

THE WOLF INTERVIEW: ROBERT SHEPPARD



Robert Sheppard was born in 1955. His first contact with the British Poetry Revival was made as a teenager when he visited Bob Cobbing at his home for advice on an exhibition he was organising on Concrete Poetry. It was not long before he became a member of the same London scene as a poet, a period richly documented in *When Bad Times Made for Good Poetry: episodes in the history of the poetics of innovation* (2011). Sheppard was educated at the University of East Anglia, where he completed a PhD on Roy Fisher and Lee Harwood. From 1989 to 2000 he worked towards a number of texts eventually ‘collected’ in *Complete Twentieth Century Blues* (2008), some of which were published separately as *The Flashlight Sonata*, *Empty Diaries*, *The Lores* and *Tin Pan Arcadia*. Recent titles include *Hymns to the God in which my Typewriter Believes* (2006), *Warrant Error* (2009), *Berlin Bursts* (2010), and *A Translated Man* (2012). As a poet critic, Sheppard has written widely on modern poetics, including *Far Language: Poetics and Linguistically Innovative Poetry 1978-1997* (1999), *The Poetry of Saying: British Poetry and its Discontents 1950-2000* (2005), and *Iain Sinclair* (2007). He edited *The Salt Companion to Lee Harwood* (2007), and co-edits the *Journal of British and Irish Innovative Poetry*. Sheppard is Professor of Poetry and Poetics at Edge Hill University in Lancashire, UK. His blogzine *Pages* can be found at: <http://robertsheppard.blogspot.co.uk/>.

Christopher Madden: In the Proem to your recent collection of ‘unwritings’ in *The Given*, mention of electrical interference in valve radios from passing cars is framed as ‘This heartless / Irritation this re- / Iteration of the pure prosaic’. Thinking about the quotidian in the context of poetry, one of the conventional aspects of which seeks to transmogrify what is perceived and experienced, how do you view the relationship, if at all, between ‘unwriting’ and the idea of *undoing*?

Robert Sheppard: The prosaic is ‘pure’ here, remember (possibly because ennobled by the passage of time), and yet the writing is ‘lyric’. ‘Unwriting’ I use in a rather technical sense (and have since I first adopted the term in 1985 or whenever) of involving the taking of a piece of my own earlier writing and treating it, either systematically or intuitively, to see what it might have to say (to me, to others) in an altered state. It is undoing, certainly, but it’s also making something new, transforming it as well. But that’s not to deny the quotidian. I like quiddity. I like that electrical interference and isolate it in that piece, but what I don’t do is float it into an anecdote (this is my grandfather’s wireless too close to the traffic of Old Shoreham Road in Portslade). I suppose I hope I’m one of Christopher Middleton’s ‘artificer poets’ in that respect, whom he contrasts to the purveyors of anecdotage, as I isolate the tokens of ‘the pure prosaic’.

CM: Unwriting enacts some sort of defamiliarisation of the self. In *The Poetry of Saying: British Poetry and Its Discontents, 1950-2000*, you make the distinction between a poetry ‘embedded in its artifice’ and one ‘that has as its chief dimension *mimesis* of a recognisable social world’. Given modernism’s reformulation of mimesis, which certainly neither jettisoned artifice nor alienated itself from representing the external world, I am wondering whether contemporary poetics can ultimately deny the force of mimesis. It remains problematic, but it remains (with us) nevertheless. Whither the relation, then, between that which is familiar and that thing being defamiliarised?

RS: We could never encounter the completely other (so says Derek Attridge): defamiliarisation must involve some necessary recognition of the object treated, estranged, distanced, transformed. It’s not about the insertion of noise into communicative transparency. I think the contemporary interest in the everyday (seen in lots of writers from cris cheek to the conceptualists, via the situationists of course) is probably a practical answer to that question. ‘Mimesis’ is not the central problem of the poetry of the said; it’s an issue about the kind of mimesis, I suspect, where it becomes its ‘chief dimension’, its *raison d’être*. In the social perspectives of the Movement Orthodoxy, mimesis seemed tied up with self-expression as though the self was a thing to be represented rather than used as a transformative principle.

CM: In *Warrant Error* the sonnet seems to be deployed as a transformative principle. Your subject here is not so much the self as the propaganda around and mediascape of the War on Terror, which is reworked (or remade) under the microscope of the form. I liked the epigraph from Bill Griffiths: ‘What better disguise for evil than sonnets?’ I suspect this might have something to do with rhetoric...

RS: I have a pun on ‘sonnetize’ and ‘sanitize’ somewhere in that book, though I don’t think sonnets necessarily *disguise* evil! There are puns throughout from title to the hundredth poem but it’s most pronounced in sections where I’m trying to shove the language of the War on Terror up itself, or transform it, I suppose. So ‘terror’ begat ‘error’. I had pages of terms I could play around with in that way. I’d done something similar in ‘Killing Boxes’ during the First Gulf War, and it’s obviously a reaction to ‘rhetoric’ in its debased sense.

I am also trying to take the frame of the sonnet and allow other structures (not least my line counting in verselets of 2/3/4/5 lines) to inhabit it, or re-form it, to create a new space for thinking and feeling. Most surprising to me are the more traditional poems (love poems, for example) that break out at various points, as though both the unrelenting dogma of neo-con and fundamentalist alike forced me to consider the ‘human covenant’ and ‘human unfinish’ quite directly, even personally, at the level of content. On the other hand the transformations of the sonnet embody a formal kind of unfinish. This expands, in one way, into the ‘Six Poems Against Death’ in *Berlin Bursts* and, in another, towards the prose works of an unpublished manuscript called (unsurprisingly!) ‘Unfinish’; it’s prose poetry, poets’ prose, poetics, even narrative, all in one. This is a long way from rhetoric; ‘unfinish’ has turned into an ethical-formal amalgam—and the sonnet is at the heart of it in *Warrant Error*, with its rich history, but also with its sheer visible qualities. You can have all kinds of ‘visual’ sonnets based on its line-conventions (Jeff Hilson’s *Reality Street Book of Sonnets* demonstrates the love-hate potentialities of its framing) and they seem to evoke that history and repudiate it at once. Having your cake and eating it comes to mind, I think! Maybe finishing your cake and unfinishing it might be a better analogy.

CM: Indeed, the history of the sonnet is rich in formal innovation, yet the sonnet’s status as an object is unquestionable. While its conventions vary, the process of manipulating the reader’s mind through rhetoric remains intact. Referring to Tom Raworth’s ‘Eternal Sections’, however, you claim that ‘if they are “sonnets”, [. . .] then they exhibit a volta—a turn—in nearly every line, and the power of this ensures that estranging disorder is put back into montage’. The images in *Warrant Error* have an accelerated perspicacity that corresponds to the turning movement of the volta. This unsettles the sonnet-as-object, reformulating it as what you have called an ‘event’.

RS: I'm worried a bit by the way you're jumping from my critical work to my poetry here. I know there is a relationship but I wonder if I am the best person to address the transfer of concepts from one to the other. One reason for the conjectural discourse of poetics is to allow writers to dialogue with their practice and while it might pick up the odd literary critical term along the way, particularly if the poet juggling his poetics is a poet-critic, those terms might function in different ways in poetics, as speculative instruments not as analytic concepts. 'Putting disorder back into montage' is a phrase of Rancière's and I'm a great magpie of useful terms for poetics—and that one is useful for suggesting that disruptive techniques may have been not nearly as disruptive as they should have been.

CM: Perhaps we should talk about another kind of transfer, then, which is not unrelated to the one you mention: namely from page to performance and vice versa. I remember hearing you read from *Berlin Bursts* in Liverpool and being struck by the velocity of your performance style; afterwards I discovered this is conveyed on the page, too. As a reader/listener I am 'thrown', as it were, into poetics: I am simultaneously the text's receiver and co-implicated in its production. Velocity somehow calls to mind Olson's talk of breath and field composition in his essay 'Projective Verse'. To what extent does the breath feature in your work, and do you view it as another disruptive technique, perhaps?

RS: Olson has always seemed too literal to me, and like most prosody, his looks less clear the more you look at it. But I do think this is a prosodic issue, but more a question of poetics than theory, speculative in other words, and I'm speaking for myself alone. I was much taken by the 'Swift Nudes' paintings by Duchamp in the mid-80s, and they seemed apposite analogies to this vectoral poetics. Flashes of thing across the image. I'm glad you see it as related to the page. I suppose crudely one might identify unpunctuated (asyntactical or not) shorter lines as requiring or suggesting a pretty sharp pulse, whereas punctuated (whether syntactical or not) longer lines require or suggest (perhaps even demand) a slower pulse, nearer to that of speech. It's now a matter of feel for me. I don't theorise it. I also take the performance of a poem pretty seriously. It is after all an act of forming the poem itself for the audience (and me); it's not strictly secondary. And it must form itself in the right way, with the page suggesting the form of that re-forming in performance.

However, although I'm speaking for myself, there are clear precedents. The father of the shoot-from-the-hip school of reading is, of course, Tom Raworth (who I suspect developed his sense of speed from Olson) and I've always thought that what he was trying to do was put into action something he talks about in poems of the 1960s a lot, that of evading the intellect and knowing in

favour of intuition and being. I've always wondered whether he's trying to bypass the intellect and get the poem straight in somehow. The poem is thereby doing something rather than saying anything. I'm not signing up to that as my method, but certainly a performance might convince before full understanding is possible. (That has to be true with complex language in some ways.) Disruption is not the term for this; rupture might be. Interruption even, given that 'interruption is one of the fundamental devices of all structuring', as Walter Benjamin has it. In Raworth the volta in every line is also a pulse, so interruption is a prosodic feature as well as a disruptive one; it is structuring the poem. It's on the page: it's in the performance.

There is a communal aspect to this too. Among some London poets there seems to be a vectoral imperative: Ulli Freer, Adrian Clarke, Jeff Hilson all read fast; Miles Champion used to read too fast to actually hear any of the words! Scott Thurston has early poems that work best fast, though he's now a more meditative writer and the performance forms have followed that.

CM: Pausing is related to disruption insofar as what feels like an effect of pulse and pacing in effect installs a structural gap. I'm not sure what fills this gap, and perhaps that cannot—nor shouldn't—be anticipated as it is likely to be different every time. My own instinct as a reader towards the paragraph blocks of *The Flashlight Sonata*, for instance, is precisely to pause, and the resulting momentary silence exerts something on my reading. This is complicated by the heterogeneous form of the sequence, in which blocks of text (some small, tempting intervallic silence; some breathlessly edifice-like running for pages) feature alongside sharp lines and what could be called, to adapt your phrasing, shot-from-the-hip enjambment. Your reference to Benjamin put me in mind of constellations. Would 'constellation' describe your approach to, perhaps even feel for, structure? And where might the pause feature in all of this?

RS: Variable caesurae. Variable intervallic pulses (non-pulses, silences). All those terms evoke the restless different-every-time rhythm of the poetry (and prose to a certain extent) I hope. 'Constellations' suggests to me Adorno's block prose arrangement of argument by juxtaposition which I don't think I've adopted, as well as the spatial practices of Mallarmé and the later concrete poetry of Eugen Gomringer.

However, my latest book *A Translated Man*, being the double oeuvre of the fictional Belgian poet René Van Valckenborch, was partly constructed by bifurcating my practice (a little as I described it above) and inventing some new (alien) metrical tricks. His Walloon poems are all in 'roll and tumbling tercets', the enjambments a development of the abrupt line breaks of *Berlin Bursts* in fact, a 'vectoral poetics' as the fictional translator comments,

speaking to René himself: ‘Your cognitive prosody: the pleasure of speed against *la petite mort* of each line break.’ That is a way of stressing (pun intended) the complex multi-systemic nature of lineation and sense in that (unpunctuated) flow. That technique may be cognitive is something I’ve been struggling with; it’s not just creative writing ‘craft’. On the other, Flemish, side he writes with a much more constellated artifice. His interest in space is not just geographical and geometrical but is metrical and page-spatial, in that the poems feature, again quoting the fictional translator’s diary: ‘your principle of interruption, your spatial poetics’. I found those poems more difficult to finish, which was partly the idea, of course. To extend my range (to adopt a suitably spatial metaphor).

CM: Spatial poetics, unpunctuated flow: it’s little wonder you were drawn to Van Valckenborch. Veronica Forrest-Thomson’s analysis of the semi-colon in ‘In a Station of the Metro’ questions why it exists at all, why Pound couldn’t have used a dash or even a comma. Modern poetics privileges unpunctuated flow for spatial reasons: all components of prosody are then tracked by the eye, fall under the scopic regime of the visual. Punctuation is an inconvenience, it’s like litter. In your work orthographic cues feel embedded in, or are implied by, lineation and spatial arrangement but also the propulsive energy of certain words. Would you agree?

RS: Not entirely. I agree there are all sorts of visual prosodies that have hardly been tracked and tackled critically, but I also think that there are plenty of opportunities for complex syntactic play with punctuation that can’t quite work without it. You also discover and invent various mixed practices, as and when, or when the material suggests. I have prose paragraphs conventionally punctuated but for the last (missing) full stop (I stole that from Roy Fisher). Open parentheses in ‘Empty Diaries’ (that’s from Olson.) Some of the unpunctuated poems have capital letters at the start of each line which is a non-syntactic punctuation device to slow down the pace of reading (not the velocity of performance, or not that only, but the speed of eye-reading). Richard Bradford’s book *The Look of It* only scratches the surface.

CM: The page is a score; a system of notation for various settings and agents of the text. Your collection of writings spanning from December 1989 to 2000, *Complete Twentieth Century Blues*, alludes to your abiding interest in live music performance and that most powerful of musical genres. Could you elaborate on the ways in which the Blues feature in this collection and your work generally?

RS: As content. As mythology. *Blues, why do you kerb-crawl, you been following me all night?* As alternative career? As alter ego: Little Albert Fly. 1990. My guitar-genius friend Tony Parsons’ children still think that’s my name. *Motherless Child Blues*. Go see his band The Blind Lemons.

And now, with the new guitar admonishing me every moment I don't pick it up, since Patricia bought it last year, silently replete with riffs borrowed from Rice Miller, McKinley Morganfield, Peter Green, Duster Bennett. Though now I'm more likely to pluck out a Tony Joe White, strum a Leonard Cohen, cry-thrash a P.J. Harvey or camp up a Kinks number, on my return to the world of aching fingerpads, breath-sentences, sustained notes. Strictly private. Strictly entertainment.

Joe Turneresque. Belting it out. *If your ma-an gets per-son-al*. The first time I sang un-amplified that Robert Johnson blues in a Brighton pub: I'll never forget the sudden drop in conversation, the silent listening. *Why don't you have your fun?* 1977. *Give Albert a harp—something to do with his hands when he's not singing*.

I've got the blues like George Herbert got God, like Ted Hughes got Crow, like Bill Griffiths got prison, like Malcolm Lowry got drink, like Iain Sinclair got fancy walking shoes, like Otis Spann got pianistics, like Tom Jenks got Twitter-sculpting, like David Miller got soul, like Rosmarie Waldrop got the splice of life...

As content.

As form? More difficult to say. Though now, I see the versioning, the sampling, the 'strands' of the preposterous indexing of *Twentieth Century Blues* as analogous to the constant re-functioning and re-forming of songs and parts of song caught in the blues tradition: the borrowed lines, the stolen riffs, the ripped-off cadences, the quotes, the appropriation. It's more assimilative than Conceptual Writing. Ventriloquial eternity. Lemon Jefferson *inexpressive as the wine-dark riverside*.

CM: You're quoting from 'Freeze It', a poem in the same strand as 'Smokestack Lightning: A Mythology of the Blues', in which a number of muses from the Blues tradition are 'repurposed' or reanimated, brush up against each other in a kaleidoscopic portrait. Yet as the title indicates, you're problematising history here, which likely accounts for the paradox at the heart of *Complete Twentieth Century Blues* and its rhizomatic structure. Given the collection's fin-de-siècle suggestiveness, was it ever your overarching intention to argue for alternative models of history?

RS: Yes and no. Perhaps 'argues for' makes it seem more like historiography, as does the word 'models'. It was historical in that it was a 'time-based' piece of work, expiring at the millennium, but also with a strand like 'Empty Diaries' stretching from 1901 to 2000, it was weaving petite histoires through the meganarratives of twentieth century history. Its deliberately complicated 'strands' of multiple titles are meant to contribute to that, rhizomatic as you

say, to describe how we might read through it, but possibly also a ‘constellation’ of meaning-forms to come back to an earlier metaphor. ‘The Lores’ is the core of the poem, consisting of numerically-ordered and hugely impacted poems traversing history, Thatcherism, philosophical ideas, plus the texture of the contemporary streets. With a lot of loose ends because it was everything written in those years. I feel quite distant from it now, but pleased and alarmed still by its monstrosity. It’s grim stuff, the blackest impaction of societal depression, with flashes on utopian parkways desperately trying to compensate. I remember first reading Nate Dorward’s review of *Tin Pan Arcadia* and he quotes that line from *1984* about a foot stamping on a face forever, and says that’s the effect of reading the book. I put *The Gig* down and switched on the radio. It was July 7th 2005. Bombs had gone off all over London, it seemed, at the time. I made notes. I wrote ‘Byron James Is Okay’, the last poem in *Warrant Error* with that criticism ringing in my ears and thinking, yes, this is the world, but also grasping for more positive human values (not that they are *not* there in *Twentieth Century Blues*, I hope. At least the blues ring out true.)

CM: The irony is that history might have made an elegy of the last poem of *Warrant Error*. Thankfully it was otherwise. Tellingly, *Berlin Bursts* followed with a focus on art from other disciplines (relating in some ways to the ‘text and commentary’ approach to be found in *Hymns to the God in which my Typewriter Believes*). You comment that ‘Six Poems Against Death’, at the heart of *Berlin Bursts*, gesture back to the six sonnets towards the end of *Warrant Error* entitled ‘Out of Nowhere’. What role does your interest in the history of art have in relation to such resistance to elegy or rather turn to more positive human values?

RS: A lot of my things allude, use, praise, and re-function art works of various kinds throughout my work, and I’m not sure how I relate them to human values. I’m slightly nervous to articulate a ‘philosophy’ outside of art works themselves. I did risk it in the second of those six poems. It’s almost completely quotations (Doreen Massey through to Philip Roth) and I affirm ‘reasons for living happily out of nowhere and now and then on to multitopia bearing the stories so far whose passions read as co-eval becomings geographies of affect in capital Isness where human unfinish is all about...’. I quote it deliberately as prose to show how it doesn’t (quite) work as discursive prose and of course it unfinishes in 14 lines. Writers with philosophies (rather than poetics) tend to be rather tedious and I try to keep the philosophy as prompts for poetic action. I have a series of quotations on the wall here (‘Eight Theses’ that are part of *Unfinish*). One is a quote from Badiou: ‘His judgement was always anchored in poetry, or in the very subtle thinking that surrounds it.’ (He was describing Mandelstam.) That’s a kind of axiomatic meta-prompt for me. So perhaps that may explain the turn to art

works, that they might speak more eloquently, because silently, of those values. Or am I just making that up and really have no idea why I am drawn to one thing rather than another? I can dress it up as ‘multiform unfinished’.

The relation of resistance to elegy to human values seems a clearer question this afternoon, because this morning I spent time revising a pair of elegiac poems for my father, one short, one long. The short one (unpunctuated but with retarding capitals at the start of each line) ends: ‘Elegy lost in action on the outskirts of an event’, which is less negative than it first seems; the second is subtitled (for the moment, but perhaps permanently) ‘A Kind of Elegy’, in which I have these lines (punctuated with sharp enjambments for thrust and interruption):

The task
of the poet is elective translation,
to transmute the nothing that is said
into the nothing that could
talk itself into the world: the
shadow that casts its wings between the red
pillars that hold the whole thing up.

I’m not sure that I would articulate that outside of the poem, where I’m not sure I know what it means with any assurance. Decontextualised from the previous eleven pages’ refusal to mourn it is itself a kind of quotation.

CM: The word ‘unfinished’ has featured prominently in our discussion, and now there’s ‘multiform unfinished’, a particularly resonant phrase in the context of *A Translated Man*, in which you edit the double oeuvre of René Van Valckenborch. How did you begin to organise the work of this enigmatic, elusive writer?

RS: In my inaugural lecture I told my audience, ‘Writers do not often sit down and inscribe “Poetics” at the top of a sheet of paper and then enumerate an orderly blueprint for writing a particular named text.’ But that’s exactly what I did, in the way I described earlier, the bifurcatory poetics. Van Valckenborch didn’t arrive as a fiction, like Tropp in my short story ‘Tropp’, with any particular traits, physical or mental. In fact, partly due to his bilingual near-impossibility, he is an enigma, as you say, to those who ‘edit’ and ‘translate’ him, though those characters may have made him up. And he’s an enigma to me. The translator Annemie Dupuis seems the most real to me because she has the luxury of her diary at the end of the book. Van Valckenborch is not an autobiographical poet, by the looks of it. I wanted him to be defined (if that’s the right word) by his indistinctness; his ontological status is as unstable as that of fictional poems in any situation, say in a novel. One of the problems of

persona poems, even Pessoa's, is that they *demonstrate* a poetic personality. I wanted the poems to be real ones, but in an imaginary collection. They 'developed' along two parallel trajectories until he 'disappears' as demonstrated by his ridiculous Magritte-inspired 'Cow' poems in Walloon, his Flemish experiment in creating his own fictional translations (one for each EU country, though there are only 5 in the book), and in the ever-wilder imaginings of Dupuis in her diary. I wrote the early poems (supposedly from the year 2000) and then developed his poetics (plural) towards the 2010 vanishing point. I seem to remember some of the diary entries were written *ahead* of the dates they carry, which left me a little uneasy. But the material came quickly. I wrote *only* Van Valckenborch poems for about a year.

CM: It seems Van Valckenborch wore a number of masks in his life: the sense of this is carried in a modernist-inspired sequence as part of the Walloon oeuvre (from *masks and other masks*, 2002). For me, he continues a distinct poetic inheritance: Poe-Baudelaire-Breton. The taut psychogeography of those 'Twitterodes' (from the Flemish oeuvre) surely make him the man of the (Web 2.0) crowd. Did this come to mind during your year-long traversal?

RS: He owes more to Ponge as a Walloon and to the Oulipo as a Fleming (I didn't know anything about the Belgian Formales group of poets until after I'd finished). Clearly he is a psychogeographer in his Henri Lefebvre inspired sense of the production of space. I was deliberately feeding that in to the Twitter stream—and he's restlessly investigating page-space as well as actual space. Breton (of *Nadja*) may be there. But Breton's polar opposite Queneau is too. Baudelaire is probably always there, but I wanted to steer away from those influences. Your question is unusually complex in this case because there's what I've contrived to be Van Valckenborch's influences and what are the actual ones on me. And I might keep quiet about those, even if I'm certain (or even correct) about what they are. I wanted to have some fun with this fictional situation. And fun pushing myself into unusual writerly positions with the 'Twitterodes' and writing about film (he's the buff) and so on. I could allow myself to be influenced by him, too! After all, in one version of his European Union of Imaginary Authors the UK poet he invents is me!

CM: What would you ask Van Valckenborch if you had the chance?

RS: I'd be more worried what he'd ask me! That Sinclair suspicion that the creatures you make up will find you out. Or more precisely, that it would turn out like the plot of Peter Carey's *My Life as a Fake*, which is a cross between the Ern Malley affair and Frankenstein!