Allen Fisher : reading 'Mummers’ Strut'
Thurston, S

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In 1995, Allen Fisher published a poem entitled ‘Mummers’ Strut’ in an issue of the magazine West Coast Line,[1] accompanied by a statement of poetics. The poem is organised into twenty-seven short numbered sections, mostly in couplets, ranging from two to twenty lines in length. The predominant impression is of a fragmented discourse that is hard to read as constructing a consistent speaking voice of a narrator on a single theme, and yet the poem offers numerous, more subtle, continuities throughout. The division into sections emphasises the fragmented nature of the text but also suggests areas of local coherency that can be compared across the whole. The principle technique that Fisher employs in this and other works is a form of collage; combining materials taken from other texts, often altering them in the process (a technique Fisher calls re-narration). This altering of the quotations from other texts amounts to what Fisher calls a ‘subversion of collage form’ (WN, p. 110). These elements are in turn juxtaposed with Fisher’s own self-generated material. Throughout his long poetic sequence Gravity as a consequence of shape, of which ‘Mummers’ Strut’ is a part, Fisher provides lists of resources he has used in the construction of his poems, usually located at the end of a book, like a bibliography. What is particularly notable about ‘Mummers’ Strut’ is that, unlike most of Fisher’s output, it includes endnotes which precisely indicate the origins of each part of the poem’s fabric. This provides a rare opportunity for an exact comparison of the materials Fisher has drawn on and their final appearance in the text of the poem. It is hoped that such a comparison will suggest ways in which Fisher’s hypercomplex work can be understood and appreciated as literary art.

In the West Coast Line statement, Fisher offers a description of a compositional procedure that is divided into three stages: research, selection and presentation. Fisher’s description of the research stage divides his sources for ‘Mummers’ Strut’ into six sources of discussion on ‘the human condition’ and works concerned with ‘aesthetics and architectural order’ (WN, p. 109). The former category contains the work of rock-musician Kurt Cobain, the ‘pseudo-clinical and case study’ research of Helmuth Plessner, William Blake’s notebooks, William Cowper’s ‘Ode to Peace’ and Peter Kropotkin’s political writings (WN, p. 109). The latter category includes Cicero on oratory and aesthetics, Pliny on painting, M. Quatremère de Quincy on aesthetics, and works on architecture by Vitruvius, Hegel, Eugene-Emmanuel Viollet-Le-Duc, Gottfried Semper and Heinrich Tessenow. Fisher subsumes the remainder of his sources as ‘culminating’ in one of Leonardo Da Vinci’s notebooks and Dante’s The Divine Comedy, although references are also made to Anthony Kenny’s work on Wittgenstein and the work of Hugo von Hofmannsthal on aesthetics.

The selection stage of Fisher’s procedure involves choosing from this range of research data, and the presentation stage involves deciding how the words generated during the research and selection stages are actually laid out on the page with ‘stanzas broken into fragments indicated by line-breaks’ (WN, p. 110). Fisher actually offers his own reading of the first section of the poem in order to illustrate the stage of selection. The section of the poem is quoted here for comparison:
A technician turns the radio to
drown screams from neighbours

When the hungry come for food
the dog barks until they go

The connection fraught
with stray wires

Before this begins and now
it is bleeding and now the barking

drowns the screams and the
hungry have gone.

(\textit{MS}, p. 28)

Fisher’s commentary on this extract is as follows:

The reader is immediately referred to ‘a technician’ and a description of an activity ‘turns the radio...’ The second part of the stanza abruptly adds an observation that may or may not apply to the same space and/or time – the ambiguity of this abrupt addition is both rhymed and commented upon in the third two-line couple of stanza one, ‘The connection fraught / with stray wires’. That is, the connection between the first couple and second couple is fraught, and the radio rhymes with stray wires rhymes back again onto screams. The connection is then confirmed in the fourth, ‘Before this begins and now’, which apparently immediately connects by narrative sentence with the fifth part, ‘drowns the screams’ – referring back to part one and ‘the / hungry have gone’ referring to part two. Thus the selective procedure is first a choice generated by the wish to rhyme, such as in stanza two where ‘rock / it’ matches ‘rocket’, but is also a matter of using the research to simulate an incident-set, which is then re-narrated by an ‘as if this were happening’ voice.

(\textit{WN}, p. 110)

This rather clinical account is interesting because it focuses only on the patterns of connection and disconnection in the text without attempting to say what effect this might have on the reader’s experience of the text. Fisher does not appear to want to anticipate a reader’s interpretation of the significance of this patterning nor describe his own as a reader of his own work and therefore does little more than state technical particulars. The poem itself offers a condensed figure for this poetics, ‘The connection fraught | with stray wires’, which Fisher describes as both ‘rhyming’[2] with and commenting upon the previous lines. Thus what is on one level a metatextual ‘response’ to an abrupt juxtaposition, is, on another level, another juxtaposition \textit{and} another connection: a fraught connection is still a connection.

Fisher’s notion of ‘simulat[ing] an incident-set’ has one foot in the writings of Jean
Baudrillard and the other in the work of the Situationist International.[3] In Baudrillard’s essay ‘Simulacra and Simulations’, simulation replaces the notion of representation in the light of a view of contemporary life as having lost any distinction between the real and the imaginary. Fisher, does not appear to be emphasising such a view of contemporary life but rather uses simulation to emphasise a means of representation that is not simply directed at an object in the world, but which itself is an object in the world, implying a complex orientation towards form that Fisher’s use of collage indicates. Situationism, in the works of writers such as Debord and Vaneigem, offers the terms situation and détournement as most useful for understanding Fisher’s poetics of the incident-set. In Debord’s ‘Toward a Situationist International’ he writes:

Our central idea is that of the construction of situations, that is to say, the concrete construction of momentary ambiances of life and their transformation into a superior passional quality.[5]

The idea of constructing situations, or transforming the situations of everyday life into something more radically engaging, represents an aim the Situationists attempted to achieve through the technique of détournement. Debord describes détournement as ‘the reuse of preexisting artistic elements in a new ensemble’[6] and adds:

The two fundamental laws of détournement are the loss of importance of each détourned autonomous element – which may go as far as to lose its original sense completely – and at the same time the organization of another meaningful ensemble that confers on each element its new scope and effect.[7]

Such a definition exactly describes the poetics of collage and re-narration active in Fisher’s work. In an interview I conducted with Fisher, his explanation of the concept of the incident-set implicated both the construction of situations and the idea of détournement. Fisher said:

Rather than confront the burden that you’re experiencing as a daily social-political norm internally, instead of internalising it, the Situationist view would be to just turn it back on itself and make the situation for yourself. That’s a very crude summary, but effectively what that leads to saying is that, if I’m researching in lots of little areas, many of which might be to do with troubled ecologies or something of that kind – let’s take that as an example – it’s quite possible to arrive at a position where you can say the way to deal with this complexity of problems is to situate it here, to actually make an incident out of these understandings, even though the incident hasn’t necessarily occurred, but it has now, here it is. So it’s like making the poem itself an incident in a sense.[8]

The connection with Situationism lies in Fisher’s notion of ‘making the situation for yourself’ by turning (or détourning) it ‘back on itself’. The incident set is a way for Fisher of dealing with a ‘complexity of problems’ by situating it and making ‘an incident out of these understandings’. The idea of the poem itself as an incident echoes the notion of simulation, since the poem, rather than attempting to represent this complexity of problems, in fact attempts to enact the complexity by means of techniques such as collage and détournement, thus emphasising its objective status in the world against a subordinated, representational relationship to the world. The re-narration of an
incident set by an ‘as if this were happening’ voice indicates the role of a constructed voice in creating various effects of continuity within the text, which is, in fact, the product of a number of different discourses. This voice is, however, by no means straightforwardly identifiable.

To return to the opening section of the poem with some of these notions in mind, two situations are described; one in which a technician appears to ignore his or her screaming neighbours and another in which, when hungry people approach somewhere – possibly the technician’s house – for food, a dog barks at them until they go. The phrase ‘it is bleeding’ in the fourth stanza suggests that the dog is bleeding, which might explain why it is now the barking which drowns the screams even though the hungry have gone. The section seems to be concerned with human suffering – from violence or hunger – as dependent on the responsibility of others, and also leading to the suffering of animals. The incident-set, or situation in a Situationist sense, that is simulated here has the feel of a self-contained moral allegory which is rearticulated towards the end of the poem as section 25:

25

Technician turns the radio to
drown screams from neighbours

when the hungry come for food

(MS, p. 36)

Here the technician appears not as a technician but as ‘Technician’, another of the many appearances of technicians in the poem which will be considered later. In this situation the appearance of the hungry could now be the cause of the neighbours’ screams, suggesting a possible development of the situation in section 1.

Whilst such paraphrase is important in determining the themes of the poem, it should be read against the poem’s détourned or collaged form. Although the first section is not annotated, and therefore cannot be read off against its sources, the fact that the third couplet informs the reader that the connection between the first two stanzas is problematic (‘fraught | with stray wires’) suggests a poetics of collage and juxtaposition in constructing this section. Much of the poem as a whole presents resistances to an easily paraphrasable content, whilst also conveying themes to the reader, and the main means of this resistance is the use of collage/détournement.

The collage form of the poem is made dramatically obvious in section 2 of the poem which uses fragments of the lyric for the song ‘Negative Creep’ written by Kurt Cobain, the singer-songwriter of Seattle rock band Nirvana, from the 1989 Bleach L.P.:

2

This is out of our range
This is out of our range

This is out of our range

.....
This is getting to be
This is getting to be

This is getting to be
.....

I’m a Negative Creep
I’m a Negative Creep

I’m a Negative Creep
and I’m stoned

(MS, p. 28)

This is re-narration, wherein Cobain’s lyrics are collaged and détourned into a new context, his use of the first person pronoun becoming that of an undetermined voice in the poem. Although organised into couplets the lines strongly suggest the structure and rhythm of a rock song. Whilst the repetitions of the lines exactly follow the second verse of the original song, at two points Fisher has elided two phrases: ‘and it’s crude’ and ‘like drone’[9] respectively. This demonstrates how re-narration subverts collage form, by altering the source that has been collaged. This allows one to speculate on why Fisher elided these phrases, although it is possible that, if Fisher simply heard the song, perhaps on the radio, he was only using his memory of the lyrics in the poem. The first line, as a complete sentence, appears as a collective voice recognising a state of limitation. Whereas the printed lyrics denote repetition by adding a ‘x3’ at the end of the line, Fisher repeats each line in total and orders them into couplet fashion, with the ellipses standing in for one line. This has the effect of generating a striking pattern on the page and, within the section’s figure of sound, the elisions also anticipate the full-line that is supplied after the third repetition of ‘I’m a Negative Creep’; that is ‘and I’m stoned’. Whilst the repetition plays up the musical insistency of the lines, it also creates a tone of reiterative despair.

There are also subtle plays here in the indeterminacy of what the word ‘this’ refers to. It seems paradoxical to suggest that ‘this’ – implying the proximity of something – is ‘out of our range’. The opening line of the original song also uses the word ‘this’ in the line ‘This is out of our reach’,[10] suggesting ‘this’ might be referring to the song itself. This might be considered to rhyme with the use of ‘this’ in the first section of the poem, in the line ‘Before this begins and now’ where ‘this’ might be read as referring to the poem. To suggest that the song is out of one’s range suggests that it might be hard for one to sing it in key, whilst that it is ‘out of our reach’ suggests the more general meaning of ‘out of our range’: that something is beyond one’s ability to achieve or comprehend. The elided phrase ‘and it’s crude’ as a further comment on the limitation, might have been considered by Fisher to overstate the point here, although the elided line itself in a way enacts limitation.

Turning to the next set of repeated lines in the poem of ‘This is getting to be’, the lack of a qualifying adjective gives a different role to the ellipses. Again, the original lyric suggests a limitation in that the lack of range is beginning to sound monotonous, ‘like drone’, although, without this phrase in the poem, the lines hang uncompleted, or as somehow simply emphasising
their own ostensive existence: they are getting to be, in order to be. Alternatively, this can also be read as a limitation, as the line fails to be qualified, its range limited. At any rate this progression creates a greater variety of tone than if the elided phrases were included, as they would be read as referring to the same problem. The final lines introduce a first person pronoun, which balances the ‘This is getting to be’ line between the assertion of a collective situation and an individual situation.

The assertion of a view of an identity as a ‘Negative Creep’ (emphasised by capitalisation) who is ‘stoned’ is another abrupt change in tone, although the limitation suggested in the opening lines and the ambiguous assertion in the middle of the section contributes to a theme of difficulty, or the facing of problems, which gains its most direct expression in the assertion of an I who calls itself a ‘Negative Creep’. Of course, the pathos of these lines could be read as descending into bathos with the frankness of the assertion ‘I’m stoned’, and yet the exclusion of the phrases ‘and it’s crude’ and ‘like drone’ actually creates a more serious tone than the original song, which, after registering its sense of limitation, switches to a more celebratory and nihilistic ‘Fuck! Yeah! Drone! Stoned!’.[11] Therefore, Fisher’s re-narration of these lines appears to be emphasising their sense of difficulty and limitation. As Fisher suggested in the above-mentioned interview, Cobain is standing for a ‘complexity of problems’,.[12] alluding to the singer’s suicide in 1994. Thus the inclusion of fragments of his lyric becomes another incident set of the human condition: Cobain’s suffering and/or the suffering of the alienated voice re-narrated in the poem is metonymically connected to the suffering of others.

Section 7 contains the lines:

This is getting to me
This is getting to me

This is getting to me
.....

I just wanna take off
I just wanna take off

I just wanna take off
.....

(MS, p. 30-31)

Here re-narration has developed a stage further, the ambiguous line now transformed to form a complete sentence by the exchanging of ‘be’ for ‘me’, which nevertheless remains within the theme of difficult problems which are ‘getting to’, i.e. becoming unbearable for, the voice. The lines ‘I just wanna take off’ however appear nowhere in the original song, and yet they are presented in the same format and follow the same rhythm and diction of the other lines. This is perhaps the extremity of re-narration that has become a kind of ventriloquism, the collage process giving way to an actual miming of the source in a similar style. The effect of these lines is to declare a need for escape, as if the situation has now become completely intolerable.
To return to the second section, the lines from Cobain’s lyric are then followed by a sequence of lines that link with aspects of the voice of the first section. The lines are as follows:

Sometimes it works
and sometimes it doesn’t

rock
it

begin another grasp
from the inside

rocket

(MS, p. 29)

The voice here seems again to comment on the poem underway, and the risks involved in, for example, quoting rock lyrics, that is, sometimes this technique works, sometimes it doesn’t – reminding the reader of ‘The connection fraught | with stray wires’. The phrase ‘rock | it’ can be read as referring to the rock lyrics quoted but also suggests a possible imperative ‘to rock’ the poem underway, that is, to give it some of the reckless abandonment and strong rhythms associated with rock music. Consequently, there is a possibility of renewal and development in the suggestion ‘begin another grasp | from the inside’: to approach the writing of the poem from another angle, perhaps this time from the inside of the poet’s consciousness and experience rather than from those sources he or she finds outside him or herself. This also makes a link with the ‘Before this begins and now’ in section 1. The word ‘rocket’ as it rhymes on ‘rock | it’ seems a potential figure for this new beginning, perhaps one with qualities of speed and power, although it might also have destructive capabilities as well as explorative ones. It also links back to the Cobain line ‘This is out of our range’ and links forward to ‘I just wanna take off’.

These reflections seem taken up again immediately in the following section which opens: ‘So much so difficult to take in’ (MS, p. 29). This is perhaps a reflection on the number of discourses which the voice feels implicated in, and obliged to face, suggesting the strategy of beginning again ‘from the inside’.

As Fisher explained in the interview, the notebook of William Blake is part of the ‘schema’ of Gravity as a consequence of shape.[13] According to Fisher, although he does not specify this exactly, there is an annotated way of relating each notebook page to each page of the Gravity project so that Fisher knows which notebook page he is to consider when writing a particular poem. In some cases the notebook is actually quoted from and in others it doesn’t appear at all. In ‘Mummers’ Strut’, sections 6 and 7 include re-narrated lines from Blake’s notebook of 1808-1811, in section 7 leading to the further re-narration of the Cobain lyrics. The original entry in Blake is a bizarre re-narration itself of Aesop’s fable about a dog, who, whilst swimming across a river (or looking into a river) with a bone in his mouth, notices his reflection in the water, and, taking the reflection to be another dog, with another, even juicier, bone, snaps at the image and in so doing loses his one and only bone to the bottom of the river. The moral is thus
something along the lines of ‘be thankful for what you’ve got’ or a warning against coveting one’s neighbours’ possessions. Blake’s version is as follows:

pp. 60-61 To Venetian Artists

That God is colouring Newton does shew,
And the devil is a Black outline, all of us know.
Perhaps this little Fable &c.

[on next page]
Perhaps this little Fable may make us merry:
A dog went over the water without a wherry;
A bone which he had stolen he had in his mouth;
He cared not whether the wind was north or south.
As he swam he saw the reflection of the bone.
‘This is quite Perfection, [here’s two for one! what a brilliant
tone! del.] one Generalizing Tone!
‘Outline! There’s no outline! There’s no such thing!
‘All is Chiaro Scuro, Poco Pen, [& del.] it’s all colouring.’
[Then he snap’d & del.]
Snap, Snap! he has lost shadow and substance too.
He had them both before: now how do ye do?
‘A great deal better than I was before.
‘[I’ve tasted shadow & del.]
‘Those who taste colouring love it more and more.’[14]

The argument that Blake is expressing here needs some contextualising as it continues a long debate, in his notebooks and in his annotations to Sir Joshua Reynolds’ Discourses, about contemporary painting and science, including his attacks on the Venetian school of artists. In Blake’s argument, the quality of outline in painting is privileged over the diffuse and homogenised colouration he sees in painters like Rubens and Rembrandt. He links such artists to a ‘generalizing’ tendency (see the above quotation ‘Generalizing Tone’) which he also criticises heavily. Furthermore, his annotations to Reynolds also include attacks on the new science of Newton, Bacon and Locke, whose experimental empiricism he sees as inimical to the innate capacity for vision and inspiration that he believes is the true source of art.

To read Blake’s fable in the context of these arguments is to become aware of the irony of his comments that ‘God is colouring Newton does shew, | And the devil is a Black outline’. Blake links the general culture’s privileging of colouration with Newton’s (absolutist) view of the universe and God, whilst casting his own privileged outline in the role of the Devil – a characteristic Blakean reversal akin to those enacted in ‘The Marriage of Heaven and Hell’. Indeed, elsewhere in the notebook, Blake links the perception of outline to madness, although the tone is also ironic and quite possibly self-referential: ‘Madmen see outlines and therefore they draw them’. [15] At any rate, it is quite clear that the fable is used to critique the privileging of colouration: in the reflection, the mirror of art, the dog sees and admires ‘one Generalizing Tone!’
that links the two bones together, in spite of their crucial dissimilarity. The dog further perceives that there is ‘no outline! There’s no such thing! | All is Chiaro Scuro, Poco Pen, it’s all colouring’. Chiaro-scuro (‘half-revealed’) is a term in painting referring to the treatment of light and shade – the use of which by the Venetian painters was severely criticized by Blake in the annotations. Blake’s use of the term ‘Poco pen’ is no less critical and is glossed by Geoffrey Keynes’ note on another passage from the notebook entitled ‘Public Address’, where the term appears as ‘Poco-Pui’d’. Keynes links this spelling to the use under consideration ‘formerly read as Poco-pen’d’ (explaining Fisher’s variant quotation of it, from Erdman’s edition of the notebook), arguing that a correction of Piu for Pen is acceptable and that Poco-Piu’d is a conjunction of two Italian words meaning a Little More, or, in this context, ‘overdone’.[16]

As the fable dictates, the dog’s enrapture with the reflected bone, standing in for a coloured vision of the world in art, leads to his loss of both ‘shadow and substance’, which, in spite of his excessive interest in the shadow, he possessed before. The final irony however is that, instead of bemoaning his loss and folly, the dog is actually so smitten with his deluded tasting of colour that he loves it ‘more and more’. Thus Blake suggests that a similar taste for colour and shadow in artists is a delusion at the expense of a knowledge of particular outline and substance.

This debate over conflicting modes of representation and the philosophical implications of one’s commitment to one over the other is reduced in Fisher’s text to the following excerpts:

6

Outline.  
There’s no outline

There’s no such thing  
All is Chiaro Scuro Poco Pend and Colouring

7

A dog went over  
the water without a wherry

A bone which he had stolen  
he had in his mouth

As he swam  
he saw the reflection
Reading this re-narration of Blake in the poem in section 6, the assertion of ‘Outline’ followed by ‘There’s no outline | There’s no such thing’ may be an argument about the usefulness of the concept of outline to the poetics of the poem. Thus, it may be a critique of the poem’s succession of juxtapositions as leading to a diffuse, homogenous texture; suggesting that all that is possible in such a complex negotiation with discourses in transition is to achieve a kind of chiaro-scuro, a half-revealed, partially-penned situation – there are no hard outlines to be seen or copied. Such a reading would link to the passages already identified which consider the short-comings and difficulties of the poem; the fraught connections, the ‘Sometimes it works | and sometimes it doesn’t’ and ‘So much so difficult to take in’.

In section 7 the re-narration continues by retelling the story of the dog (Fisher now re-narrating Blake re-narrating Aesop) setting out on the river without a ‘wherry’; a ‘wherry’ being a light shallow rowing-boat or a large light barge (OED), although possibly this puns on ‘worry’ also. The dog also reminds us of the one that appeared in section 1. The story breaks off at the point that the dog sees its reflection, at almost the point where section 6’s text begins in Blake’s text. Instead of the negotiation with the nature of the reflection and whether it is something that should be ignored or recognised, and ‘possessed’ only if one is prepared, or foolish enough, to lose one’s bone – such possibilities are juxtaposed with the development of the alienated (and ironically reflective) voice of section 2, which here articulates: ‘This is getting to me’ and ‘I just wanna take off’. At this point the jump from one re-narration to another suggests a juxtaposition of voices. It is as if the weight and importance of these arguments raised by the re-narrated Blake are just too difficult for the next voice to cope with, because the arguments function as a major critique of the whole discourse underway. This amounts to yet another subversion of the collage form whereby the fragments taken from such diverse sources, separated by nearly two hundred years, are re-narrated and then juxtaposed in such a way as to suggest an argument between different positions, or a reaction to an argument – therefore creating an incident-set.

Section 10 contains the densest set of re-narrated quotations from various authors in the poem and brings into focus the research cluster of aesthetics and architectural order. The first three lines are:

10

Climate no longer an obstacle
In civilised societies technicians are rich

A long story of robbery

The lines derive from the opening pages of the first chapter of Peter Kropotkin’s *The Conquest of Bread*,[17] which begins with a description of the power of the contemporary means of production before developing an analysis of it based on anarchist principles. Kropotkin describes with a certain awe the fact that
on the wide prairies of America each hundred men, with the aid of powerful machinery, can produce in a few months enough wheat to maintain ten thousand people for a whole year. […] Climate is no longer an obstacle. When the sun fails, man replaces it by artificial heat. […] In our civilised societies we are rich.[18]

Whilst the first quotation from Kropotkin is quoted as the original, ‘Climate no longer an obstacle’, the second quotation is re-narrated to identify ‘technicians’ rather than ‘us’ as the rich in ‘civilised societies’, which has also changed from ‘our civilised societies’ (my emphasis) as Kropotkin has it. This is the second, but not the last, appearance of the word technician, or of some variant of it, in the poem. The re-narration of Kropotkin here provides a harsher analysis of the situation. Kropotkin himself goes on to ask ‘Why then are the many poor?’[19] and answers:

It is because all that is necessary for production – the land, the mines, the highways, machinery, food, shelter, education, knowledge – have been seized by the few in the course of that long story of robbery.[20]

In his re-narration, Fisher makes a direct link between the technicians and the technology which has been seized, going right to the heart of Kropotkin’s argument. The reappearance of the technician, who in the first section of the poem appeared socially irresponsible, now appears implicated as responsible for a ‘long story of robbery’. Nevertheless, the fact that the term technician is one that is more readily equated with the position of a worker implies an ambiguity about this situation. It might be that it is the technicians as workers, particularly in a (truly) ‘civilised’ society, who are the wealthy, and they have been robbed. Alternatively, it is also possible that it is the technicians who are ironically robbing their own class of its productions. This critique of the position of the technician is echoed in the work of Michel de Certeau.[21] At any rate, the re-narration of these lines in the poem continues to generate an incident-set that is concerned with the causes of human suffering. The next five lines are:

Wisdom taken from eloquence

Wisdom without eloquence
Without exception

perfection and finish
are unnatural

(MS, p. 31)

These lines are taken from two passages in Cicero’s De Inventione,[22] the first of which is:

For my own part, after long thought, I have been held by reason itself to hold this opinion first and foremost, that wisdom without eloquence does too little for the good of states, but that eloquence without wisdom is generally highly disadvantageous and is never helpful.[23]
Cicero’s book on rhetoric is concerned with the implications of oratory for civic life and therefore a connection with Kropotkin’s analysis of civilised society is readable in this leap between discourses, as well as the relevance of the poetics of rhetoric for the practising writer. Cicero expresses the view that in public-speaking, wisdom which is not eloquently expressed does little good and eloquent expression without wisdom is never helpful. Fisher re-figures this distinction in the poem to set up a parallelism between the lines which both begin with the word ‘wisdom’. By asserting ‘Wisdom taken from eloquence’ Fisher echoes the sense of robbery in the previous line but ambiguously expresses the first and/or second part of Cicero’s argument, given that wisdom ‘taken from’ eloquence may leave either quality by itself. ‘Taken from’ is also able to suggest that wisdom can be gained from eloquence. The following line ‘Wisdom without eloquence’ is a less ambiguous statement but would seem to bear an unstable relation to the previous, in that it may or may not be read as reiterating or contrasting with either sense of the previous statement, or contrasting with the suggestion of deriving wisdom from eloquence. The effect of this is to throw into question whether wisdom and eloquence can actually be separated as straightforwardly as Cicero seems to suggest, implying that the means of expression may not be so easily distinguished from its contents. To put this in terms which may be relevant to Fisher’s poetics, it is clear in the collage and re-narration technique that forms and contents are always implicated by each other and one without the other is impossible.

The parallelism set up in these lines prepares for the next phrase ‘Without exception’, which both qualifies the previous statement (suggesting wisdom without eloquence is unexceptional) and leads into the next; ‘perfection and finish | are unnatural’. In fact, these lines derive from a much later passage in Cicero which comes toward the end of Cicero’s description of the story of the painter Zeuxis. Zeuxis was such a renowned artist that the citizens of Croton wished him to paint their temple of Juno. Zeuxis decided that he would produce a painting of Helen and asked the citizens to find the most beautiful women of the city to act as models. The women were assembled and selected, and Zeuxis chose five of them. His reason for this was, as Cicero describes:

He did not think all the qualities which he sought to combine in a portrayal of beauty could be found in one person, because in no single case has Nature made anything perfect and finished in every part.[24]

The last part of this passage is re-narrated in the poem as ‘Without exception | perfection and finish | are unnatural’, this variation seeming more for the purposes of parallelism and economy than refiguring meaning. To return to the Kropotkin, if there has been a long story of robbery, this may be attributable to situations in which leaders’ eloquence without wisdom and wisdom without eloquence have had dire implications for the State. Nevertheless, the juxtaposition with the idea that nature is never capable of perfection is perhaps a way of rescuing the situation – although wisdom may persist without eloquence and vice-versa, perhaps this is the natural state of things, or at least one which may not be so disastrous. Alternatively, the lines may suggest that the perfection and finish of eloquence in public speaking is unnatural and therefore one should seek, or at least not attempt to hide from, an account of events that may be imperfect and less polished. Thus the previous lines may be advocating wisdom without eloquence, or wisdom ‘taken from’ eloquence for this reason – to avoid the ‘finish’ of an eloquent account of events, which may also pun on the notion of completeness, suggesting that completion is unattainable. This can be connected with Fisher’s own quite deliberate avoidance of finish or perfection in the myriad
jumps and gaps of his collage. The re-narration processes of the poem also resist any sense of a decorous rhetorical style, as they are the construction of many voices pasted together and written on, over and through, rather than being readable as the voice of a single speaking subject.

The next four lines are:

Three lines on a panel
an exchange between two Technicians

competes sequester’d derision
completes aesthetic decision

(MS, p. 32)

In the chapter from Pliny’s Natural History[25] to which the first two lines refer, Pliny also tells the story of Zeuxis told by Cicero above and describes the famous painting competition between Zeuxis and Parrhasius. Pliny then goes on to describe Parrhasius’ achievements, which included winning the palm in the drawing of outlines – an interesting connection back to Blake. Fisher’s ‘Three lines on a panel | an exchange between two Technicians’ refers to Pliny’s telling of the story of the painters Protogenes and Apelles. Apelles went to visit Protogenes and, on finding him absent, drew a very fine line on a blank canvas in Protogenes’ studio to show he had been there. When Protogenes returned, he recognised Apelles’ work and drew a still finer line on top of Apelles’ line. Apelles returned and added a third line which was so fine as to leave no more room for any further line. Protogenes decided to keep the panel to be admired as it was. As Pliny writes, the canvas ‘looked like a blank space, and by that very fact attracted attention and was more esteemed than every masterpiece’: [26] a case of how an ‘unfinished’ work can be admired.

In Fisher’s re-narration of this story, Protogenes and Apelles have become technicians – adding another layer to the identity of the technicians in general in the poem as well as alluding to the Greek word for art techné, from which technician is derived. In his Natural History, Pliny tells us that the great painters of the time were often very wealthy – possibly the rich technicians of the second line of the section. The next two rhyming lines: ‘competes sequester’d derision | completes aesthetic decision’ although not identifiable as a re-narration of Pliny seem to refer in the first instance to the competition between the two painters. The phrase ‘sequester’d derision’ links to a quotation from William Cowper’s poem ‘Ode to Peace’ in section 9: ‘dewy mead and sequester’d shed’ (MS, p. 31), although it might also suggest the way in which the competition or exchange proceeds in isolation: each painter making their mark separately, and, although the competition seems good-natured, with a certain amount of derision for the other’s skill. Fisher rhymes this statement however with ‘completes aesthetic decision’. This might refer to the competition creating an occasion for the construction of lines as an aesthetic performance in itself or to the panel becoming regarded as a ‘completed’ aesthetic object although the lines on its largely blank surface are barely visible. The lines of course might also be read as the lines of a poem, so that the idea of an exchange of technicians on a panel might also become a figure for the processes of collage and re-narration, incorporating multiple voices into the work.

The competition between technicians appears as a theme of the rest of the poem too, which describes the actions of a ‘competing Technician’ (MS, p. 33) who becomes ‘This second Technician’ (MS, p. 33) contrasted with ‘The first Technician’ (MS, p. 33), although, unsurprisingly, the difference between the two is not clearly defined, encouraging the reader to
perceive this duality as two sets of qualities of the persona, held in relation but not necessarily opposing, although ‘competing’. It is at this point in the poem that another persona, The Burglar, appears as the sender of a postcard which quotes terms from Vitruvius’ On Architecture:[27]

The Burglar’s postcard reads:
*taxis, diathesis, economia*

(*MS*, p. 32)

These terms derive from Vitruvius’ exposition of his basic principles of architecture:

Now architecture consists of Order, which in Greek is called *taxis*, and of Arrangement, which the Greeks name *diathesis*, and of Proportion and Symmetry and Decor and Distribution which in Greek is called *oeconomia*. [28]

As another reference to classical poetics, alongside Cicero and Pliny, these terms seem to contrast with the earlier notions of perfection and finish being unnatural. However, the fact that this information arrives on a postcard from The Burglar, who surely seems implicated in the long story of robbery, might suggest that this information is to be treated with caution. As the poem continues, it suggests, in fact, how the postcard is read:

It is read as combining form into order
with a comprehension of flavours

in the best place
understand sub-atomic and cosmic time-space

For the Technician this will provide
strength, utility and grace

(*MS*, p. 32)

That the postcard is read as ‘combining form into order’ suggests that *taxis* (order) and form are being distinguished. Therefore, if form can be disorderly, in the way that the poem itself seems to have proceeded so far, then order is perhaps now being considered as an aesthetic option, although qualified by a ‘comprehension of flavours’, which might suggest that order must allow for the individual qualities or flavours of the materials to be appreciated, as is possible in a poetics of juxtaposition.

The next couplet contains a statement that can be related to Fisher’s concerns in an essay entitled ‘The Poetics of the Complexity Manifold’, where he states that an artist’s understanding of quantum-field theory will affect their experience of gravity, drawing and reading.[29] This exchange of scale might be equivalent to a desire (‘in the best place’) to understand and relate the sub-atomic and the cosmic. The line ‘in the best place’ however, might also be referring to Vitruvius’ criteria for the optimum positioning of a building.[30] From Vitruvius’ concerns about the local availability of building materials and the avoidance of certain other kinds of conditions such as marshy ground, Fisher updates such knowledge to a consideration of the fabric of space-
time, both on the quantum and cosmic scale. This suggests that the positioning of buildings can be considered within much larger, and much smaller, contexts than Vitruvius may have been interested in. The reversal of the more usual ‘space-time’ to ‘time-space’ sets up an end-rhyme with both ‘place’ and ‘grace’ neatly linking two terms for spatiality with the very different quality of grace. The idea of the cosmic is also taken up in later lines that feature the ‘cosmic torus’ (MS, p. 32), a ‘cosmos | expressed by a knot’ (MS, p. 33) and references to ‘the stars’ (MS, p. 37). The final couplet of the section directly quotes from Vitruvius’ general propositions about the siting of public buildings:

The assignment of public buildings […] should be so carried out that account is taken of strength, utility, grace. Account will be taken of strength when the foundations are carried down to the solid ground […] of utility, when the sites are arranged without mistake […] of grace, when the appearance of the work shall be pleasing and elegant, and the scale of the constituent parts is justly calculated for symmetry.[31]

At this point in the poem it is difficult to determine exactly what ‘this’ in the line ‘for the Technician this will provide’ refers to. It may be the three terms on the postcard, which may have been sent by the Burglar to the Technician, or the understanding of quantum and cosmic space-time, or both. At any rate, ‘this’ will provide the technician with another triad of strength, utility and grace. It is the civic quality of Vitruvius’ writings, i.e. in his criteria for public buildings, that seems a possible connection back to the political considerations offered by Kropotkin and Cicero. It is unsure whether the technician will be provided with these three qualities as a person, or whether these qualities will be at the technician’s disposal for whatever work they may have underway. Vitruvius’s use of these terms to denote solid foundations and plentiful materials, efficiency of use and a pleasing appearance again might seem irresistible qualities to attribute to a poetics, although not a poetics of collage and re-narration in which perfection and finish are called into question. In spite of this the Vitruvian triad of taxis, diathesis and economia reminds one of Fisher’s three stages of research, selection and presentation. If research can be likened to collage and selection to montage,[32] then this is well reflected in the close relation between taxis ‘the balanced adjustment of details’[33] and diathesis ‘the fit assemblage of details’;[34] taxis being identified with montage and diathesis with collage. Economia would then also seem an appropriate equivalent for presentation.

Vitruvius’ terms are taken up in a different form in the next two couplets of section 11:

11

Where house is the first idea in building
a first matter of importance becomes load-bearing

this means wall, which leads to column
and a grace known as functional beauty

(MS, p. 32)

These lines are derived from G.W.F Hegel’s Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art[35] where Hegel is considering classical architecture. The elements in Hegel’s account which are re-narrated by Fisher are as follows:
If we look more closely at a house and examine its mechanical proportions [...] the first thing of importance in this connection affects load-bearing. As soon as load-bearing masses are mentioned, we generally think first [...] of a wall as the firmest and safest support [...] Greek architecture [...] employs the column as the fundamental element in the purposiveness of architecture and its beauty.[36]

One of Hegel’s main sources is Vitruvius, and the re-narration of Hegel’s writing by Fisher re-iterates the Vitruvian principles of strength, utility and grace that close section 10. The discussion has therefore continued along the lines of ordered, rational ideas about architecture, far from the poetics of the poem itself. The next three couplets however constitute the most direct statement of poetics in the poem:

In every poem of truth
The Technician demands fiction

In every resemblance to the real
technique demands incompleteness

Fiction and incompleteness constitute the art
that she imitates

(MS, p. 32)

These lines re-narrate passages from M. Quatremère de Quincy’s An Essay on the Nature, the End and the Means of Imitation in the Fine Arts[37] in which De Quincy argues that:

We have already, in analysing the constituent elements of every art, laid it down that all resemblance must necessarily be incomplete, and we shall presently, when reverting to the subject, further show that all imitative resemblance is of necessity fictious.[38]

De Quincy’s book is described by the translator as an exposition of Aristotle’s Poetics. As De Quincy explains his above argument:

Whatever qualities and properties are dependent on the especial nature of the model, material or instruments of any art, will be wanting to another whose model, material, and instruments are different. And this is what constitutes the incompleteness of every art in as far as resemblance is concerned. What constitutes the fictious character of an art is its inability to produce any other than an apparent and feigned impression of the imitable object, one which is opposed to that of the thing itself or of the absolute truth.[39]

At this point, the arguments concerning an alternative aesthetics, which originated with the re-narrated Cicero in section 10, return with full force. The valorisation of fiction and incompleteness seems an extension of the consideration of perfection and finish as unnatural. In their reversals of the prior terms (although not reversing the argument), incompleteness reads as a rhyme on finish, and fiction as a rhyme on perfection; as in De Quincy’s argument, fiction is
considered a quality short of the absolute truth. The parallelism in these lines adds to the forcefulness of this re-narration, and the fact that the demands are made, in turn, by the Technician and technique itself reflect the fact that, in De Quincy’s argument, incompleteness appears to derive from the limits of the specific art form (technique), whilst fiction derives from a failure to approach absolute truth, which may also be considered a general human failing. The identification here between the Technician and technique is reiterated and transformed when the elements of fiction and incompleteness are said to ‘constitute the art | that she imitates’. Although the verb ‘imitates’ here might be slightly problematic, in that to imitate an art might be different to practising an art whose main aim is imitation, also notable is the sudden appearance of the pronoun ‘she’, where one might have expected the technician. In reading this passage as one of the most direct statements of a poetics that celebrates simulation and collage, the switch to ‘she’ appears to suddenly situate the artist outside the established context for the discussion, perhaps metonymically relating ‘her’ to the artist Allen Fisher.

In conclusion, this reading of ‘Mummers’ Strut’ has adopted Fisher’s challenge in the West Coast Line statement to consider it as ‘exemplary of Allen Fisher’s poetics in action’ (WN, p. 110). The reading has sought to demonstrate how techniques such as collage and re-narration have been used to simulate incident-sets – where détourned elements are juxtaposed – where themes as general as ‘the human condition’ and specific as ‘aesthetics and architectural order’ have been articulated and developed.

To read Fisher’s work is to experience a complex tension between rapid juxtapositions of different materials and patterns of continuity generated through repetition and rhyme: between discontinuity and continuity. A reader must actively negotiate the jumps and continuities in order to build his or her own reading of the poem. The above reading of ‘Mummers’ Strut’ has delineated a few of these jumps and continuities in examining the description and expression of human suffering, the self-awareness of a voice who appears to be writing the poem and a complex argument about aesthetics, politics, oratory, art and architecture which does not develop logically but develops by means of juxtaposition and re-narration. The poem attempts to relate a large number of discourses without homogenising their terms into one argument from one point of view. Instead the differences are left to resonate across the gaps in the collage, and this is what allows the reader space for their own engagement.

One of the most important statements of Fisher’s poetics is contained in his long poetics essay Necessary Business, where he uses the idea of the ‘chreod’[40] to talk about consistencies, and the disruption of them, in the poetry of cris cheek, J.H. Prynne and Eric Mottram. Fisher describes how reading the work of these poets builds up an awareness of consistencies, for example of rhythm and sound patterning, which he identifies with the concept of the chreod, adapted from C.H. Waddington’s biological terminology meaning ‘necessary path’, which describes how ‘change is canalised once started in a certain direction’ (NB, p. 196). Fisher argues however that these poems ‘deliberately break or fracture’ (NB, p. 196) this path, thus deconstructing their own ‘consistent and chreodic memory’ (NB, p. 211) and that which the reader builds up during his or her reading. This fracturing ‘intuitively invents new memories’ which ‘revitalise the reader’s historical desire in production’ (NB, p. 211).

This fracturing is central to the techniques that Fisher is interested in these poets, but is also evident in Fisher’s own poetics. It can be linked to the notion of defamiliarisation, as the breaks or leaps, between, for example, a notebook entry of William Blake followed by the lyrics of Kurt Cobain, are intended to disrupt normal habits of reading and therefore to engage the reader in new ways. Fisher, however, does acknowledge the extent to which his engagement as a reader
depends both on the patterns of connectedness as well as their fracturing, otherwise the fractures would not be perceived (*NB*, p. 213). Fisher politicises his view of reading by seeing it as historically-contextualised production – rather than consumption.

The methodology of Fisher’s use of many sources in his work and the techniques he uses to juxtapose them to engage the reader, is ultimately made possible by his view of the aesthetic function of poetry, which derives, as Robert Sheppard has discussed,[41] from his reading of Jan Mukařovsky’s essay *Aesthetic Function, Norm and Value as Social Facts.*[42] As Fisher argues, many activities contain an aesthetic function, and ‘non-art activities transform into art when their aesthetic function is given prominence’ (*NB*, pp. 180-81). However, the converse of this is true in that art activities similarly cease to be art if another function predominates over the aesthetic, for example the political or informational. Therefore, where ‘poetry predominately makes political engagement possible derives from its aesthetics’, not its political function (*NB*, p. 181). The implications of this for Fisher’s use of resources in his work is that he manages to create poems, which although full of information about scientific theory, or history etc, are not involved in, to paraphrase Wittgenstein, the language-game of giving information about scientific theory, history etc.[43] Robert Sheppard has noted how Mukařovsky’s essay ‘unwittingly confirms the […] answers to Wittgenstein’s question, when Mukařovsky states: “The aesthetic function, by dominating over the informational function, has changed the very nature of the information”’.[44] As Sheppard argues, the importance of Fisher’s reading of this essay is that Mukařovsky’s work preserves the ‘arena of the aesthetic as the centre of literary life’. [45] It therefore functions for Sheppard as ‘a bulwark against theories that tend to collapse the distinction between art and life’. [46]

Poetry does not collaborate with society, but with life; its field of collaboration is predominately aesthetic, that is its main function. Whatever else I may get from a work of art, because its dominant function is aesthetic it requires my engagement to create it, to produce it. The significance I most warmly value derives from this production, its affirmation of life. (*NB*, pp. 164-65)

By determining the dominant function of poetry to be aesthetic, Fisher is able to emphasise that it therefore affirms life through its need to be produced by a reader, it requires ‘participators to consider their activities [the functions of an artwork] as Art’ (*NB*, p. 181). If poetry’s predominant function were political, it could be argued that it would not need to be read in order to gain its significance and would therefore not affirm life.

In a related passage from a later essay by Fisher entitled ‘Breaks Margin’, on the work of Ulli Freer and the painter Harry Thubron, he argues that:

The predominant function in art, the aesthetic, is concomitantly one of the functions of consciousness. Consciousness and aesthetics share the summary of their activity as patterns of connectedness, which are patterns necessary for life. They are patterns that provide the structures for ethical, moral, and social understanding and efficacy, and they change, can be changed. Loss of the renewing and changing capacity of this patterning ... amounts to a loss of significant life.[47]
Such a statement comes full circle in relating the continuities of aesthetic practices to the continuities of consciousness. Such continuities have a moral and social, therefore political, role which changes and can be changed, but Fisher emphasises that lack of change amounts to ‘loss of significant life’. Therefore change becomes an imperative. The means of change and renewal includes the breaking of chreodic patterning in order to create new connections, new memories and new ideas for active writers and readers. This practice in Fisher’s poetry indicates how Fisher’s techniques of collage and re-narration are connected to thinking about the nature of continuity and discontinuity in consciousness and art and the political implications of such thinking.

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[2] It should be noted that Fisher’s use of the term ‘rhyme’ is not restricted to the repetition of sounds but can include the repetition of ideas which may not be expressed in the same linguistic form. In the above example ‘radio’ is rhymed with ‘stray wires’ because of the old-fashioned term for radio as ‘wireless’. Less clearly Fisher suggests a further rhyme of wires with screams, perhaps purely because they are both plural nouns.


[7] Ibid., p. 29.


[10] Ibid.


[16] Ibid., p. 928.


[18] Ibid., pp. 11-12.

[19] Ibid., p. 12.


[21] Michel de Certeau explores this theme in The Practice of Everyday Life, through the notion of the ‘third man’, a kind of mediator between theory and practice who is an engineer. De Certeau argues that: ‘the “third man” haunted enlightened discourse (whether philosophical or scientific) and continues to do so today, but he has not turned out with the personality which had been hoped. The place he has been accorded (currently being slowly overtaken by that of the technocrat) is a function of the process that all through the nineteenth century on the one hand isolated artistic techniques from art itself and on the other hand “geometrised” and mathematicized these techniques’. Michel de Certeau, The Practice of Everyday Life (Berkeley and London: University of California Press, 1984), p. 69. The suggestion that the ideal third-
engineer’s place is being taken by the technocrat, and that this arises from the separation of art
from its techniques and the objectification of those techniques, suggests a connection with
Fisher’s technicians.
[22] Marcus Tullius Cicero, De Inventione, De Optima Genere Oratorum, Topica, trans. by H.M.
[23] Ibid., p. 3.
[24] Ibid., pp. 167-68.
[26] Ibid., p. 321.
[27] Vitruvius, On Architecture, trans. by Frank Granger (London and New York: Heinemann and
G.P. Putnam’s Sons, 1931).
[28] Ibid., p. 25.
115-18, p. 115.
[31] Ibid., p.35.
[32] Gregory L. Ulmer distinguishes collage/montage in the following way: “Collage” is the
transfer of materials from one context to another, and “montage” is the “dissemination” of these
borrowings through the new setting.’ Gregory L. Ulmer, ‘The Object of Post-Criticism’, in
84.
[33] Vitruvius, p. 25.
[34] Ibid., p. 25.
[37] M. Quatremère de Quincy, An Essay on the Nature, the End and the Means of Imitation in
[38] Ibid., p. 82.
[39] Ibid., pp. 113-14.
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thinking that results’, in Symbiosis, no. 1 vol. 3 (1999), 77-92 (pp. 86-87).
[42] s: Charles Bernstein, Allen Fisher and “the poetic thinking that results”, in Symbiosis, no. 1
vol. 3 (1999), 77-92 (pp. 86-87).
mention should be made of the […] ideas from Jan Mukařovský?’ (p. 167).
[44] Wittgenstein wrote: ‘Do not forget […] that a poem, even though it is composed in the
language of information is not used in the language game of giving information’. Quoted in
Veronica Forrest-Thomson, Poetic Artifice: a Theory of Twentieth-Century Poetry (Manchester:
[46] Ibid., p. 87.
[47] Ibid., p. 87.