

KEEPING IT STRANGE

Roy Fisher, *The Long and the Short of It: Poems 1955-2005*, Bloodaxe Books, 2005.

Peter Robinson

A reader familiar with Roy Fisher's publishing history might imagine his contract for this new edition containing a rider that the book has to be distinctly different from his three earlier "collected poems" volumes. Certainly Fisher has come up with a gathering of work that is his most complete to date (though by no means a Complete Poems) and one characteristically non-definitively open-ended. The words "collected" or "complete" are nowhere to be seen; the book's main title, *The Long and the Short of It*, alludes in one of its meanings to the literal fact that the volume contains all his longer works (his two Oxford collected volumes did not include "The Cut Pages") as well as the vast majority of his shorter, short, and very short pieces. Fisher's work ranges from the five-line joke poem called "Epic" to the short epic called "A Furnace". The book is by no means a complete Fisher, because it pointedly excludes a number of poems that have previously been collected ("Occasional Poem", on the death of John Berryman, or "To the Supposed Dancer") and other possible candidates for inclusion that have been published in pamphlets or magazines ("Three Early Pieces", "Abraham Darby's Bridge"). It also steers clear of any approach to the fairly large body of early, uncollected poems—such as the elegant "The Lemon Bride"—cited and discussed by James Keery in his chapter from *The Thing about Roy Fisher: Critical Studies* (2000). The book collects for the first time a few early poems that had got away ("Kingsbury Mill"), the completed text of "The Dow Low Drop", which had appeared in abbreviated form in the 1996 Bloodaxe *New and Selected Poems*, and quite a number of shorter, occasional, or elegiac poems written during the last decade or so.

The book is not as reliable as it might have been, containing an unhappy peppering of minor misprints and typos; and Fisher had long ago issued a statement on such textual slippage in "Irreversible": "The *Atlantic Review* misspelled Kokoschka. / In three weeks he was dead." This book's fine cracks, which by no means diminish the importance of its publication, are further sign that for the poet it is not one of those graveyards of performance described in "Five Morning Poems from a Picture by Manet" as "splinters of fact stuck in the earth's fat rind." As the poet notes in the Acknowledgements, "These poems no more amount to a biography than I

do” and thus “an arrangement that seemed chronological” would be “false”. This effectively damns the two Oxford volumes (1980 and 1988) to falsity, for some such rough arrangement—with the exception of “The Ship’s Orchestra”, put at the back in an appendix—appeared to have been tried there. In *The Long and the Short of It* “nothing of the kind is...attempted”, and the resulting rearrangement of his works will provide an intriguingly coherent deployment of texts both for Fisher’s long-time readers and those fortunate people who, coming upon his work for the first time, can encounter its uniqueness afresh. For the chronically chronologically minded, Fisher has added dates of composition after titles in the Index (though the mysterious dates ‘0000’ after “City” and “Interiors with Various Figures” must—for the time being—stand as either collapses in the face of a too complex chronology, dada jokes, or merely production slip-ups). Fisher kindly acknowledges my “help in the preparation of this book”; for the record, my contribution involved no more than an acted-upon suggestion about what to do with the poems that didn’t evidently fall into generic categories, plus a few pleas for inclusions, in some cases of which the poems’ defense council was overruled by the presiding judge.

Even for those who know Fisher’s work well, this book offers revealing and refreshing encounters and conjunctions. The texts have been ordered into nine sections, of which five could be described as “generic”. The first contains long works such as “City”, “The Ship’s Orchestra”, “The Cut Pages”, and “A Furnace”. The third is made up of comedy poems like “A Modern Story” about poetry competitions, “Paraphrases” about the weird epistolary life of a poet with an international reputation and no books in print, or “The Poetry Promise” about keeping the customer satisfied in these market-driven days, or “The Nation”—written before the institution in the UK of a “National Poetry Day”, but a perfectly judged mockery *avant la lettre* of such superficially populist, culturally retrograde antics. The fifth gathers poems dedicated to other writers and artists for festschrifts, memorials, or from no occasional prompting, such as “Staffordshire Red” (for Geoffrey Hill), “Emblem” (for Lorine Niedecker) and “Songs from the Camel’s Coffin” (for Gael Turnbull), its title borrowed from Turnbull’s own “For a Jazz Pianist”, in which he describes “(a camel’s coffin?)” as “a black / and polished upright / slotted box”. The final section of Fisher’s poem records his arrival in the USA for a visit that included a reading event at Notre Dame (where he was photographed playing one such camel’s coffin, a photo subsequently printed in a university yearbook, captioned in the manner of “Irreversible” as a picture of John Cage):

Born in the middle of the island and never leaving it
 in fifty years, then startled
 on stepping down to the battered tarmac of O'Hare
 to discover that the air above it,
 the entire medium of elsewhere,
 wasn't as I'd guessed it would have to be, a heavy
 yellowish fluid tending towards glass,
 towards mica. Why in all that time
 had nobody said?
 I'll never be sure, that's for certain.

Such lines as these casually instance Fisher's uniqueness—his ability to preserve a remarkable freshness in his encounters with the world, which we can then encounter too, refreshing our sense of the lived. This is not exactly a Russian formalist “making strange”, because to Fisher the thing, in this case the air above O'Hare, is strange anyway. Fisher's art is about processing experience without lessening its strangeness. It is about “keeping it strange”—and this has required his never being “sure” and “that's for certain.” Section VII of his book is devoted to the sequences and series of shorter writings, the “Interiors with Various Figures”, the “Texts for a Film” about Birmingham that Tom Pickard produced, the “Seven Attempted Moves”, “The Six Deliberate Acts”, “Five Morning Poems from a Picture by Manet”, the four poems “To the Memory of Wyndham Lewis”, or the “Three Ceremonial Poems”. Last of these generic groups, section VIII, is given over to collaborations with artists—such as “Correspondence” with Tom Phillips, “Also” with Derek Greaves, and the many others with Ronald King. Missing from this section though is “Cultures”, a collaboration with King (helpfully described by Ralph Pite in his chapter from *The Thing about Roy Fisher*) but one whose arrangement defies publication in a book of this kind.

While these five sections are the volume's reinforced structure, built upon the grounds of compositional habits and preferences, the other four sections—gatherings of poems that don't fit any of those generic categories—are, as far as the organization is concerned, the book's most revealing. These mid- or short-length poems tracking individual moments of inspiration contain borderline overlaps with other sections. “The Thing about Joe Sullivan” might be thought Fisher's most dedicated poem, in that it expresses an overwhelming fascination with the psychology and aesthetics, and indeed ethics, of this white Chicagoan jazz pianist's style; but it doesn't appear in section V, presumably, because these two musicians—Fisher has also worked as a semi-professional jazz pianist—were not personally acquainted. Similarly, “One World”, a poem reporting on an early teaching experience with a remedial class at a school and reflecting on the unlikely-

hood that such pupils could have come to be readers of little magazines, might have appeared in the comedies section—since it was first published in one of the pamphlets of such work issued by the late Richard Caddel's Pig Press. Yet its account of teaching a class of severely underprivileged children is not, properly read, a joke at all. So the fascination of these more apparently ad-hoc sections lies in their prompting a reader to think about how and why specific works have found their way into each of these four and, further, why individual texts placed there have become neighbors.

Section VI, for instance, appears to be made up of poems that variously address without satire Fisher's evolving awareness of his own aesthetics. Born in 1930, and not in 1885 or thereabouts, Fisher, though willing to give interviews, has felt no inclination to write manifestos, whether group or personal, or indeed to establish his "poetics" by means of academic, critical, or hortatory prose—and especially not before the fact of having written attempts at pieces of literary art. Thus, "For Realism", "A Poem Not a Picture", "The Lesson in Composition", "Of the Empirical Self and for Me", or "From an English Sensibility" come together with other relevant pieces to define, however obliquely and inconclusively, what Fisher has thought and felt he has been up to all these years. Nor does this section, since it is the occasional work of decades, pretend to offer a single, coherent aesthetic position. No sooner have we read the close of "For Realism" ("A realism / tries to record, before they're gone, / what silver filth these drains have run"), than we encounter the six-line epigram "It is Writing" which ends: "I mistrust the poem in its hour of success, / a thing capable of being / tempted by ethics into the wonderful." It is hard to believe that the latter, from 1974, has not been placed thus on the same page as a tacit comment on the former, written in 1965, and made a moral meal of by Donald Davie in the chapter "Roy Fisher: An Appreciation" from *Thomas Hardy and British Poetry* (1973).

But why, then, asks the doubter, isn't "The Thing about Joe Sullivan", with its tacit ethical-aesthetic commentary, or "The Memorial Fountain" with its "thirty-five-year-old man, / poet, / by temper, realist, / watching a fountain"—why are these poems in section V, and not alongside "For Realism" or the "Lesson in Composition"? One pragmatic reason is that the various mid-length poems must not be lined up by overt or obvious similarities. If you put "For Realism" next to "The Memorial Fountain", for instance, you allow a misleading statement to form, one which appears to imply that Fisher is, despite appearances to the contrary, really a realist. So, in these sections, there is un-simplifying variation and contrast too; and there is conscious avoidance of any chronology (even the generic works are

shuffled so as to display pointed-ness but not evident thematic or biographical continuity. This is surely why the first section begins with “Wonders of Obligation” with its classic account of Fisher’s reluctantly associative art “We know that hereabouts / comes into being / the malted-milk brickwork” and its, understated for the most part, values: “The things we make out of language / turn into common property. / To feel responsible / I put my poor footprint back in.”

Fisher, “never sure...for certain”, has stated in an interview that there is still such a thing as “honest skepticism”. He said it in the hey-day of that post-modern skepticism which, since it multiplies doubt to infinity, haplessly drops skepticism out of the equation—allowing its proponents to flourish mechanical rejections of justifiable assertion (about what truth is, for instance) that in practice leaves everything precisely as it was. Honest skepticism, I take it, means allowing doubt its place in an understanding of the world, both natural and human; doubt then functions as a means to further apprehension and understanding, not as a device for short-circuiting any such gains. Fisher has never believed, as Charles Tomlinson emblematically did with the title of his second collection, that “seeing is believing”. He too has been, as he put it in “City”, a poet who lived “so much by the eye”, but he did so to address the processes by which the world takes shape around us, breaking up, and reconfiguring its solidities, altering the angles of sight, or focal length, so as to access a knowledge of change and evolution. “A Furnace” proceeds by enacting the life of energies, powers, forms, or evidences not only to access knowledge of change, but to assist it. Fisher’s skepticism about poetry with a moral attached has found its role in defining his field of operations, since on its right flank were the social moralists of the 1950s, Larkin, Amis, Davie, and, in the Tomlinson of the 1960s and 1970s, an epistemological moralist of international distinction.

However, to live outside the law you must be honest; and Fisher’s skepticism means that he is not without beliefs about aesthetic, literary, poetic, and therefore social and political conduct—beliefs that might be identified in the differences between overtly propagated rules of behavior with a social flavor, and complexes of learned practices about relations with others that, for one thing, would be betrayed by imposing them on others, by boasting about holding them, or by announcing that you have just acted in accord with them. In “The Lesson in Composition”, Fisher writes of how “Whatever I start from / I go for the laws of its evolution, / de-socializing art, diffusing it / through the rest till there’s no escaping it.” This is a prosaic poem responding to the oppressive social demand that the marketplace has, mysteriously, imposed on poetry over the last few decades. I say “mysteriously”

because you would have thought that the marketplace has so little real use for poetry, it not making much money for anyone, that it could have been left in peace. The thorough marginalization of the art some time before the rise of our current version of market economics should have found it well positioned to resist such demands. Yet such is the power of ideology that poetry's more socially adaptive operators have felt compelled to sing from the same stock-exchange hymn-sheet. Fisher's poem approaches its end by describing the British version of this problem. "Art talks", he writes,

of its own processes, or talks about the rest
in terms of the processes of art; or stunts itself
to talk about the rest in the rest's own terms
of crisis and false report—entertainment,
that worldliness that sticks to me
so much I get sent outside
when the work wants to start.

I'm old enough to want to be prosaic;
I shall have my way.

The sense is that art offers its benefits to individuals and, through them, to the society at large, only if it is allowed to follow its processes without the imposition of formulated social demands—whether they are promulgated by a national union of writers, or as a requirement from publishers and their allies in newspapers and award bodies to address the immediate interests of imagined consumers. Fisher's skepticism about identity and the idea of the discontinuous self, the role of body sensations, of ontology in epistemology can also be related—paradoxically it might seem—to Jazz and the life of the performer. Yet this is not pop music; and Fisher became interested in his music at a point just before the moment when it was to be pushed aside. He has, as a consequence of that marginalization, accompanied distinguished American performers on their tours of the British provinces. This is slightly different from the kinds of relation to an audience of readers that many writers will take for granted. The latter is slower, more cumulative, based upon two separated activities that take place within the privacy of the writer's or reader's conscious minds—and one that is only supported, or sometimes even hindered, by encounters with the poet in performance. The musician who performs on a nightly basis needs an internalized sense of what a good performance will be that pays only slight attention to what the audience may or may not have thought. Fisher is thus complexly placed both to understand the way in which art is necessarily a matter of presenting its products to informed people who appreciate that art, and of knowing

how to preserve the autonomy of the performer from audience demands that can in so many ways prove to be art's ruination.

The doubt about being able to know ourselves, a first step on the road to such self-knowledge as may be granted us, naturally extends in honest skeptics to the knowledge of others. The limited access allowed to the rest of the world then requires a process of acquaintance, a repeated returning to and reconsidering of phenomena. One limit in Fisher's work is the locating of experience in shared relationships between people. The works that might seem at first most to qualify such a statement ("Interiors with Various Figures" and "The Ship's Orchestra") only tend on closer acquaintance with their strangeness to reinforce it. This limit might seem to be escaped from by the comedy poems of section III. Comedy requires a relation to constituencies and social groups. The poet's relative lack of ease with such situations of identification and provision, may account for some of the weaknesses in that section. "Sets", for instance, was inspired by the quarrels between various groups and sub-groups of poets about who precisely should control the UK Poetry Society. Beyond the more "committed" inner circles of such writers and their support teams it might be expected to reverberate with rather less force:

If you take a poem
you must take another
and another
till you have a poet.

And if you take a poet
you'll take another, and so on,
till finally you get
a civilization: or just
the dirtiest brawl you ever saw —
the choice isn't yours.

What saves this from being a faded joke about a shrunken corner of a lost world, is the crispness and clarity not only of the writing, but also of the double disappointment it dramatizes through, for example, the workings of unobtrusive rhymes: "poet...get", "so on...civilization", and "saw...yours". Equally, the way that "or just" breaks up the resolving rhymed close on the word "civilization" is a perfectly judged ruffling of high-minded high hopes. So the poem first describes a process that we who admire and enjoy this art have all experienced—the growth of a learned and then fed fascination that can access some of the finest productions of highly sensitized minds, and then marks a precipitous slide into isolation, conflict, and the total loss of

anything like art or control. Many of Fisher's poems dedicated to other poets could be called counteractive moves in this cultural destruction of poetry and the conditions for its best production. "You Should Have Been There", written for Peter Riley in 2000, is exemplary in its acknowledgement of just how essential imaginative collaboration is in this most personal, and often most isolate, of arts: "you should have been there / to make two of our sort / too many for the territory / I'd split the shift with you", he proposes, "while the broad- / bodied waitress in black with the ominous eye / stalks by".

Roy Fisher's is then a poetry of skepticism, one that includes a healthy skepticism of poetry. It has been protected from the canceling to nothing of moralized minimalism—by accepting a need to grow loquacious and to address with ever greater reach the implications and ramifications of its congenial, not to say congenital, modes first intuited through exposure via Gael Turnbull to American writers such as W.C. Williams, Denise Levertov, and Cid Corman in the late 1950s and early 1960s. This is what Fisher's lesser known, and by some less appreciated, work of the 1980s and 1990s has been about. In "A Furnace" and elsewhere his "honest skepticism" has tacitly defined a complex social and political agnosticism—addressing, for instance, the survival of ancient religious modes for giving significance to mortal processes, while criticizing established religion's expropriation of death, and the role of the dead in our lives. Since the end of the 1970s, Fisher has published work that takes carefully calibrated steps in the direction of the social, while simultaneously keeping the time's overweening social demands in their place. He has put his "poor footprint back in". The first part of "Texts for a Film" (1991) begins "Birmingham's what I think with" and over more than fifty years this poet has found evolving means for turning that thought into art. I first encountered his poetry on a library shelf some thirty-five ago. If not quite "what I think with", Roy Fisher's work has nonetheless contributed substantially to what and how I think—and, *al que quiere!* (to those that desire), it can do the same.