quotes the following lines:

10
Climate no longer an obstacle
In civilised societies technicians are rich

A long story of robbery
(p. 147) (MS, p. 31)

where the phrases derive from Peter Kropotkin's *The Conquest of Bread* but, modified as they are, by no means inevitably point in the same direction as Kropotkin's anarchist thesis. Thurston chases down possible readings of such prismatic 'incident-sets', seeking clues to the moral and political positioning of the poet, unfolding them against referenced texts and thematic patterns set up in the sequence by quotation and allusion. Finally, still, we are left opulently hanging, and that hanging space is the space of the aesthetic, where referential utterance becomes compositional element, shifting and sparking against other referential utterances in a kind of collision dance of semantic particles which never dissolve into the mere functionalities of discursive meaning.

On the other hand, Robert Sheppard, reading into the grain of 'The Apocalyptic Sonnets', attending to Fisher's use of sonic and thematic rhymes and mis-rhymes, constraints, patterned interferences and other such self-disrupting devices, manages to unearth the development of what he calls a 'loose argument' (partly concerning good and bad attitudes to and uses of technology) and to make a claim 'working against some of Fisher's self-presentation of his work, for their status as autonomous "finished pieces"' (p. 131). His reading, whilst recognizing the ambiguities inherent in the figure of Faust and the exploration of the varying applications and understandings of the concept of Technology, sees a kind of development across the texts from negativity towards what appears to be a vision of renewal and regeneration of purpose, although aware of the ghosts of irony flitting about in the structure of the sequence.

If we can think, as Pierre Joris does, of Allen Fisher's work as comprising some sort of approximate total vision of the humanly apprehended universe, it's of a world

in process, endlessly open to the possibilities of error and misreading, of catastrophe as well as joy and health, of alienation as much as of fully inhabited engagement. This, of course, is part of the excitement of Fisher's work – not only the sheer volume of ideas and unexpected connections it proffers even if only in germ form, but also the dangerous openness of his engagement with the materials of knowledge. For Fisher, we pass through language as we pass through everyday phenomenological experience and through more logically organised encounters with matter – by means of leaps of interpretative confidence, wherein it is continually possible that the confidence might be misplaced, or misused, that the leap ends on a feeble ledge. In this vast, dazzling and boggling body of work, though, shot through with abysses, but also with brio and tenderness and humour, it's the sense of positivity that shines through, the sheer venturesome pleasure in thought and language and action and of simply being in the world. *The Allen Fisher Companion*, both celebratory and buzzing with awkward questions, is a valuable accompaniment to the work of this amazing artist.

Competing Interests

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

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