

## Artifice and Artificers: The Meaning of Form in the Work of Christopher Middleton

‘I owe CM a debt of understanding’, Roy Fisher has written recently of Christopher Middleton. He explains:

At a time when the Sunday broadsheets still carried reviews of new poetry there appeared a review of his book *Torse #3*. [sic] The piece was by its own standards civilised: but it was patronising, ignorant, insular and weary. I had at that time virtually no contacts and no prospect of getting a book published; but I was working tentatively in a distant corner of the same territory, and the review showed me in an instant how the cards were stacked. It freed me from setting any store by opinions that might come from such a quarter. (Fisher 2014: 196)

This exemplary declaration of independence (*torse 3* was published in 1962) set Fisher up for a career that is definitely and quietly defiant, yet modernist in orientation, with a perceptual poetics that torques the social perspective into the phenomenological. It turns the general philistinism of British cultural life to its own advantage through its awareness that allegiances to influences outside of the Movement Orthodoxy will find precious little support from mainstream culture so one might as well get on with it. Which Fisher did.

Fisher and Middleton are often yoked together by critical violence (sometimes with Edwin Morgan or Charles Tomlinson thrown in for good measure) but this is the first time, I think, one has publicly acknowledged the other. Middleton politely declined to contribute to the tribute volume Peter Robinson and I edited for Fisher’s 70<sup>th</sup> birthday on the understandable (though surprising) grounds that he had not been acquainted with the work since the mid-1960s (by which time Fisher’s publishing prospects had improved, thanks to the little press revolution). One reason for the yoking is precisely their outsider status as renegade modernists with not incompatible but differing commitments to acts of artifice over transcriptions of anecdote.

Another explanation of their actual distance is Middleton’s own ‘understanding’ of the review Fisher read, which I am guessing is the one by A. Alvarez, who, as editor of Penguin’s *The New Poetry*, was both detractor of, and perpetuator of, mainstream orthodoxy, detecting the germ of a poetry of psychological extremism lurking in the Larkinesque—and getting his payoff from the final works and tragic days of his Hampstead neighbour, Sylvia Plath. Middleton’s reported reaction to the ‘patronising, ignorant, insular and weary’ review was to emigrate, finally to the US where he has

lived ever since, in the unlikely expanses of Texas, no better understood by the culture he left behind, but sustained by his commitment to European culture (as a professor of German literature and one of the best modern translators) rather than by his adoptive country; he displays not a trace of an accent after fifty years, though he writes intimately of American life (and American animals and birds; one of his accomplishments is that he is one of the best writers of animal poems, something I am not sure anybody has considered against the blinding brilliance of his modernist credentials). I am sure his removal from Britain was more complex than that but the comparison with Fisher's retreat to a Bely-esque city of modernism in Birmingham, a scratch philosophy concocted out of perceptual scraps, is instructive.

Middleton's defence of poetic artifice against genteel reserve in verse or its obverse, psychological extremity in expressive confessionality, had to wait until his 'Reflections on a Viking Prow', published in 1978. This work is partly what its title claims it to be but is also Middleton's poetics; in Jeremy Hooker's words, it is simply 'his great essay'. (Hooker 2005: 60) For Middleton the anecdotal of contemporary poetry, which works in easy complicity with the mechanics of paraphrase, was occluding the operations of artifice, operations whose history he traces in the hands of the ancient artificer as he or she constructs an artifact. An exhilarating description of the carvings on the prow of the Oseberg ship traces the way the spirit of the sea, the boat's fickle medium, is carved transformatively as a dragon-like form into the wood, which, it is important to note, remains visibly wooden, foregrounding the medium in its protective animism. It is 'an artefact which is shaped from, responds to, and controls otherwise dangerous elemental powers,' as Hooker puts it. (Hooker 2005: 67) 'The ship was protected and guided by marine protoforms,' Middleton notes, emphasising that the work was thereby functional, or 'utile' to use a term of David Jones. 'The being of the potter,' as Lambros Malafouris puts it of an analogous artifactual material engagement, 'is co-dependent and interweaved with the becoming of the pot.' (Malafouris 2013: 212) Middleton, though, concludes that, in distinction to the (unidentified) authors of anecdotal poems with their tendency to 'limp, self-indulgent, and haphazard writing,' (Middleton 1990: 287) 'such an artificer is not confessing, not foregrounding his own subjective compulsions, not cataloguing impressions, not hanging an edict from an anecdote.' (Middleton 1990: 283-4) This seems to be—to use an appropriate metaphor—firing a bolt over the bows of confessional poetry, impressionistic imagistic writing, and the moralistic empirical lyricism of the Movement Orthodoxy alike. This does not make Middleton, despite his reputation as a 'neo-modern' in the 1960s, a card-carrying linguistically innovative or even formally investigative writer; he says, 'Any doctrinaire purism repels me, even that of Gerhard Rühm,' pointing accusingly to the leading and uncompromising concrete and sound poet of the Austrian avant-garde. (Middleton 1990: 288).

Such independence strengthens his poetics' claims on behalf of artifice; he does not enter the 'Poetry Wars' as I found myself compelled to do in the introduction to this piece. It is simply this: 'Thinking about artifice of this kind,' he writes, 'one comes to have doubts about poems which conform to the scripts of subjective expression.' (Middleton 1990: 287) Indeed, the essay is not just a subtle 'reflection' but a modest proposal (or 'conjecture', to use another of Middleton's favoured terms for the speculative, writerly discourse of poetics): to 'propose, as one possible model for the poem, the significant and useful ancient artifact'. (Middleton 1990: 289) This perspective suggests 'a distinction between two kinds of text, the configural and the confessional', where the former suggests the transformative and protective properties of his chosen exemplar, the Oseberg Ship, while the latter points towards 'subjective expression' in its many forms. (Middleton 1990: 287) The resonant opening words of the essay express the perceived need for artifice and the effects of an artifactual or configural sense of poetic forming.

To recapture poetic reality in a tottering world, we may have to revise, once more, the idea of a poem as an expression of the "contents" of a subjectivity. Some poems, at least, and some types of poetic language, constitute structures of a singularly radiant kind, where "self-expression" has undergone a profound change of function. We experience these structures, if not as revelations of being, then as apertures upon being. We experience them as we experience nothing else. (Middleton 1990: 283)

This is a high claim and Middleton is guided by his larger historical consciousness, as he laments (elsewhere): 'How tormented the present century has been by the decay of imagination into paranoia and mass hysteria.' (Middleton 1998: 2) Middleton dwells in the conjecturality of poetics, but his exemplars are drawn from his wide reading, from Propertius to Baudelaire, from Pindar to Fritzi (Friederike) Mayröcker; he concludes of the work of his pantheon: 'Never frontal reportage about apparent localities, their writings are formal creations which enshrine and radiate poetic space.' (Middleton 1990: 288)

Often responding, as this last distinction suggests, to space and specific places, these poems offer 'structures—or should I say structurings', Middleton self-corrects, in order to make the word 'structure' active. (Middleton 1990: 288) Similarly, I prefer the word 'forming' over 'form', as Derek Attridge does throughout his magisterial *The Singularity of Literature*, or, at least to imply the former in usages of the latter. Middleton experiences Schilleresque form-urge when he notes: 'The inaugural word-forms are distinct from expression in the usual sense; they are vocal, but not thought/feeling arbitrarily vociferated. Almost they put us into perceptual contact with being;

almost we perceive, in their organization, being as a most subtle and integral form.' (Middleton 1990: 288)

The 'word-forms', these structures, are equated both with the structurings of certain places and localities and with the form, forms or forming of being. Absolute identification is held off by the parallel use of the word 'almost' and by the insistence that we are dealing with the reverse engineering of the imagination. The words are not simply forms (as the places are not simply 'structures'); they are active and are forming (they both 'radiate' and are 'radiant'). They are transforming as 'a profound change of function'. Form is the force that offers being to experience, as 'artifice is what form supplies to attention', as Susan J. Wolfson says. (Wolfson 2007: 216) It is a matter of forming that makes the artifact configural in Middleton's terms. Middleton himself stops the flow of his conjectures, knowing that it is difficult to articulate further speculations about these 'formal creations' outside of his own experience of them. This approaches the mute wonder of Peter de Bolla, who ironically writes elegantly but impressionistically about such aesthetic apprehensions in his formalist meditation *Art Matters*, but Middleton sets himself a wider existential test for poems: 'Can they compete with, can they outweigh, certain experiences (aesthetic or not) which one has had?' (Middleton 2004:103)

Middleton does not make the mistake of connecting such conjectures directly to his own poetic work (poets, I contend, cannot read their own works, one of the reasons poetics exists at all); others provide the copula. Zulfika Ghose points out that Middleton's 'description of the Viking prow provides us with a poetic insight into the method of his own poetry', though the word 'method' is too schematic a term. (Ghose 2005: 53) It is important to separate the poetics of 'forming' that relates to the configural artifactual writing and the actual forms made present to a reader forming the poems. August Kleinzahler (though he is, in fact, writing of a later poem) identifies the salient formal methods and results of Middleton's poetry contemporary with the essay: 'What is achieved by his mix of inversion, repetition, the elliptical (all amplified by the enjambment) is a foregrounding of particular elements, a raising of our attention by disrupting conventional expectations of flow.' (Kleinzahler 2005: 45). Most of the poems in the extraordinary 1980 volume *Carminalenia* might be described this way, even the two contrasting long poems which figure forth aesthetic transformations, 'The Prose of Walking Back to China', where a quotidian Paris street scene becomes a pursuit of the poem itself—'The poem began when I walked out'—across the territory in long punctuated lines, (Middleton 1980: 52) and 'Wild Horse', which is in three-line stanzas devoid of punctuation but marked formally by abrupt enjambment, where the narrator tries to deal with the mental image of the wild horse of the title which has arisen unbidden and (of course) untamed:<sup>1</sup>

I cannot recall that I have ever  
 Seen a wild horse in the flesh  
 Perhaps in films but I have not smelled one

(Middleton 1980: 86)

In the first poem, unlocatable flute music in Paris ‘is perceived, at origin./ Before creation’, (Middleton 1980: 54) while the wild horse’s ‘hooves are my heartbeats’ (Middleton 1980: 88). The poem that is never written nevertheless configures and transfigures Paris, as it recognises the unexpected and unlocatable sound of a flute:

Perspective makes the space intelligible,  
 But you only find the place to stand  
 By moving as you may, for luck, no nothing,  
 Nothing in the voice  
 Guides the poem but a wave  
 Continually broken,  
 And restored in a time to be perceived,  
 As the flute is perceived, at origin,  
 Before creation.

(Middleton 1980: 54)

The wild horse that is emphatically imaginary nevertheless engenders real transformative power:

Its hooves are my heartbeats  
 Mine its flying sweat silken tail floats out  
  
 Into spaces

(Middleton 1980: 88)

Were I adjusting Kleinzhaler’s words to fit these examples, his reference to enjambment would not be in parentheses since this formal aspect is paramount, especially in ‘Wild Horse’.

In ‘How to Listen to Birds’—remember my parenthetical praise of Middleton’s animal poems—the isolated word ‘Feel’ at the end of a verse leads unpunctuated on to the next line describing the embodying of birdsong: ‘Feel again its formal flute alarm’, where the line break, new verse and stuttered repetition, delights with its slight alliterative flutter (and a frisson for the reader of form in the appearance of the word ‘formal’). A series of

imperatives ('Put' ... 'Learn' ... 'Wake' ... 'Touch' as well as 'Feel') implores the addressee to respond, but most importantly to

Listen: bodily. Slip  
Through the rifts that model  
Their notes

(Middleton 1980: 68)

The lines themselves jump like slipping rifts, while also enacting the contrary pull that is *visible* in the opening line above: each word is cut off dead from its neighbour by fastidiously placed but varied punctuation. Elements of poetic artifice don't necessarily blend for semantic clarity, but tense against one another for complexity, multi-systemicity one might call it. 'For Middleton the rhythmic pulse, though almost never regular, is characteristically very insistent and propulsive', Kleinzahler insists, and it is not surprising to find that propulsion, three irregularly placed accents in each line, as the poem moves towards formal closure. (Kleinzahler 2005: 45) The act of artifactual transfiguration is discovered (and described) in the modes of attention turned towards birdsong:

A note or two, at last,  
Concentrates the practised world  
Into some new thing(.)

(Middleton 2005: 68)

The poem is perhaps a textbook demonstration at the levels of form and content of the thesis of the 'Reflections' essay since we are asked, in lines where the enjambment is crisper, the rhythm less symmetrical, the shorter lines working in parallel with their iterative capital letters, to

... find no way of your own  
To speak  
Belief, at a variance so fine  
It modifies the whole

Machine of being:

(Middleton 2005: 68)

After consideration of the essay, that the poem should utter this plea to being (and to its modification) should not be surprising, though its figuration as a machine shocks with its verse-break enjambment as much as through its

mechanical metaphor, though the ‘i’ sounds of both nouns deliver arresting consonance. Middleton’s poetics of forming appears in his deftly handled poetic forms. What is surprising, and this is as much a result of the careful orchestration (though not necessarily neatness) of the formal devices, is what lies beyond the uncertainly arresting colon, the apparent certainty of the conclusion: ‘this/ Is not unpolitical’. (Middleton 2005: 68). The enjambment, the double negative, deflect from the (implied) direct statement that this, after all, has turned out to be another poem about politics, a minatory fable about the evils of belief as dogma (a persistent Middleton theme). ‘A poem can read the spell of experience backwards,’ Middleton notes in his notes to *Carminalenia*, and it seems that a reader can equally experience the spell of this poem backwards. (Middleton 1990: 119) The muted formal and semantic affirmation at its closure allows the reader to dwell on the poem, to rise back up its chain of imperatives towards its disarmingly instructive title, to indeed learn to ‘concentrate the practised world/ Into some new thing’.

This could be argued of the formal arrangements of all of Middleton’s poems in *Carminalenia*. Timothy Harris notes that ‘Far more than the work of most poets, one feels that each poem has found its own forms; or rather that the poet has discovered its shape in the fashioning of it; the reader shares in the discovery.’ (Harris 2005: 73) The improvisatory pulse, the self-correcting tone of many of the poems (the slight hesitant insistence of ‘Feel//Feel’ is its only manifestation in ‘How to Listen to Birds’), attest to the sense of discovery that is felt as the poem finds form in a forming action that engages a reader’s productive, energetic encounters with its artifice. As readers engage materially with the artifact of the poem, its poetic artifice, they too ‘owe CM a debt of understanding’, a cognitive sugar-rush that is far removed from the prurient disclosures of the subjective script.

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<sup>1</sup> Middleton has a number of collections available. Apart from appearing in *Carminalenia* (Manchester: Carcanet, 1980) the poems referred to in this essay may also be found in many of his selections and collections, including *III Poems* (Manchester: Carcanet, 1983), *Selected Writings* (London: Paladin, 1990), *The Word Pavilion* and *Selected Poems* (Manchester: Carcanet, 2001) and *Collected Poems* (Manchester: Carcanet, 2008). *Collected Later Poems* (Manchester: Carcanet, 2014) shows his recent, and continuing, work.