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Review

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REVIEW

Book Reviews

The Meaning of Form in Contemporary Innovative Poetry by
Robert Sheppard, London: Palgrave Macmillan, 248 pp., 2016

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The Meaning of Form in Contemporary Innovative Poetry is guided by Robert Sheppard's opening conjecture that, 'Poetry is the investigation of complex contemporary realities through the means (meanings) of form' (p. 1). '[I]f poetry does anything', Sheppard continues, 'it does it chiefly through its formal power and less through its content' as 'form is a modality of meaning in its own right' (p. 1). These bold opening salvos inaugurate a detailed study of the formal practices of a wide range of contemporary poets, drawing on a number of key twentieth-century critical statements about the meaning-carrying nature and socio-political implications of aesthetic form. 'What is at stake', Sheppard continues a little later, 'is the agency of form: how it extends, reveals or – in my terms – enacts, enfolds, and becomes content' (p. 2). Form has agency, both as an imperative part of meaning, but also as an agent in altering perceptions of the world.

Sheppard has a long history as both a commentator on, and producer of, 'innovative' or 'formally investigative' (p. 1) poetry, and has been a champion of non-mainstream poetry against what he calls in his 2005 study, *The Poetry of Saying: British Poetry and its Discontents, 1950–2000*, the 'Movement Orthodoxy', which continues the anti-modernist line taken by Larkin et al from the 1950s onwards.¹ As he states in the second chapter of *The Meaning of Form*: 'In this study reading for form as a methodology accompanies a readerly and critical witnessing of a broad tradition of British post-World War Two poetry and poetics which has been called (and periodized as) the British Poetry Revival (1960–1977) and Linguistically Innovative Poetry (post-1978), along with some other cognate English language innovative poetries' (p. 47). The fruits of this witness can be chewed by reading this

very review, as it was Sheppard who set up the *Journal of British and Irish Innovative Poetry* with Scott Thurston in 2009. And, as he acknowledges in his introduction, his work on form dovetails with a recent shift in emphasis in critical writing towards considerations of aesthetics and formal properties of poetic practice. A turn or return to form, exemplified by studies such as David Caplan's *Questions of Possibility: Contemporary Poetry and Poetic Form* (2005), Angela Leighton's *On Form: Poetry, Aestheticism and the Legacy of the Word* (2007), Derek Attridge's *Moving Words: Forms of English Poetry* (2013) (all, incidentally, Oxford University Press), and Caroline Levine's *Forms: Whole, Rhythm, Hierarchy, Network* (2015), is perhaps also a turn away from the object-less and rhetorical excesses of post-structuralist and postmodernist theory and a recalibration of the importance of the particularities of aesthetics, especially where aesthetics challenges common-place assumptions and discourse complicit with social and political paralysis. But, unlike the texts just listed, Sheppard concentrates particularly on exemplary practitioners of 'investigative poetry' – both on and 'off the page' –, detailing the social, critical and experiential contexts shaping radical poets' continued investment in formal experimentation. In other words, while the OUP books are sometimes in danger of reinforcing a Walter Pateresque agenda of distanced and purified form, detached from the world of consequence, Sheppard grapples with how innovative poetics enfold contemporary politics, ideology and ethical commitment into their formal experimentation. While the work of Attridge lays the foundations for much of Sheppard's approaches to form, this study, as with *The Poetry of Saying*, treats form as a dialectical site of ethical and aesthetic thought.

Sheppard opens the book with an overview of Veronica Forrest-Thomson's poetic theory, which is foundational to his thinking about what she describes as the 'non-meaningful' aspects of poetic form. Outlining her flexible if somewhat contradictory term 'image-complex' (p. 33), Sheppard argues that Forrest-Thomson's compound concept expresses his own understanding of the characteristics of form in poetry, both as 'form' (as static characteristics) and 'forming', where readerly processes catch and transmute understanding as the poem develops. As Sheppard puts it of the cognitive activity and properties of form: '*Form* in a literary work is arguably cognitive [...] through the process of material engagement, through the apprehension of actual

forms that embody cognition, and through a reader's involvement in perceptible acts of *forming*' (pp. 15–16 – Sheppard's emphasis). Sheppard carries through and extends Forrest-Thomson's acknowledgement of the dynamic properties of form and the activity of a reader's 'receptiveness and response' (p. 17) to the unfolding of the 'devicehood' (p. 20) of the literary text, to offer a dynamic model of viewing poetic form in a wide variety of poetic practices.

Chapter two gives a good back history of the sonnet form and sonnet sequence and their usage, abusage, updating and revisions by contemporary poets, inspired by, among others, Ted Berrigan's poems. This chapter is particularly interesting on how Oulipo techniques have motivated work by, among others, Philip Terry, as well as on the continued currency of conventional forms in contemporary radical practice. In fact, while the book does concentrate on contemporary poetries, there is a good deal of useful historical context about the origins and mutations of particular forms throughout, as well as subtle readings of contemporary poets' negotiation of poetical histories. Chapters three to five on translation as 'a mode of transformation' (p. 82) in the works of Tim Atkins, Caroline Bergvall, Erín Moure and Sean Bonney (among others) are particularly good on this.

In chapters on the 'conceptual writing' of Kenneth Goldsmith, Vanessa Place, Jeff Hilson and others (chapter 7), and the 'semantic poetry' of the Polish poet, Stefan Themerson (chapter 8), a reader is treated to a whole range of writers, groupings and their associated nomenclature. For example, the term 'plundertextualities' (p. 137) – relating to the practice of conceptual writers to plunder and rearrange any texts at their disposal – was new to me. Similarly, in a discussion of Themerson's study, *Apollinaire's Lyrical Ideograms* (1968), Sheppard outlines Themerson's invention of the word 'iconopoeia' (pp. 162–3), which describes the visual dimensions of many of Apollinaire's works. Finally, Sheppard's quotation of Themerson's description of the books produced by his and his wife's – Franciszka Themerson – press, Gaberbocchus (a translation into Latin of Lewis Carroll's 'jabberwocky' (p. 173)) as "'best lookers" rather than best-sellers' (p. 173) needs a special mention! And this chapter (9) on small presses and the 'extended poesis of the physical medium' (p. 174) of book production and how it overlaps with artisanal poetics was very welcome. Through

introducing and discussing such words and verbal curios, Sheppard offers a large and flexible taxonomy of practices, formal procedures and types of poetry, all of which enable more detailed and specific discussion of these *pluri-formational* (to coin my own term, riffing on Sheppard and Attridge) poetics.

The final two chapters – on Geraldine Monk's interdisciplinary poetics and performance and the formal 'antagonisms' (p. 213) of Barry MacSweeney's negotiation of poetic politics – offer good summaries of Sheppard's ongoing arguments about the politically committed possibilities of poetic form. Both chapters draw on a wide range of contemporary commentary to argue for the transformative potential of the poets' use of form. The final chapter also engages in some detail with the critical spectres informing the whole book: Theodor Adorno, Herbert Marcuse, and Jacques Rancière, who, along with Derek Attridge, are Sheppard's four source-men of his form-ocalypse. Sheppard offers both a semantic and formal outline of the ambitions of the book, and his theses on form, in this final chapter on MacSweeney when he repeats the subtle argument informing the whole thing:

If poetry is the investigation of complex contemporary realities through the means (and meanings) of form [...] then the investigation of form itself must focus on form in the technical sense, on identifiable *forms* of poetic artifice in play *and* on form in a general, more performed sense, that prioritizes acts of *forming* and our apprehension of their becoming form in our readerly engagements with them. (p. 213 – Sheppard's emphases)

He concludes: 'Radical political implications of texts emerge in formal cognitions and recognitions, not in harvesting unmediated, isolate, or paraphraseable statements about the world' (p. 213). The phrase 'statements about the world' is from Forrest-Thomson, and Sheppard manages to extend the radical implications of her model of poetic practice to a much wider range of social and political issues than she would have allowed. In other words, by engaging with a wide range of formally diverse poetics, in particular their antagonistic and dialectical internal struggles, and extending the implications of 'forming' into identity, cultural and social politics, Sheppard makes a compelling argument for the continued urgency and high stakes

of such works in offering radical politics or structures of form (to pervert Raymond Williams' formulation) that enable different and more charged understandings of the forms of life.

Sheppard introduces us to a range of important and sometimes submerged texts from the 1970s to the present day that have taken on the Russian Formalist project in demanding an emphasis on poetic form, as well as their call for developing particular critical attention and techniques for its analysis. While Attridge's work was familiar to me, Sheppard's outline of the other work in this area was very valuable, particularly the work of Susan J. Wolfson (her edited collection, *Reading for Form* (2006) and her *Formal Charges* (2007)) and Yuri Lotman (in particular his 1976 book, *Analysis of the Poetic Text*). It was curious, however, that there was no mention of V. N. Volosinov's pioneering *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language* (1929) in the book. Volosinov's insistence on the ideological saturation and irreducible sociality of sign systems would have lent further historical context for the agency and social resonance of forms, as well as alternative linguistic models and politics to Sheppard's analysis of form, particularly in relation to his detailed discussion in chapter 6 of Rosamarie Waldrop's understanding of the 'politics of form' (p. 120). Jean-Jacques Lecercle's pioneering work in, for example, *A Marxist Philosophy of Language* (2006), would also have complemented Sheppard's approach.

However, Sheppard offers perceptive and intricately researched close readings of a range of 'investigative' poetics, providing an invaluable entry point into these poets' often challenging works. *The Meaning of Form* is another fine chapter in Sheppard's career-long advocacy and exegeses of poetics challenging and extending the definitions of poetic form, and it provides useful summaries and applications of leading work in the field – particularly by Attridge – to marginal or non-mainstream poetics. One of the other many valuable aspects of Sheppard's book is its repeated call for what he calls in the introduction 'definitional exactitude' or a 'nuts and bolts emphasis on devicehood' (p. 10) in describing and analysing form. If formal emphasis in critical analysis is going to combat the surfeit of readings for content that still dominant contemporary literary-critical culture then it needs to build up a good suite of definitions and working terminology for readers and writers to get to grips with.

The book is important, too, in its repeated acknowledgement of the imperfections of its methodology, particularly the difficult task of conducting a reading of poetry that simultaneously takes account of poetic form and the processes of 'forming' occurring in the text. Formal analysis needs to capture the subtle and complex movements and interactions of formal properties with a vocabulary flexible and specific enough to capture the intricacies of formal thinking and affect. Sheppard seems to concede that many attempts at specificity to date – Forrest-Thomson's *Poetic Artifice*, Lotman's *Analysis of the Poetic Text*, Simon Jarvis' 'Prosody as Cognition' – are elegant and challenging failures. However, Sheppard makes clear that the point of his and others' attempts lies in the activity of a critical intelligence following and describing the activities of form, not in arriving at a final end-point of descriptive and schematic triumph. As such, the methodology is speculative rather than conclusive and this sometimes results in (I think purposefully) complicated descriptions of formal agency such as this:

Aesthetic form carries a force operating on the individual (or collective) reader or 'witness', which – in the case of poetry – means that the reader is the site where such meanings are staged by form, so that reading is formulating form, and formulating it into fluxing semantic and cognitive forms as a 'performed mobility', and its ultimate forming of us. (p. 21)

Phew! Such passages adopt the dialectical subtleties of Adorno's sentences, but they also capture the intricate processes and implications at work, particularly in the subtle mutations of the '-orm' sound, which captures the multiply intertwined meanings of 'form' Sheppard is outlining. *The Meaning of Form* is a noble and necessary part of the enterprise of taking us closer to the complex dynamics of the characteristics and operations of poetic form. There is, in Jacques Rancière's phrase, an 'aesthetic revolution' going on, and many critics are joining the party.² If, as Sheppard contends in his final chapter, 'paraphrase [...] is amnesia of form' (p. 217), this book offers powerful smelling salts to jolt us back to a present of attentive concentration on form.

Notes

- ¹ Robert Sheppard, *The Poetry of Saying: British Poetry and its Discontents, 1950–2000* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2005), chapter 1.
- ² See Jacques Rancière, 'The Aesthetic Revolution and its Outcomes', in *Dissensus: On Politics and Aesthetics* (London: Continuum, 2010), pp. 115–133.

Competing Interests

Gareth Farmer is General Editor of the *Journal of British and Irish Innovative Poetry*.

Poetry and Performance During the British Poetry Revival 1960–1980: Event and Effect by Juha Virtanen, London: Palgrave Macmillan, 209 pp., 2017

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Juha Virtanen's *Poetry and Performance During the British Poetry Revival 1960–1980: Event and Effect* explores poetry performance events and their significance in the development of poetic innovation during the two decades of the British Poetry Revival. In this study, Virtanen utilises 'archaeological' research methods to reconstruct and examine four specific poetry events that took place in the UK between 1960 and 1980: Allen Ginsberg's reading at the First International Poetry Incarnation at the Royal Albert Hall in 1965; Denise Riley's first public performance at the Cambridge Poetry Festival in 1977; Eric Mottram's collaborative performance piece *Pollock Record* (1978); and Allen Fisher's *Blood Bone Brain* project from the 1970s. In examining the specifics of these four performance events, Virtanen constructs a methodology for close-reading poetry in performance that has been absent from previous studies, including Charles Bernstein's influential text *Close Listening* (1998), David Kennedy and Keith Tuma's *Additional Apparitions* (2002) and Peter Middleton's *Distant Reading* (2005). In common with these previous studies, however, *Event and Effect* recognises 'the performance of poetry as a multifaceted and heterogeneous phenomenon, which encompasses a number of different practices – such as poetry readings, collaborations and multimedia work – as well as a nexus of poetical, theoretical and socio-political receptions, interventions and reinventions' (p. 10). *Event and Effect* draws on the theoretical approaches to poetry performance developed in previous studies, but it distinguishes itself from these studies with its focus on close, sustained readings of the particular performances listed above. In each chapter, Virtanen's methodology enables the research to focus on both the 'event' – through an archaeological 'reconstruction' of the historical

performance – and the ‘effect’ – the particular ‘significations, implications and contexts’ of each performance (p. 14).

Virtanen’s methodological approach to developing a close-reading strategy for the reading of particular performance events is central to his research in *Event and Effect*. Utilising what he calls ‘archaeological’ methods, he collates fragmented and ephemeral materials that exist in relation to each historical performance. Such materials include: available accounts in biographies, interviews and memoirs; archival documents such as preparatory materials, performance aids and notes; film footage and audio recordings; and new interviews with Allen Fisher and Denise Riley. Virtanen argues that ‘it is not necessary to reject performance documentation as an *otherness* that betrays the integrity of the event; instead, these artefacts may be utilized as tools that subject “the apparently non-graspable” to new methods of interpretation and analysis’ (p. 13). This archaeological methodology enables Virtanen to close-read the specifics of his four chosen events in ways that are based on established critical praxis, and so already familiar to scholars of innovative poetry and poetics. He argues that: ‘Innovative poetry often appears “radically incomplete and unfinishable”, to the extent that we are unsure if we will ever arrive at a conclusive reading of a particular poem; nevertheless, these poems can still be analysed in rigorous and insightful ways’ (p. 13). Similarly, the ‘reconstruction’ of specific poetry performances by Ginsberg, Riley, Mottram and Fisher from fragmentary archival and documentary evidence enables Virtanen to ‘read’ the historical event of the performance as a critic might read innovative poetry on the page. This correlation between the practices of innovative poetry on the page and in performance also forms the foundation of his argument that ‘performance was an inextricable component of the poetic experimentation that took place during the Revival’ (p. 16).

Further, Virtanen argues and demonstrates in *Event and Effect* that at the prominent poetry performance events by Ginsberg, Riley, Mottram and Fisher, the notion of performed authorship is increasingly disrupted and problematised. Virtanen’s argument demonstrates that, when viewed as an event, it is possible to conceive of and understand poetry in performance as an intersubjective interaction between the active participatory agents of the poet and the audience members

in collaboration. In articulating a critical methodology for the study of poetry in performance grounded in 'intersubjective notions of fluidity, permeability and temporality' (p. 19), Virtanen neatly solves the scholarly dichotomy that considers performance to be either performance-of-authorship or performance-of-text, (a dichotomy that permeates and troubles Charles Bernstein's *Close Listening*, for example). Virtanen thus argues for the performance event as both a materially embodied and an intersubjective process, whereby those two terms are not mutually exclusive.

Beginning with Allen Ginsberg's performance at the First International Poetry Incarnation at the Royal Albert Hall in June 1965, Virtanen first explores and then complicates the notion of performed authorship in the poetry performance. He notes that: 'While Ginsberg was by no means the only American poet who saw breath as a key unit of composition, his conception of the line as a "single breath unit" was physically embodied in his performances.' Adding: 'Due to the physical nature of this delivery, [...] Ginsberg's charismatic performances relied heavily on his substantial presence, which imbued the poet's prophetic pronouncements with a sense of power and authority' (p. 29). Having acknowledged this, however, Virtanen proceeds to examine – through archaeological reconstruction – the ways that the architectural space and socio-political history of the Royal Albert Hall, as well as the presence and mood of the Incarnation's audience, interact with the poetry event to create a nexus of intersubjectivity not previously explored. Analysing the performance through archival film footage and contemporary records, Virtanen explores the various interactions between Ginsberg's intentions for the Incarnation, the expectations associated with the venue and setting, and the realities of the shifting dynamics between the poets themselves and between the poets and the audience during the event. He argues that it is possible to read this event as an act of (perhaps largely unintended) intersubjective authorship between the poets, the Hall and the audience, which is demonstrated through a close analysis of Ginsberg's performance of his final poem of the evening, 'Who Be Kind To'. In reciting this poem, Virtanen suggests, Ginsberg 'forgoes his renowned works – and, to an extent, his status as a celebrity – in order to perform material that directly addresses his present

situation' (p. 44). Through close analysis of both the written text of the poem and Ginsberg's performance of it at the Incarnation, he argues – via theoretical readings of first Deleuze and Guattari and then Mikhail Bakhtin – that: 'In a quasi-paradoxical process, the performance of this poem simultaneously asserts the presence of the author-poet as well as the cacophonous collectivity of a multiplicity' (p. 48).

In his reading of Denise Riley's first public poetry reading at the Cambridge Poetry Festival in 1977, Virtanen reconstructs the event from various sources, including: an archival audio recording; a reading of Riley's contemporary publication, *Marxism for Infants* (published by Wendy Mulford's Street Editions, 1977); and his own interview with Riley. He reads the performance as significant both in terms of the development of concerns that resonate throughout Riley's body of poetic and critical writings and in terms of documenting 'the problematic gender dynamics of this period and its contemporary legacies' (p. 79). Exploring the context of the predominantly white masculine socio-cultural milieu of innovative poetic practices and performances during the BPR – with readings often being held in settings that seemed hostile or exclusionary to women and people of colour – in contrast with the strong assertion of female subjectivity that typically characterised feminist poetry readings at the time, Virtanen reads Riley's performance as troubling to each of these contradictory contexts through its various discontinuities. He examines Riley's performance strategies, such as speaking almost-simultaneously with Mulford, reading her own poems as a 'barrage of words' to obscure her own identity, and reading poems by other poets, arguing that: 'Riley's reading not only departs from the trends of contemporaneous feminist performance art and the performance of authorship [...]; it also questions the procedures of events that emphasize authenticity and truthful reproduction, and consequently centre their attentions on the (gendered) living body' (p. 71).

In the analyses of Eric Mottram's *Pollock Record* and Allen Fisher's *Blood Bone Brain*, Virtanen reconstructs the poetry performance event from the ephemeral material artefacts created as source materials for the readings. Mottram's *Pollock Record* involved a collaborative reading between Eric Mottram, Allen Fisher and Bill Griffiths; the exact date and location of which is no longer known. Virtanen notes

that, since 'the performance cannot be situated in a particular time and space' (p. 84), he must read and reconstruct this event through the written and ephemeral records and artefacts pertaining to the work. He argues that the 'constellatory fragments' of the script-like sheets for *Pollock Record* – which Mottram, Fisher and Griffiths took turns in reading from, for an unspecified duration until one of the sections was repeated (either intentionally to deliberately end the performance or accidentally) – 'reconfigur[ed] the relationship between the audience and the poet-performers continuously throughout its duration' (p. 97). Key to his reading of the archival ephemera, moreover, Virtanen argues that the *Pollock Record* sheets 'remain the most complete documents of its performed version. Yet they provide only effaced tracings of their past' (p. 101). In pausing to 'remember Mottram's suggestion that to read is to perform a poem', he thus argues that 'the "readings" on the sheets themselves mirror the procedures of the ephemeral event' (p. 101). This prompts a meta-analysis of the reconstruction work undertaken in the chapter, whereby Virtanen 'start[s] to wonder if this chapter has also made *Pollock Record* perform' (p. 101).

In his discussion of Fisher's *Blood Bone Brain*, Virtanen devotes considerable time to examining the book object as an event in itself. *Blood Bone Brain* is a multi-faceted project comprising numerous textual – and other – artefacts made over several years and performed in various iterations at multiple sites on different occasions. This is indicative of Fisher's 'processual understanding of poetry' whereby 'the work of reading is never truly finished' (p. 107), which Virtanen explores at length in this chapter. When discussing several of the pamphlets that comprise elements of the working processes of *Blood Bone Brain*, Virtanen quotes Fisher's term for these as 'book events' that emerge from the need 'to be in the process of, rather than in the completions of' ongoing work. For Virtanen, the books comprising *Blood Bone Brain* demonstrate that 'things [...] are conditional and open to change'; on this definition, he surmises that 'such books could also be seen as events akin to "performances"' (p. 112).

Included within the book are also full-length transcripts of interviews with Denise Riley and Allen Fisher, conducted by Virtanen. These interviews provide

elaborations on the main ideas discussed within the chapters, and enable readers to engage with the poets' own thoughts about their poetry in performance. Crucially, the interviews demonstrate the book's most important argument – that the events must be read as incomplete and in the flux of process, and that no definitive closure of interpretation can be ascribed to them. In combining the interview material with the archival material, Virtanen performs the possibility of opening up the historical performances to retrospective revision and reinterpretation. Both poets each recall and fail to remember some of the details of their work or intentions of the time, providing further layers to the palimpsest of readings that excavate the source material. The interviews broaden the perspectives explored in the critical chapters, providing further complexities and complications, many of which are sensitively and skilfully referenced within Virtanen's critical analyses themselves.

Virtanen comments on the contemporary legacy of the British Poetry Revival in the book's Epilogue. He sees many reasons for optimism, with the current climate of small press publishing and regularly curated poetry events around the UK providing a platform for an increasing number of innovative poets. Many of these events (although not all) are connected in some way to various academic institutions. He is mindful, however, that there remain problematic issues of access and exclusion in contemporary British poetry. Throughout *Event and Effect*, Virtanen is aware of the lack of diversity associated with the Revival, and he presents an astute assessment of the current state of linguistically innovative poetry in performance, noting the gains that have been made in terms of openness and inclusivity, while also attesting to the problems of exclusion that still persist. He notes observations from Andrea Brady that innovative poetry reading venues continue to dissuade 'women from entering into, or staying in, the poetry scene' and from Sandeep Parmar that "reading series [and] presses dedicated to innovative and experimental poetics" still tend to feature only a few poets of colour' (p. 151). He notes also the challenges to patriarchal hegemony from poets within the innovative poetry scene, including Samantha Walton and Lila Matsumoto's collaborative performance titled 'Checklist: Your Privilege, Or, Minority Poets Tell All – and it's bad' (2014); suggesting, therefore, that poetry in performance

continues to have a key role to play in the future development of innovative British poetry and its socio-political milieu.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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