Conference Report

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CONFERENCE REPORT

Robert Sheppard Symposium

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The Robert Sheppard Symposium – the first to focus solely on his formidable body of poetry and poetics – took place at Edge Hill University on Wednesday 8th March 2017. In addition to the day of papers and discussion, there was a poetry reading, featuring performances from many of the conference participants, as well as from Robert Sheppard himself. The day's events also coincided with an ongoing exhibition at Edge Hill's Arts Centre, of publications from Ship of Fools Press, which was set up in the mid-1980s for the publication of art and text collaborations by Patricia Farrell and Robert Sheppard; the exhibition was curated by Patricia Farrell and Joanne Ashcroft. The day operated both as a concentrated critical interrogation of Sheppard's work, and also as an assertion and celebration of its importance, and of the significance of his ongoing contribution to the practice and criticism of innovative poetry in the UK. Though based at Edge Hill, Sheppard absented himself for the sessions themselves, instead asking that a statement be read at the start of the day, explaining that he wished by his absence to avoid any pretence of explanation of his work, any policing of proceedings, and to allow the maximum possible freedom for critical discussion.

The first paper of the day was from Scott Thurston (University of Salford), entitled '"For which we haven't yet a satisfactory name": The Birth of Linguistically Innovative Poetry in Robert Sheppard's *Pages* and *Floating Capital*'. Thurston used the editorial content of Sheppard's *Pages* magazine, and the editorial of the 1991 anthology *Floating Capital*, co-written with Adrian Clarke, to trace the emergence of 'linguistically innovative poetry' and its poetics, out of the fragmentation of the brief relative prominence of the British Poetry Revival. Thurston described *Pages* – the first series of which ran from July 1987 to July 1990 – as a crucial site for beginning to articulate

the shared 'operational axioms' being developed at this time; indeed it was in *Pages* that Gilbert Adair first coined the term 'linguistically innovative poetry'. Starting from Andrew Duncan's term 'Pulse', to describe the distinct new style he found in *Floating Capital,* Thurston then turned to Sheppard's own contribution, 'Daylight Robbery'. He described the 'phrasal poetics' of this work as an interplay of fragmentation and continuity, in which the uncertain relations between short lines build a sense of argument – here to do with media saturation and depictions of violence – whilst reflectively interrupting, reframing and critiquing its modes of representation, to distance them from those of, say, the newsreel or police helicopter. This poem acts as an example of the distinct poetics articulated in *Pages* and *Floating Capital*, and its capacity for fresh kinds of critical perception.

Robert Hampson's (Royal Holloway, University of London) paper, 'Convergences: Robert Sheppard's Early Poetry and the English Tradition', followed a similar vein. Hampson staked a claim for Sheppard's early poetic development as part of a specifically British poetic tradition of Linguistically Innovative Poetry, distinct from any imported poetics – such as those of Language Poetry – with which it shares many concerns. Hampson used early reviews written by Sheppard to assert the influence of earlier British Poetry Revival poets, particularly Roy Fisher and Lee Harwood, expressed through a shared interest in modernist defamiliarisation, in semantic ambiguity and discontinuity, interrogation of the perceptual environment, and attempts to find strategies to avoid the co-option of consciousness. Through a comparison between Harwood's *The Sinking Colony* and Sheppard's *Mesopotamia*, and a reading of *Letter from the Blackstock Road*, Hampson argued that Sheppard moved away from the open field poetics of his immediate influences, to a notion of the 'multiply coherent text'. *Mesopotamia* shares with Harwood's text features such as an ironised reading-through of colonial narrative and nostalgia, and a structure of interweaving and interruption to create a generalised location. Sheppard differs by dispensing with any cohering narrative, in favour of the framing device of looking through a peepshow, to allow for sharp cuts between disconnected material, and a sequential development which works through a process of 'accretion and erosion'.

In Hampson's description, *Letters from the Blackstock Road* is similarly more frag-mented in its dealing with place, at the levels of narrative, subject and phrase, than its stylistic predecessors. The distinct British tradition represented by these texts was driven by an engagement also with the political environment of the UK, to which Sheppard and many of his contemporaries were compelled to respond.

Andrew Taylor (Nottingham Trent University) provided a more practical kind of history with his paper '"Isn't it about time somebody wrote all of this down?": A History of The Edge Hill Poetry and Poetics Research Group'. The group was founded in 1999, with original members Sheppard, Taylor and Cliff Yates soon joined by Scott Thurston, and later by poets such as Angela Keaton, Matt Fallaize and Alice Lenkiewicz. Taylor described the profound influence these sessions – and the opportunities to read alongside visiting poets such as Tom Raworth, Geraldine Monk, Harriet Tarlo – had on the development of him and his fellow members. Determined not to run a standard workshopping group, to avoid being a 'censorship group' or 'market testing environment', Sheppard instead encouraged serious and engaged critique of work presented through a focus on poetics as the central point of discussion. Participants were also encouraged to organise for themselves, to 'seize the means of publication'. Taylor's account was striking for its description of how this attitude helped to cre-ate a strong sense of inclusive and active poetic community, a sense of a common, sympathetic readership, and a collective nurturing of radical formal development, as a catalyst for poetic work which the participants carried into their subsequent lives and careers; Matt Fallaize said of the group that it 'gave me a permission to continue, and obligated me to take risks'.

To end the first session, Steve Waling's (independent scholar) 'Re-education of desire' turned to Sheppard's early manifesto, 'The Education of Desire', and his use of the work of Veronica Forrest-Thomson. Waling described Sheppard's early adop-tion of Forrest-Thomson's concept of 'delayed naturalization', to aim for a poetic form which cannot be co-opted as advertising jingle, cannot be easily assimilated, for example by capitalist narratives and processes. Waling quoted Sheppard, summaris-ing this position as both a statement of intent, and an oppositional stance to that

poetry which fails by his rigorous aesthetic-political standard: 'The kind of poetry that produces easy naturalisations can only really describe the world as it is, it can't imagine a new world.' Sheppard wants a poetry which doesn't only gesture to the already-known world, but which uses a form based on disruption and 'creative link-age' to make new, as yet unknown worlds out of fragments of the known. These are tentative, fleeting worlds, rather than concrete propositions, whose existence in a moment of poetry functions to critique the present. In Sheppard's work this is tied up with a distrust of grand narratives; delaying naturalisation allows for a poetry of serious political critique, even utopian impulse, which yet resists pushing program-matic certainties on its readers. Instead, it works with difficulty and incompleteness, to move towards collaboratively imagining a new world, one that might not yet be recognisable.

The discussion which followed this panel interestingly drew together two strands from these papers: the emphasis on a (politically) interrogative poetics, and the work of building a shared poetic community. It was suggested that the two connect in a counter-system in which important thinking can be done collectively, and conditions can be created to maximise the number of people who can be active, organising partners. These kind of questions, of reach and political efficacy, are always highly fraught, but an emphasis on generous, inclusive and active communities seems like a good, or rather absolutely necessary, start for a poetry with serious social concerns.

In 'The Necessity of Robert Sheppard: On Course for Poetics', Keith Jebb (University of Bedfordshire) took his initial cue from Charles Bernstein's description of poetics quoted in Sheppard's 'The Necessity of Poetics', as 'an unruly, multisubjec-tive activity'. Jebb envisaged the genre of poetics, as seen in Sheppard's work, not just as a discourse of self-reflexive creative activity, but as a particular way of think-ing which can be used to interrogate the forms of politics and history. How could a poem like Sheppard's long work *Twentieth Century Blues* act to counter the problems of the prevalence of binary thinking? It is a highly kinetic text, one rooted in history, but written not with the stable certainty of descriptive hindsight, but as if moving conjecturally forward from any given point. Its structure opens this movement in

multiple directions; the work is one poem, and also many poems, many concurrent, overlapping and interweaving sequences. With no single route for reading, each piece is surrounded by multiple possibilities for a reader to navigate. Rooting this back in the history it occupies, in a bold comparison with Walter Benjamin's *Arcades Project* and the organising principle of its 'convolutes' – more metonymic or metaphoric than strictly classificatory – Jebb suggests that if Benjamin's is a poetics of the arcade, then the scattered organisation of Sheppard's work is a poetics of the Twentieth Century.

Nikolai Duffy (Manchester Metropolitan University) began his paper, 'Robert Sheppard and the Politics of Literary Experiment', by facing directly those niggling questions which lurk in the background of many of these papers, the anxiety which the claim to political work aims to answer: what's the point of (innovative) poetry? The response, or the hope, is that to problematize meaning, to render things equivocal, is always already political, and can facilitate radical thinking which is dynamic and ongoing, available for individual involvement as active participants rather than disciples. Duffy described formal effects in Sheppard's work like those picked up elsewhere – the use of line-break and rhythm to create a doubling sentence structure, phrases that push off from their unfinished precursors in ongoing motion – as creating contiguity between objects and concepts. Unlike other comparisons or equivalences, contiguity caters for doubt, establishes its objects in a discrete chain of singularities. The political or ethical implications of this structuring logic are in an openness to the other – to other modes of thinking and being, to other poets, artists or individuals, and to the possibility that the world could be otherwise. As ever, this isn't rooted in Sheppard's work in strictly delineable partisan positions, but a political engagement focused on continual formal investigation, on the openness of 'saying' rather than the closed off 'said'. Quoting Sheppard's *The Meaning of Form in Contemporary Innovative Poetry*, Duffy told us: 'The critical function of art is born in the instant its form de-forms and re-forms in front of us.'

Adam Hampton (Edge Hill University) brought this political thinking into sharp focus in '*Warrant Error*: When Bad Language Makes for Good Poetry. Politics and

Poetic Re-Appropriation'. Hampton gave an extended close reading of Sheppard's *Warrant Error* (note the pun on 'War on Terror' when sounded), and its re-appropriation of the language of political spin, subterfuge and misrepresentation to create power dynamics and legitimise military action. Here we see the application of techniques of disruption and defamiliarisation applied with sustained attention to a specific area of political discourse. The worlds which that discourse is created to serve, the narratives it constructs to make brutality excusable, are reapplied, redistributed, transformed into different contexts – 'tailored suicide vests' – in such a way that the function is exposed, the strict narratives open out into areas of indeterminacy and cease to convince. The reader-citizen encounters familiar language, no longer asking for submission to its malicious manipulations, but hoping to facilitate a more genuinely public discourse into what actions are justified, and by whom. Focussing these grand claims on their effect on the individual reader, Hampton talked of his own experience serving in the military in Afghanistan. His daily actions, he said, relied on a narrow thinking, an easy narrative of delineable and absolute enemies; the kinds of thinking which he has since encountered in response to this text make such pernicious easy narratives much harder to swallow.

The third session was begun by another close examination, this time of Sheppard's 'His Furious Skip', by Tim Allen (independent scholar). In 'Robert Sheppard – Energy! Violence! Expression?', Allen countered the occasional accusation laid against avant-garde poetry that it is 'coolly cerebral' – with its processual methods and deployment of Theory – describing his own sense of Sheppard's poetry as 'hot' – that is, full of often angry energy. Allen tentatively compared both this emotive register and the poetic form to Expressionist painting; we engage at the level of the line, as the brushstroke, to build our sense of the overall feel of the poem. 'His Furious Skip', Allen suggested, immediately plunges us into contradictions of syntax and figure which obscure subject matter. The dominance of words and phrases in the lexical field of conflict within this structure create a hectic, stressful, emotive space, anchored only to hints of reference to the disjunction between war and peace; it is as though the reader is placed in the incoherent internal space of a nightmare. If this builds up to

suggest the history of the Twentieth Century as the poem's loose subject matter, Allen once again pointed to the inclination away from objectivity or clear understanding, but added to notions of conceptual destabilisation the immediate emotive response, the disgust or anger, which precipitates the poetic treatment of its horrors.

Joanne Ashcroft (Edge Hill University) followed with 'A Response to Vitality in Robert Sheppard's *Empty Diaries* and *Wiped Weblogs'*. Ashcroft described how the energy which she first encountered in performance, far from relying solely on Sheppard's style of delivery, also emanated out in her experience of form on the page. Charles Olson described poetry as a transmission of energy, a dynamic combination of ear, mind, and breath, lines and syllables; Bob Cobbing thought of communication in terms of the muscular activity of sounding out and how this affects the body. Ashcroft began from these ideas to trace the transfer of bodily vitality (following the work of psychologist Daniel Stern), the experience of forward motion, in the measure of syllables and the syntax across line breaks in *Empty Diaries*. This movement is also carried at the level of subject matter, and in a shifting of pronouns to create a dynamic fluidity or ambiguity of identity, switching to female narrators to reflect on how history, and the female body, have been overwhelmingly written through a male perspective. The energy Ashcroft described is empathic in effect, producing a sense of human community through the shared voicing of the poem, and through the action of the sounded poem on the body of its readers, a shared energy which calls back to the roots of oral literature in music, movement and dance, in art experienced collectively. In the conversation following this session, Tom Jenks suggested that the emotional energy Ashcroft described as 'vitality' is that same energy which Tim Allen named as violence, the differing tones of description perhaps reflecting its nature as activating individual, affective response.

Christopher Madden (Edge Hill University) kept the focus on close formal analysis in 'Orpheus Flux and Flax: Robert Sheppard and Lineation'. To the ongoing discussion of line break, syntax, ambiguity and fragmentation, Madden added his thinking on the interplay between lines as an ambiguous formal unit and the white space which they gesture out into. How we see the poem, whether the line is a bounded

unit striving for internal coherence, or something much more fluid depends on how it interacts with this white space. Comparing the line to a musical measure, Madden sees the interplay in Sheppard's work of syntactical collisions within and across line breaks, with this space on the page, as creating a tension or discord. Instead of settling into harmony, into sense, these lines hover on its edge. Inside this tension, in the perception of line and shape on the page, the reader oscillates between alternative possibilities of sense. This uncertain hovering around the open space of the page can be thought of as an element of the reading process which precipitates much of the disruptive critical work described in Sheppard's poetry across the day.

Zoë Skoulding (Bangor University) began a final session loosely focussed around issues of translation and identity, with '*A Translated Man* and the EUOIA' – the latter standing for Sheppard's European Union of Imaginary Authors, an ongoing collaborative project of faux-translations. Criticisms have been brought against this work from some quarters, that the invention of imaginary authors in minority languages might speak over real authors in those languages, in a kind of colonialist appropriation which could frustrate cross-cultural understanding through its ironic monolingual enactment. Without dismissing such concerns, Skoulding suggested that the emphasis on bilingualism in this work, and its imaginative gestures towards other languages, in fact has potential to open up a wider cultural-linguistic landscape than the standard transatlantic Anglophone space which innovative poetry often occupies. The creation of this imaginative world, or imagined international community – related to Fernando Pessoa's concept of the heteronym – and its thinking about minority concerns, meets the extension of innovative poetic community (itself a minority concern) constituted by these collaborations. Drawing evidence from her own experience working with Welsh language poetry, Skoulding described her sense that an interest in minority literatures can create conditions for communities which extend past hegemonic forms, across both national and stylistic borders. Translation, in Erín Moure's account, is an element of all reading; to assimilate markings on paper or screen into understanding through an individual body. Though not a perfect definition for dealing with the specificity of cultural difference, this points back to the

structure of the heteronym as pushing towards a plurality of category and meaning, which can be thought of as a common necessity for transformative reading, and for national and international political thinking at a time when borders appear to be becoming markedly more entrenched.

Tom Jenks's (Edge Hill University) paper '"God's not too pleased with me": Robert Sheppard's *Petrarch 3'* turned to Sheppard's pamphlet- (or rather, map- , given its fold-out publication format) length series of 'translations' of Petrarch's third sonnet. Jenks contextualised the work by reference to more descriptions of translation – Umberto Eco's 'translation is the art of failure', George Henry calling translation, at best, an echo – and to the recent Petrarch translations of Peter Hughes and Tim Atkins, which Sheppard has himself reviewed. Moving from a fairly conventional translation, with some ironic stylistic heightening, *Petrarch 3* quickly begins to disrupt this process with shifting tones and identities, contemporary references – from BDSM to Margaret Thatcher – as well as the folded map form which creates a hypertextual structure with multiple possible routes through the text. Translation is opened up here from a different perspective to the EUOIA: there is a heterogeneity in which multi-directional conversations between reader and shifting author-identities telescope out in these multiple translations from a single, real, source text, rather than interweaving between a whole continent of invented texts. If poetics is, in Rachel Blau DuPlessis' definition, 'permission to continue', then Jenks says the form of this piece as a translation from this canonical sonnet, much like the imaginative world framing the EUOIA, offers a reason to begin. Translation becomes an enabling structure in which Sheppard can explore identities other than his own, or multiple alternative versions of himself.

Aptly bringing the formal element of the day to a close with his paper simply titled 'Who is Robert Sheppard?', Allen Fisher (Manchester Metropolitan University) reflected directly on those many identities as they proliferate across Sheppard's body of work. Referring less to Sheppard than to 'The Bluesman', himself a rhetorical incarnation of the poet of *Twentieth Century Blues*, Fisher illustrated how a focus on establishing the self or selves brings identity and autobiography into question,

undermining the idea of the self as a stable entity. Techniques of damage and disruption, varieties of montage and demontage, 'brazen incompleteness' or 'unfinish', situated by Fisher as elements of Modernist practice, promote what Fisher calls 'imperfect fit' and put disorder at the heart of Sheppard's practice. This disorder is not just of meaning, but also of identity. Thus The Bluesman is a representation which is constantly deferred, fragmented through other selves, or the self as other, a dialogical overflow alienated from himself. Returning to the question of the work of political change or exploration, Fisher calls the construction of identity a project of imagining change; disruptive practices do critical political work here through interrogating the self in the world, and beginning with the self as the site of change.

This stimulating day of discussions was followed by an evening of readings which bore out much of the most positive elements of what had been said across the day. The importance of creative, critical, poetic community – a recurring subject of discussion, as something both necessary for worthwhile creative work, and built into Sheppard's practice as a poet, critic and teacher – was well in evidence. Readers and friends based here in the North West were joined by those from further afield in a scintillating line-up: Robert Sheppard, Robert Hampson, Joanne Ashcroft, Andrew Taylor, Zoë Skoulding, James Byrne, Rhys Trimble, Tom Jenks, Steven Waling, Antony Rowland, Natasha Borton, Scott Thurston, Patricia Farrell, Allen Fisher, Jo Blowers & Steve Boyland, a collaboration by Edge Hill MA students Brendan Quinn and Bill Bulloch, plus video messages from Ian McMillan, Charles Bernstein and Chris McCabe. Many of these readings drew from the festschrift produced for Sheppard's sixtieth birthday (*An Educated Desire,* edited by Scott Thurston), and were accompanied by warm words of tribute.

The opening reading from Robert Sheppard himself – no longer keeping his distance from this part of the proceedings – followed fittingly the day's attention to his work. It was shot through with high, sometimes angry energy, and was certainly the most exciting of several performances I've witnessed in the few years I've been based in the North West. The opening sequence contained almost-clear political invective around contemporary events – Brexit, social unrest, terror attacks and

their rhetorical deployment. This was suggested through fragments of description sitting hazily somewhere between actual global events and their imagined violence, combined with slogan and jargon, the repurposed detritus of political or media commentary discourse, and a tone which existed as much in the reading body as in the linguistic constructions. It is from this tone more than from any clear statement that the direction of this invective emerged, offering no solutions to the listener, but a state of heightened emotion and of bewilderment, for us to sit in or negotiate as we saw fit. To end on a brief example of some lines which particularly rung out to me in the moment of listening: 'I've forcefed my kidnapped evil poets watercress/scrumpy and their own bad verses until/they relinquished their copyrights and I release/them tongue-tied back into the wordless wild!'

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Competing Interest

Joey's doctoral research is currently being supervised by Scott Thurston at the University of Salford, and by Nikolai Duffy at Manchester Metropolitan University.