

"If I Didn't Dislike Mentioning Works of Art": Roy Fisher's Poems on Poetics

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ROY FISHER'S *Poems 1955-1987* give strong evidence that we cannot write the history of British poetry since the 1950s in terms of the Movement, Ted Hughes, and a few Northern Irish poets. Fisher is preeminent among poets who wish to extend the structural and technical innovations of modernism. His major poems on industrial civilization, *City* (1961) and *A Furnace* (1986), have been compared to *The Waste Land*. They deserve and have received readings of their own: Donald Davie and Peter Barry, for example, have looked closely at *City* and Barry has analyzed *A Furnace*. Eric Mottram and A. Kingsley Weatherhead have written major surveys of Fisher's work. This poet's numerous poems about poetry in the *Poems 1955-1987* volume also deserve attention. They have a wide range: some are merely humorous, some satirize the literary world, others inquire into the nature of literary art. At their most complex, his poems on poetry are a guide to his complicated relationship with the image-centred version of modernism that was his starting point.

Andrew Lawson claims that Fisher is essentially a modernist, while John Ash has written an article calling him "A Classic Post-Modernist." Postmodernism is a term constantly under revision: even Ihab Hassan, who has written so much on the subject, now seems to feel some impatience with it: "At worst, postmodernism appears to be a mysterious, if ubiquitous ingredient — like raspberry vinegar, which instantly turns any recipe into *nouvelle cuisine*" (508). The term identifies a whole cluster of emphases and tendencies and can be seen as an extension or critique of modernism as easily as a break with it. Fisher, who began as a

brilliant modernist in the Imagist/Objectivist line, has moved toward postmodern attitudes through a scrutiny of the assumptions of that line. Lawson, who claims that "Britain has yet to go through a modernist period" (413), places him in the "modernist esthetic worked out by William Carlos Williams," and characterizes his work as "early modernist phenomenology" (415). While calling Fisher a postmodernist, Ash admits that his relation to postmodernism "is uneasy and ambiguous" (47) because he is still committed to an element of realism in spite of his distrust of denotative language, his skepticism about its ability to deliver the real. Ash believes that deliberate fictiveness is an important element in postmodernism, and it is certainly a common trait. I find Fisher's postmodern quality precisely in his skepticism, in his anxieties about the reality of the observing "author" and the reliability of the poem as a report on experience. Hassan points to the fictiveness of the subject as a characteristic of postmodernism (505). This is not the impersonality of modernists like T. S. Eliot but a radical critique of the subject. Fisher also decenters art and has written several poems that evoke Jacques Derrida's questioning of texts. Although Fisher is committed by temperament to the objective reporting of sense impressions, he has pushed the poetics of Pound and Williams to the point where fissures have appeared. His awareness of the fissures gives his work the reflexive quality that so often marks postmodernism and is probably its most obvious distinguishing mark.

In his long interview with Jed Rasula and Mike Erwin, Fisher spoke of his "perceptual thinking," a term that one of his best critics, Peter Barry, considers a self-contradiction. "After all, thought and perception have to be distinguished . . . and it is a serious error to mistake the eyes for the mind" (240). But this paradox is at the heart of the Imagist esthetic and therefore very close to the heart of modern poetry ever since Pound defined an Image as "an emotional and intellectual complex in an instant of time." A good example of Fisher in a Poundian mode is this haiku-like poem from "Seven Attempted Moves" (51), in which a sense of the numinous in nature is conveyed through the imagery of wet leaves that Pound used so often:

hardly ever mentions me, except / by way of some stiff joke like this one." Fidelity to the observation seems to call for the exclusion of the observer.

In "The Lesson in Composition," Fisher goes on to make it clear that he is not merely a reporter. The sensory field must be rendered, transformed into art. The final stanzas of the poem are an important expression of Fisher's esthetic:

— Tedium of talking again,
or at last, about composition and art, while I have one
eye on a thrash of clouds breaking around the guileless
blue of this December noon and the other
on the notion that there's no other topic to be had.
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. Art talks

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.

He cares enough about these points to put them prosaically, schematically. To deal with art as subject is a common postmodern approach and this reflexiveness is frequent in Fisher. The approach to external subjects becomes problematic as writers ponder the relation of text to world. Fisher wants to avoid the kind of worldliness and cant stigmatized by Pound in essays like "The Serious Artist." The immorality of bad art, Pound says in "The Serious Artist," lies in its being inaccurate: "It is art that makes false report." (43). While Fisher's art is most often directed at giving true reports of the external world, he also deals with the processes of art in as concrete a way as possible, and some of his most interesting writing grows from tensions between these aims. In *City Poems*, a taped reading in 1988, he made this comment: "For me

It's like this often —

I don't exaggerate.

And the scene?
 a thirty-five year-old man,
 poet,
 by temper, realist,
 watching a fountain
 and the figures round it
 in garish twilight,
 working
 to distinguish an event
 from an opinion;
 this man,
 intent and comfortable —

Romantic notion.

The observer will be conditioned by everything he brings to the scene. Objectivity is a Romantic notion because events tend to blur together. The acts of the mind as it struggles to render the experience become subjects themselves. In a note written for the jacket of a small press book, *Matrix*, Fisher stated that “[a]lmost without exception my poems are propositions or explorations rather than reactions to personal experience. The poems are to do with getting about in the mind . . .”

For Fisher, the observing self is a problem, not a neutral source of truth. Andrew Crozier has argued in “Thrills and Frills: Poetry as Figures of Empirical Lyricism” that poetry of the Movement and its successors takes for granted an empirical self and its common sense dealings with the world: “In the poetic tradition now dominant the authoritative self, discoursing in a world of banal, empirically derived objects and relations, depends on its employment of metaphor and simile for poetic vitality” (229). Fisher is predominantly a metonymic poet, and his vitality depends on a complex involvement with a world that he does not take for granted. In his droll but serious poem entitled “Of the Empirical Self and for Me” (125), with a witty dedication to “M. E.,” he observes that “[i]n my poems there’s seldom/any *I* or *you*,” and provides an anecdote to illustrate the unreliability of such entities. The “Two of us,” the speaker and “Mary” (M. E., presumably an

alter ego of the speaker) are sitting outside in the dark, "two invisible ghosts," drinking milk:

A tall man passes
 with what looks like a black dog
 He stares at the milk and says
*It's nice to be able
 to drink a cup of
 coffee outside at night ...*

and vanishes. So —
 What kind of a world? Even
 love's not often a poem. The night
 has to move quickly. Sudden rain.
 Thunder bursts across the mountain;
 the village goes dark with blown fuses,
 and lightning-strokes repeatedly
 bang out their own reality-prints
 of the same white houses
 staring an instant out of the dark.

The poem dramatizes perceptual uncertainty as well as doubts about the reality of the self, the "invisible ghosts." The dog may be a black dog, if it is a dog at all. Coffee is confused with milk, in spite of our truisms about the truth being as clear as black and white. Reality is not solid for all its appearances of being so: in a world of blown fuses — sensory overload — reality is perceived as a succession of brief images, momentary reality-prints. A minute examination of the visual field will reveal its constant fluctuations. The illusion of a solid ego inhabiting a solid world is a persistent, perhaps necessary illusion but art (and contemplation) can reveal the cracks in it, defamiliarize it. A similar point is made in "Correspondence" (94) when the speaker catches sight of himself in a television monitor and his normal sense of self disappears: "The world looked like itself / I looked like it too / not like me / as if I was / solid or something." The implicit irony lies in the fact that the solid world into which the self has been assimilated is an illusion, a ghost in the machine of television receiver.

Yet the self is the source of Fisher's poem and must work to render perceptions accurately. Fisher has not abandoned the correspondence of text to world: after all, as he says in "The Memorial

Fountain," he is by temper a realist. One way toward honesty is to demystify the author, to reveal the exact circumstances of the writer, as Fisher does in a key work, "The Open Poem and the Closed Poem" (166-67). In the first section of the poem, he describes opening his writing notebook and making an inventory of poems after a long gap in his production. Some of them he has forgotten or even lost. The individual who wrote the poems has climbed hills and wrecked his shoes, has "run / my new car twelve thousand miles without / memorizing the tyre pressures," and has "walked Avebury and forgotten all / but the shape of my understanding." The maker of the poems, then, is a contingent being whose works proceed out of a complicated literal and imaginative life. Far from being an omniscient and magisterial being, an Author, he may forget some of his own creations. Fisher says that he wants "to have things clear, the circumstances / answerable for a start, so that it's plain who's talking." He scorns the closed poem, which "can come out capitalized, with outlines, / cross-beams and a display." In part 2 of the poem, he follows this explanation of the factors which influence "who's talking" with a brief example of an open poem, in this case, one that evokes a moment of intense observation:

Winking drop on the lens
 shatters a soft
 fog of lamplight in the dark
 that hides how close
 overhead the wet balks are;
 where you're standing, the way
 you're standing
 makes the signal, what gives
 the wires to shine, a handsbreadth
 at a time, rapidly sliding
 through the thick of the wall, the bank,
 black peat that holds
 flakes of thrush-egg. Underfoot
 in the shallows every unevenness
 crawling with rust, alive
 with rust. Foot of the signal.

The poem makes us aware not only of the scene but of the influence of the observer's mind in creating the scene: the second-person

protagonist creates the signal by his presence, makes the wires shine by being at just the right spot to observe them. The scene fuses the organic and inorganic, the light and the dark, and makes us see the intricate physical processes present even in what appears to be static: the rust is "alive," "crawling." Pound's famous formulation in "A Retrospect" that an "Image is an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time" seems appropriate here, along with his related claim that an Image gives a sense of liberation, a sense of freedom from limits of space and time, a sense of growth. Part 1 of "The Open Poem and the Closed Poem" is the postmodern component: a reflexive questioning of the notion of authorship. If we ask whether Fisher is a modernist or post-modernist, we have to answer both, which reminds us that a nominalist approach to such categories is sensible.

An earlier poem, "Suppose —" (68-69) also expresses distaste for the traditional approach, while admitting that it sometimes works. But the conventional poem is characterized as "the old flat arrangement, / Dry track of a half voice" and it gives a guttering illumination. Even Aleksandr Blok, a modernist whom Fisher admires, could deal out humbug at times an "[s]till made sense." The postmodern reflexiveness of "The Open Poem and the Closed Poem" constitutes an effort to avoid humbug. Fisher does not go as far as some contemporary theorists: he does not speak of "The Death of the Author" with Roland Barthes or speak of his disappearance, as Michel Foucault does in "What Is an Author?".

If the perceiving self is a shaky and contingent being, one capable of misplacing or even forgetting its work, the poems created by it must also be provisional constructs, views of the truth not to be trusted implicitly. The second problematic area of art for Fisher is the question of the reliability of the poem — the work in language — itself. Fisher likes the common reflexive device of speaking of "the poem," as in "If I Didn't" (128-30), which opens:

If I didn't dislike
mentioning works of art

I could say
the poem has always

already started, the parapet
snaking away, its grey line guarding
the football field and the sea

— the parapet
has always already started
snaking away, its grey line
guarding the football field and the sea

By repeating the description of the parapet with slightly different lineation, Fisher reminds us that a poem represents one set of choices among many as it describes the world. And he makes us aware that we are reading “the poem” and not encountering reality directly. Art is by implication talking about its own process. To complicate matters, the Steinian (or perhaps Derridean) tag line “always already started” is a loaded phrase which can be unpacked in several ways. First, the poem has already started before anyone can read it: it is already written and only appears to be starting. Second, “always already” conveys a sense of the continuous present both in the poem (in the second stanza) and the world (third stanza). The poet can tell us where the poem is set, but the “when” is problematic. Of course, the “where” is also problematic, as the place, Goodrington Beach, is being recollected rather than described in a hypothetical present in this memory poem. The conditional opening of the poem (“If I didn’t dislike / mentioning works of art / I could say . . .”) creates further paradox by saying that the poem will not start, although it clearly does. In effect, the poem is written under erasure: we read it in spite of itself. The poem was first collected in 1977, which seems a little early for direct influence from Derrida. Certainly it shows an affinity for Derrida’s decentering of self and language, and for his concepts of erasure and the “always already” given nature of meaning.

A distrust of language as a means of delivering the real can be found everywhere in recent poetry and criticism. We could say that the wide and sudden acceptance of works like Derrida’s *Of Grammatology* by so many reveals a common uneasiness about the reliability of language. The only honest work may be the one that admits that it is unprepared to deliver reality, like Fisher’s “A Poem to Be Watched”:

Coming into the world
unprepared

and being then always —
in honour of that
birth and to stay
close to it —
under-provided

and driven to exhibit
over and over again
unpreparedness

habitually
unready to be caught
born

(182)

In one sense, such a poem is the only authentic one, and therefore worth watching. In another sense, it is to be watched out of suspicion, either because it can subvert normal attitudes toward poetry as a reliable art, or because it is, after all, a poem and *all* poems are untrustworthy. This one, at least, admits that it cannot deliver presence: it is always unready to deliver the real and, under-provided, lacks the resources to do so. Indeed, it hardly comes into being at all: it is “unready to be caught / born.” The Cretan is not lying so much as he is warning us that he cannot tell the truth.

Fisher clearly does not want to be one of Nietzsche's poets who lie too much. One of the strongest uses of the locutions like “this poem” or “the poem” comes in “It is Writing” (111-12).

Because it could do it well
the poem wants to glorify suffering.
I mistrust it.
I mistrust the poem in its hour of success,
a thing capable of being
tempted by ethics into the wonderful.

Such scruples are frequently encountered in the poetry of Geoffrey Hill. Fisher makes it clear in his interview with Rasula and Erwin that he does not aim at making simple moral points: “If your image is capable of being moralized, in this country particularly, it will be. The moral will be screwed out of it. I deplore this: it's a

simplifying tendency" (16). Easy moralizing is a cheap route to the sublime: it plays on stock response. Once in a while Fisher does let himself be tempted into the ethical, as in his response to the glorification of suicide in discussions of confessional poetry. In "Occasional Poem 7.1.72" (99) he denies that poetry is a "death train," and he concludes, playing on the term "confessional," that "[t]here are courts / where nobody ought to testify." Other somewhat occasional poems include a satire on the publishing industry ("The Making of the Book" 69-70) and an acidly ironic defense of the humanity of literary critics, "Critics Can Bleed" (87).

But most of Fisher's poems about poetry are concerned with the studio rather than the marketplace. He probes into the limitations of language. In "The Only Image" (113) he examines the nature of metaphor. As John Ash points out, the poem is a "wry comment on the absolute arbitrariness and wilfulness of imagination" (49). It deserves quoting in full:

Salts work their way
to the outside of a plant pot
and dry white.

This encrustation
is the only image.
The rest —
the entire winter, if there's winter —
comes as a variable that shifts
in any part, or vanishes.

I can
compare what I like to the salts,
to the pot, if there's a pot,
to the winter if there's a winter.

The salts I can compare
to anything there is.
Anything.

Anything may be compared to anything else: Fisher is postmodern in his implication that metaphor is therefore questionable. The circumstances are irrelevant (it can be winter or summer, there can be a plant pot or no pot), and the ingenious writer can make

any comparison desired, which makes the metaphor as suspect as the empirical self. Metaphor, which Aristotle saw as the true mark of genius, becomes meaningless. Fisher uses metaphor, but his mind is more at home with metonymy, with the brilliantly realized sensory particular.

In "A Poem Not a Picture" (112), a prose poem which appears on the page before "The Only Image" in *Poems 1955-1987*, that precision with detail is manifest:

On a ground remarkable for lack of character, sweeps of direction form.

It's not possible to determine whether they rise from the ground's qualities or are marked on to it. Or whether, if the first, the lines suck the ground's force up, or are its delegates; or if the second, whether the imposed marks mobilize or defeat it; or both, in all cases.

Out of a scratch ontology the sweeps of direction form, and, as if having direction, produce, at wide intervals, the events.

These are wiry nodes made up of small intersecting planes as if rendered by hatching, and having a vapid, played-out look. But they are the nearest the field has to intense features. Each has a little patch of red.

The poem immediately suggests Monet's 1873 "A Field of Poppies" and conveys the dynamisms of an impressionist painting. At the same time, its title cancels out the suggestion — places it under erasure — by reminding us that the medium of a poem is verbal, not visual. A poem can and cannot deliver a picture, Fisher tells us. In "The Lesson in Composition," he referred to art that "talks of its own processes," and "A Poem Not a Picture" does this for painting as well as poetry by concerning itself with the processes of the picture rather than with its subject matter. The painting is and is not a field of flowers. The poem may be perpetually unready to be born, but it arrives anyway. He has favorite strategies appropriate for the constant struggle to distinguish facts from opinions. One is to remind the reader of the multiple perspectives available on any scene or event. A related strategy is to describe the subject through a frame, either one given in experience or created by the

observing mind. "In the Black Country" (106) describes the view, or more precisely, the multiple views, of Dudley from the castle keep: "one town excited / by plural perspectives / into four or five landscapes of opportunity." And with these views, we are told, goes "a selection of skies." A similar idea is expressed in "Wonders of Obligation," a long collage poem in which the poet defines some of his typical interests and obsessions. At one point he evokes

As many skies as you can look at
stretched in a second
the manifest
of more forms than anyone could see

and it alters
every second you watch it,
bulking and smearing the inks
around landlocked light-harbours

At such a moment, the viewer can lean back, look at the heavens, and "[c]hoose this sky. / It is / a chosen sky" (157). Fisher's many poems in sequences remind us by their form that reality is various: there is no simple, single narrative frame. The collage techniques of *City* and "Wonders of Obligation" have the same effect.

The poems that use a framing strategy are abundant and reveal important aspects of Fisher's thinking. "If I Didn't," a poem touched on earlier, looks at a remembered scene at Goodrington Sands in terms of "the looking down / between the moving frames." Frames remind us that a view is partial, a perspective among perspectives. The frame may be a given, created by a door, a window or a picture frame. In the last section of "The Red and the Black" (151-54), the poet meditates on a picture of a galantine in a picture frame and creates a brilliant contrast between the "inert" black and white frame and the "vehement energies perceived in the red and green" (meat and parsley) texture of the food. The photograph is described in terms that echo William Carlos Williams's "The Yachts": there are references to the bow wave and at the end "the event passes over." Fisher suggests by the allusions that even an apparently static scene can be as tumultuous as a stormy day if the perceiving mind looks at it acutely enough.

Fisher most often deals with deliberate acts of framing, the mind selecting one view from many, choosing one sky, or, as in section 14 of "The Diversions," deciding to move a potted plant:

Sliding the tongue-leaved
crassula arborescens
 smartly in its pot and saucer
 from one end of the windowsill
 right down to the other

alters the framed view, much
 as a louvred shutter would.

All my life I've been left-handed.

(136)

In "New Diversions," the frame is given by the four windows of a room which "idly take pictures of the weather / over my shoulder or / out of the corner of my eye, then / play them long after" (174). In a delightful poem entitled "3rd November 1976" (143-44), Fisher turns the accidental framing action of a window into a comment on art and bureaucracy. As twenty individuals struggle to make sense out of the principles of the Arts Council of Great Britain, a window turns life into art. Outside the plate glass window, three "performance artists" are working on the lawn with rakes and rods. Then,

One of our number is abducted
 into the picture. A sculptor innocent of bureaucracy
 raises his fine head to speak out;
 and the window and its world frame him.
 He is made clear.

First the window turns the scene outside into a work of art with three accidental performers, then it turns a sculptor whose head (coincidentally) is esthetically pleasing into a work of art as well. The discussion may never be made clear, but the sculptor is. The boundary between art and world is blurred.

In "Report on August" (61-62), the speaker sitting in a window and observing becomes a kind of frame himself as he speaks of

the work I do filling days
 so that they seem one day
 a firm framework, made
 of the window where I sit
 (or lie, slumped, feet on the desk,
 waved to by passers-by
 like a paraplegic)
 a window-shaped guise of myself
 that holds what few events come round
 like slides, and in what seems
 capricious sequence.

And in "Poet's Message," a comment on didacticism in poetry, he suggests that his stance is to be a frame for what he observes:

What sort of a message —
 what sort of man
 comes in a message?

I would
 get into a message if I could
 and come complete
 to where I can see
 what's across the park:
 and leave my own position
 empty for you in its frame.

(116)

As John Ash points out, the reader of this poem is expected to take part in the framing activity: "The reader must figure as an active participant, not as a passive receiver of messages: he must occupy the position left empty for him within the frame of the poem . . ." (41). Participation is one of Ihab Hassan's rubrics for postmodernism (43). Fisher's work abounds with framing situations, not all of which can be discussed here. An early set of his prose poems was called "Stopped Frames and Set Pieces" (33-39). It appeared first in *The Cut Pages* along with a number of improvisations that often deal with explicit or implicit frames.

To conceive of the poet as an elusive figure functioning as a point of view (or choice of viewpoints) may appear to make the author seem neutral, detached, but in fact he remains responsible for everything he selects. Fishers adds an occasional personal touch that reminds us that the poem is not written by the language, although it becomes part of the literary system. "Wonders of Obligation" expresses a contemporary sense of the centrality of *langue* without denying the significance of *parole*:

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

(156)

It is a sense of responsibility that makes him sometimes write poems with messages, like the satires on confessional poetry and literary politics. He feels a responsibility to "witness and make conclusions," as he says in "The Lesson in Composition." Most often he exercises this responsibility without being overtly didactic, and without muddling facts with opinions. This activity of an empirical self that the poet calls into question generates some fruitful tensions, especially when the medium is also doubted, tested. His testimony offers "nothing but the truth," as he sees it, rather than "the whole truth."

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