

ROY FISHER: THE VERNACULAR LANDSCAPE, JAZZ, AND THE POEM AS PROBLEM

Fisher, Roy. *Selected Poems*. ed. August Kleinzahler. Chicago: Flood Editions, 2011. *Standard Midland*. Tarsset: Bloodaxe Books, 2010. Robinson, Peter, ed. *An Unofficial Roy Fisher*. Exeter: Shearsman Books, 2010.

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In *19 Poems and an Interview*, Mike Erwin asks Roy Fisher, “I’m wondering what you think about the case of poetry more often sheltering and protecting people than stimulating them and opening them up? If that is the case.” Fisher’s response to that question has been cited often:

As far as I can see it, a poem has a business to exist, really, if there’s a reasonable chance that somebody may have his perceptions re-arranged by having read it or having used it. The poem is always capable of being a subversive agent, psychologically, sensuously, however you like.

How might a reader use a poem by Roy Fisher? How different would Erwin’s question be if he had asked Fisher about Birmingham, the city that Fisher is most closely associated with, instead of poetry? For Fisher, the answer to the second question might not be altogether dissimilar: Birmingham is what he thinks with, after all.

In “Texts for a Film,” Fisher describes how he thinks with his city:

As a means of thinking, it’s a Brummagem
screwdriver. What that is,
is a medium-weight or claw hammer
or something of the sort, employed
to drive a tapered woodscrew home
as if it were a nail.

For Fisher, a poem can be a “Brummagem/ screwdriver,” an *ad hoc* implement taken up to solve a problem or meet a need, though a problem it wasn’t necessarily designed for or a need normally unassociated with the tool. If “a poem is a small (or large) machine made of words,” as William Carlos Williams famously writes in the introduction to *The Wedge*, Fisher’s machines do not work on the assembly line. Williams’s less well-known following sentence deserves attention here: “When I say there’s nothing sentimental about a poem, I mean there can be no part, as in any other ma-

chine, that is redundant.” It is challenging to imagine a machine with less redundancy than a hammer, but Fisher’s poem asserts an expanded field of possibility by looking at the simple tool under the Wittgensteinian gambit of “seeing as.” Does one see a rabbit or a duck: how does a poem shape the experience of the world?

Poetry responds to problems, not because the poet *vates* gets it right, but because, as Fisher says, “you make certain bids, you release certain items, you leave them around and wonder what will happen to them.” The question is not so much one of a modernist aesthetics of defamiliarization as it is simply getting by in an environment in which use-value shifts according to the requirements of the moment and the ingenuity and desire of the user. What a reader picks up from a Fisher poem depends on what a reader needs. Subtly, Fisher corrects the dichotomy Erwin’s question assumes: getting by means to be sheltered and protected on the one hand, while seeing possibilities in the ordinary and casually subverting norms on the other. There is no bright line between support and subversion. Roy Fisher’s vernacular landscape is as full of aesthetic potential as it is practical problems.

Later in the interview, Fisher tells Erwin, “You know, I’ve got my sort of fan album of things I think with.” Fisher lists a wide range of materials from “Jess Stacy, pianist; Kafka, Paul Klee, [and] Hiroshige,” and throughout the interview Fisher frequently refers to painters or to Chicago jazz as sources as central to his work as the mid-century American modernists with whom his poetry is often linked. A jazz pianist improvising presents the audience with a musical problem being solved, though it is probably more accurate to say that the problem, the improvisation, is itself the solution. Whether the artist is a pianist walking a bass line or thinks as Paul Klee does that “a line is a dot that went for a walk,” the problem is how to get from one place in the composition to another. This is not a question of inspiration, nor a matter of style: it is a matter of getting the job done. As Fisher says of jazz musicians during the heyday of the music, “You just had to play what needed playing; you had a small compass, a small area to work in, and within that you could work with great finesse, and you had to be quick, very intelligent, you had to be athletic in your mind, and use what you had QUICKLY.” Moments later Fisher says of Paul Klee,

You stick to what you first thought of, you do it again. This appeals to me enormously. The idea of Klee working away at things, having a theory, and doing many variants, many alphabets, many grids, and having an apparently inexhaustible source of statements and restatements that are like frames, like hours, like days, very simple conceptual things. I like that.

Three recently published books help readers new to or familiar with Roy Fisher's decades-long career understand just how well Fisher's poetry manages to get along with the means available: Flood Editions' 2011 *Selected Poems*; *An Unofficial Roy Fisher* edited by Peter Robinson and published by Shearsman Books in 2010, and a slim but potent volume from Fisher himself, *Standard Midland* also published in 2010. The picture that emerges from all three works taken together is of Fisher as an independent, searching poet whose innovations and risk-taking have presented poets on both sides of the Atlantic with an exemplary poetics grounded in detailed, patient craftsmanship and quiet daring. While Fisher's rigorous pursuit of the poem as problem may have left him without epigones or a broad audience—August Kleinzahler drily notes in the first sentence of his introduction to the *Selected Poems*, “Roy Fisher has never aspired to a readership”—, that is just as well: his work has incited other poets not to imitate but to listen and to see differently, to make do with the materials at their own hands. Kevin Corcoran's question-as-apostrophe from “The Fisher Piano,” says what needs to be said on that score:

Roy—is that you out there, above the tin-ear merchants,
flash buggers and lickspittles in their dark workshops,
in a decent country called the possibilities of poetry? (42)

The Flood Editions *Selected Poems*, edited by August Kleinzahler, is aimed at an American audience with poems that span the entirety of Fisher's career. Kleinzahler has the hope that “this selection should broaden Fisher's American readership beyond those very few who have attended to any signs of life in British poetry over the past fifty years” (XVI). The idea of a selected poems aimed at an American audience unfamiliar with Fisher's long career is interesting in part because Fisher is an astute and sensitive English reader of American modernist poetry. He grasped early on a sense of the possibilities that American poetry was opening up, and the range of his work demonstrates his career-long pursuit of modernism's poetic potential. It is indeed valuable to hear the aesthetic ambitions of American mid-century modernism through Fisher's attentive English ears, though Fisher's translation of Black Mountain College poetics into his own English provincial environment is quite free. Fisher writes in a productive trans-Atlantic poetic situation in which American innovation with the poetic line in the open field rubs shoulders with the deeply historicized sonic meditations of *Briggflatts*.

August Kleinzahler's editor's foreword quickly offers an arresting observation of Fisher's work: “it is poetry almost entirely without charm.”

At first, this assessment perplexed. It was as if Kleinzahler had insulted the poetry and the poet, but the sentence jostled a memory of something Evelyn Waugh wrote in *Brideshead Revisited*. To set the scene, the louche and well-connected Anthony Blanche has just seen Charles Ryder's new jungle paintings and declared them "a very naughty and very successful practical joke." "It was charm again, my dear, simple, creamy English charm, playing tigers," Anthony says, and a few lines later offers his definitive diagnosis: "Charm is the great English blight. It does not exist outside these damp islands. It spots and kills anything it touches. It kills love; it kills art; I greatly fear, my dear Charles, it has killed *you*." Roy Fisher's poetry does not rely on charm to "play tigers," and to have escaped charm's deadening embrace can be counted a major victory. Kleinzahler might have added that it is poetry without cynicism, charm's critical complement, as well.

In a poem such as "Wonders of Obligation," included in *Selected Poems*, what begins as atmospheric description of Birmingham's industrial cityscape, "the malted-milk brickwork/ on its journey past the sun," veers into a passage mourning citizens lost in the air raids of the Second World War.

I saw
the mass graves dug
the size of workhouse wards
into the clay

ready for most of the people
the air-raids were going to kill:

The balancing of light effects on the built environment earlier in the poem with grave-digging in the local clay is what might be called a working person's cosmology in reverse, and "Wonders of Obligation" presents a perspective frequently observed in Fisher's writing: light materializes into dull stone or rusted metal. Later in the poem Fisher tells us

The things we make up out of language
turn into common property
To feel responsible
I put my poor footprint back in.

The cosmology on offer is decidedly vernacular, creating "common property" out of a public language. The poetic products of language are less things-in-themselves than things-in-relation to others. Fisher's poems track the affect of relations: to his environment, to his fellow city-dwellers, and to

himself.

my life keeps
leaking out of my poetry to me
in all directions. It's untidy
ragged and bright
and it's not used to things

mormo maura
asleep in the curtain
by day.

What might seem contradictory at first, poetry generates common property in things and yet is “not used to things,” is an example of negative capability—Fisher is also an admirer of Keats—but also of Fisher’s poetry of affect which is capable of presenting seemingly incompatible experiences as part of the ensemble of everyday life. That he is surprised by the fact that his life comes to him by way of poetry, the record of common property, is due to the fact that the poet, solitary and hidden as the moth in the curtain, seems to exist apart from things or audiences. The seemingly simple poetry of “Wonders of Obligation” is anything but simple in its subtle and incisive investigations of the individual’s relation to collective artifice or of the historicized interpenetration of the natural and built environments.

In the passage above and in the earlier passage from “Texts for Film,” I want to draw attention to the ordinariness of the objects that Fisher names. A tool is an element of tradecraft, rich in history though rarely appearing on history’s main stage. Tools are commonplace items: items that were put to work to create a common place, however haphazardly. Fisher presents his readers with ordinary objects designating what anthropologist Kathleen Stewart calls “ordinary affects.” In *Ordinary Affects*, Stewart writes, “everyday life is a life lived on the level of surging affects, impacts suffered or barely avoided. It takes everything we have. But it also spawns a series of little somethings dreamed up in the course of things.” Later she writes, “Ordinary affect is a surging, a rubbing, a connection of some kind that has an impact. It’s transpersonal or prepersonal—not about one person’s feelings becoming another’s but about bodies literally affecting one another and generating intensities: human bodies, discursive bodies, bodies of thought, bodies of water.” Stewart’s work describes a life-world in which the rational and irrational, the logical and the heteronomous, the natural and the cultural are folded into each other. She shows how perceptions and lives are ideologically structured, while showing how such structurations are always subject

The essay is well-worth reading on its own terms, but as an introduction by a major press such as Flood Editions, it has to be said that it represents something of a lost opportunity. There are many people who could have written a fine introductory piece discussing Fisher's work in the context of American poetics of the last half-century, Kleinzahler among them. The book's introduction still goes a long way on that score, but does not achieve all that it might have.

An Unofficial Roy Fisher offers readers "an informal gathering of writings that celebrate the art and influence of a unique British poet on the occasion of his eightieth birthday," and is an informative and useful book that brims with warmth, even love, for its subject. Edited by Peter Robinson, whose long familiarity with the poet places him in just the position to be able to put such a collection together, the book is composed of a short gathering of Fisher's poetry, "an unofficial fisher"; a "poet's poets' anthology" of poems in homage to Fisher; and a well-selected collection of critical essays and personal reflections, "the fisher syndrome explained," of which Peter Makin's "The Hardness of Edges," Ralph Pite's "Roy Fisher's Waterways," and Mathew Sperling's "Water" are particularly noteworthy. To cap off the collection, Derek Slade's masterful Fisher bibliography is brought up to date through 2010. For academics *The Thing About Roy Fisher* will remain the most important collection of essays, but *An Unofficial Roy Fisher* does substantially advance understanding of and appreciation for the poet's work, especially in the emergent field of ecocriticism. Sperling is on target when he writes, "But it seems to me that Fisher is one of the few poets whose work puts the social and the economic back into 'eco' in a genuinely cogent way. [...] Fisher on water, Fisher on the river, is the best starting point for thinking about contemporary ecological poetry."

The short selection of uncollected poems, "an unofficial fisher," offers twenty-one poems in which Fisher has fun at T.S. Eliot's expense, as in "Script City": "Now let me drag the night/ Across us like a table,/ Over the stove and fire irons," or riffs on William Carlos Williams's variable foot, as in "The Discovery of Metre":

Any old man
 walking downstairs
 three steps
 And a pause
 still talking
 pleased to be
 Talking and
 still making it
 downstairs.

While the selection does not attempt to offer more than a short précis of Fisher's poetry by means of some of his previously uncollected poems, it very capably brings Fisher's wry sense of humor and his typical self-abnegation into the foreground. In a poem such as "Art Comes to its Senses Again," Fisher's mordant writing skewers the culture of art competitions: the "anonymous corporate donor" funding "this year's prize," which must bear the title, "*Old Man Swallowing His Tongue*," has "specifically excluded from consideration...works submitted in any of the following forms: solo dance-pieces, video installations, interactive DVDs, netsuke, preserved human tissue, poems." Here the reader finds Fisher delighting in the absurd, not a little at his own expense. I am tempted to say that the poem is charmingly cynical, but the irony is not bitter nor is the satire dark. This is Fisher "taking the piss," not being pissed off.

The poet's poets' anthology offers work from a wide range of poets stylistically, ranging from Fleur Adcock to John Wilkinson. Most of the poems explore place and memory, textured by loss or by the inevitable defeat of initial enthusiasms, but the poems also offer a sly resistance to the ongoing beat-down. Some, like Fisher's own work, attempt to find resilience through craft, if not craftiness. Robert Sheppard's "Tentatives" opens "Between buildings brushed/ By bitter wind// Bodies chatter/ Chilled equivocation," a cold prospect, certainly, and more unpromising and darker than Fisher's Birmingham. But, a little further into the poem, "Hoist from the purest/ Lyric a catch// To pull up the stepped lines/ Silvered in living daylights." Song intervenes in the frigid atmosphere like a weakening but dramatic light: "Throws long shadows lawns of/ Dark stretching back from flaming// Brickwork the faces of buildings/ Distant towers." The chiaroscuro of Sheppard's poetry calls to mind the light effects of a Fisher poem such as "By the Pond":

Brick-dust in sunlight. That is what I see now in the city, a dry epic flavor,
whose air is human breath. A place of walls made straight with plumbline
and trowel, to desiccate and crumble in the sun and smoke. Blistered paint on
cisterns and girders, cracking to show the priming. (35)

"Tentatives" ends on a fragile, melancholy note: "Where at the periphery stretches/ A god created by gospels// That thread between things/ Like gossamer like culture." Sheppard's poem offers neither shelter nor protection, but it does present a world in which things cohere, however fragilely or temporarily, because words tenuously suture them together.

Many of the poems borrow Fisher's humor and self-mockery. Ian McMillan's "The Literary Life" depicts Fisher in "an upper room of a pub in

1980” where he is “getting ready to read poems.” The reading is interrupted by a series of unfortunate events: vegetable selling, a drunken patron threatening the vegetable seller, and a novelist shouting “*People I am The President*.” McMillan concludes, “Roy looked at me across the room and said/ *This is The Literary Life: get used to it.*” The poem honors Fisher’s travails in the world of provincial literature, a provincialism that Fisher has assigned himself on several occasions.

The essays and personal accounts are written with great affection for Fisher, and they offer the reader both humor and insight. Though editor Peter Robinson characterizes *An Unofficial Roy Fisher* as informal, it would be a mistake to think that to be any sort of deficit. It is precisely the informality of the volume that allows the various essays and recollections gathered together to so effectively present the personality of the poetry and of the poet. Fisher’s own contribution in this section, “Death by Adjectives,” constitutes a poetics by way of jazz review and is itself a rather splendid performance. When Fisher discusses “Earl Hines’s ways of opening the music out and knocking it right along,” he is outlining the aesthetic intelligence necessary for successful composition: “he [Hines] lopes relentlessly away with the left [hand] while grabbing jagged, sidelong treble phrases apparently out of nowhere. In fact they’re out of the pretty plain harmonic progressions, but by no route anybody could have foreseen.” To find the way through a musical problem with readily available but unexpected means offers Fisher a template for his own “Brummagem” poetic investigations. It is worth remembering here that Fisher told Eric Mottram, “I paid far more attention to the *Tractatus* as a mode of lineation, say, than to any poet. And similarly, in more recent years, I have enjoyed the way Cage’s thinking moves in his writing more than almost any poet.” Fisher’s demotic *sprezzatura* sometimes masks his muscular intelligence and his deep commitment to perfecting his craft.

Standard Midland is a jewel of a book, full of finely wrought lyrics that explore time, mortality, history, and the historicity of place. Ange Mlinke’s review in *The Nation* of the Flood Editions *Selected Poems* sees Fisher as a poet “of the long view” who “writes about what’s sorely missing, or is often dodged, in our virtual world of speed and simultaneity—the full weight of time.” In *The Guardian*, Paul Batchelor concludes his review by saying “*Standard Midland* is an honest appraisal of what it is possible to say, and what remains to be said, by an artist in old age. It finds Fisher at his most approachable and makes an excellent introduction to this important poet’s work.” Both reviews get at something central to *Standard Midland*, the sense of the past in the poet’s life and landscape, but it is important to note

that the poetry has an intense focus on the present as well, a present that is sometimes not entirely distinct from past or future.

Take, for example, the poignant poem, “On Hearing I’d Outlived My Son the Linguist”:

Two days since I heard you were gone
suddenly in your forties and me still not quite eighty

and hour by hour today with no whole word at all
the emptied patterns of your talk come crowding
into my brain for shelter:
bustling, warm exact. You’d be interested.

This small poem is virtuosic in its verb use; note how past and present tenses are carefully interwoven as gerunds and past participles, as in the poem’s fourth line where the word “emptied” modifies the “patterns” presently “crowding” the poet’s brain. The word “shelter” takes on characteristics of both noun and verb, poised between artifact and action. The sense of compacted motion is picked up by the next line’s gerund, “bustling.” The final sentence reads not “would have been” but “would be,” as if to say might still be. Fisher contracts the final conditional “would,” which places all the more emphasis on the final “be,” giving the past participle a sense of a possible future. It is an exquisite poem written in a fissured present, elegant in its depiction of grief and loss and all the more effective for its seeming emotional detachment.

In a poem such as “At Brough-on-Noe,” Fisher depicts the seemingly haphazard organization of the village: “What feels/ like a village is not more than a road junction/ mounted on a wandering confluence/ and twisted to fit.” What seems to be initially a poem about the mismatch between terrain and the built environment becomes more complex when the fact that Brough-on-Noe is the site of a succession of Roman forts is considered. The village’s present is conditioned by the fact of the ancient Roman occupations of the place, which saw the village, then called Navio, flicker in and out of existence several times over the course of imperial rule, finally disappearing c. 350 c.e. The landscape of Brough-on-Noe has been shaped by human intervention over the course of millennia, and in this case, the faint outlines of the old Roman fort, still visible from the air, are themselves “emptied patterns” that continue to reverberate in the present. Where Mlinke feels the weight of time in Fisher’s poetry, I find reflections on the nature of transience and duration. This might seem a small distinction to make, but it is the difference between time as oppressive, a record of violence demand-

ing atonement as Mlinke has it, and time as the still visible record of past inhabitation. As Fisher puts it in an interview with John Tranter,

If I live in the country, as I do now, I live in a country which has got a couple of hundred years of petty industrial history, which you can see. And I also live among deposits which are three to four thousand years old. There are Bronze Age tombs on the skyline out of the window. [...] So always I'm looking at development and growth and the way people use land, the way people inhabit the surface of the earth. For me it's just a matter of looking at it with a ranger longer view.

To return to “At Brough-on-Noe,” for Fisher the present is not self-identical; it is a fractured and elusive moment. In the poems’ second stanza, Fisher writes

And the mismatch
chops up appearances
so that each part, each house,
row of trees, block of viewless
buildings marked grey on the map
as ‘works’ settled askew,
has to announce itself
as newly created. It moves
and stays put. There’s
no single place to be
at Brough.

Fisher’s work occupies a landscape that is fundamentally hybrid, in which the pastoral and urban landscapes have been worked over, altered for millennia by waves of inhabitants. Seeing such places afresh means stripping them of phony nostalgia and taking them out of the deadening circuit of the national heritage industry. There is “no single place to be” because place is never singular: not a universe but a multiverse.

Roy Fisher might be a poet hard to place in any poetic school, but Paul Farley and Michael Symmons Roberts make a good case for his being one of many English edgeland artists. In their book *Edgelands: Journeys into England’s True Wilderness*, Farley and Roberts situate Fisher among those whose work takes sustenance from the interstitial spaces

where ruderals familiar here since the last ice sheets retreated have found a way to live with each successive wave of new arrivals, places where the city’s dirty secrets are laid bare, and successive human utilities scar the earth or stand cheek by jowl with one another; complicated, unexamined places that thrive on

disregard, if we could only put aside our nostalgia for places we've never really known and see them afresh.

I expect to see Fisher's work grow in importance in America as interest grows for work that investigates what the English ecologist Richard Mabey calls "the unofficial countryside." Mabey coined the phrase in 1973 and it is interesting to think that Raymond Williams's *The Country and the City* came out that year, as did J. G. Ballard's *Crash*, which was followed in 1974 by *Concrete Island*, a novel that takes place entirely in the voids created by a freeway exchange. The connection to Ballard is made by Iain Sinclair in his introduction to the 2010 reissue of *The Unofficial Countryside*. While Fisher's poetry may take place, whether Birmingham or Brough-on-Noe, as its occasion, the poetry is less loco-descriptive than it is a subtle, serious analysis of affect and landscape. Works of Fisher's such as *A Furnace* or *Birmingham River* deserve to be approached with the same intensity as those of Ballard and for many of the same reasons. Mabey writes, "I have called it the unofficial countryside because none of these places is in the countryside proper, nor were they ever intended to provide bed and board for wildlife. They are all habitats which have grown out of human need." Fisher's poetry maps the environments of human need in such work as "Wonders of Obligation" "I'm obsessed/ with cambered tarmacs, concretes,/ the washings of rain" or in "After Working," where he writes

I squat there by the reeds
in dusty grass near earth
stamped to a zoo patch
fed with dog dung, and where swifts
flick sooty feathers along the water
agape for flies.

The thoughts I'm used to meeting
at head-height when I walk or drive
get lost here in the petrol haze
that calms the elm-tops
over the sunset shadows I sit among:

[...]

then down its concrete stems,
shaded as I go down
past slack and soundless
shores of what might be other
scummed waters,

to oil-marked asphalt
and, in the darkness, a sort of grass.

There is shelter and protection to be found here, among the least of spaces.