



University of  
**Salford**  
MANCHESTER

“For which we haven’t yet a satisfactory name” : the birth of Linguistically Innovative Poetry and the practice of a collective poetics in Robert Sheppard’s Pages and Floating Capital

Thurston, SD

<b>Title</b>	“For which we haven’t yet a satisfactory name” : the birth of Linguistically Innovative Poetry and the practice of a collective poetics in Robert Sheppard’s Pages and Floating Capital
<b>Authors</b>	Thurston, SD
<b>Publication title</b>	The Robert Sheppard Companion
<b>Publisher</b>	Shearsman Books
<b>Type</b>	Book Section
<b>USIR URL</b>	This version is available at: <a href="http://usir.salford.ac.uk/id/eprint/48250/">http://usir.salford.ac.uk/id/eprint/48250/</a>
<b>Published Date</b>	2019

USIR is a digital collection of the research output of the University of Salford. Where copyright permits, full text material held in the repository is made freely available online and can be read, downloaded and copied for non-commercial private study or research purposes. Please check the manuscript for any further copyright restrictions.

For more information, including our policy and submission procedure, please contact the Repository Team at: [library-research@salford.ac.uk](mailto:library-research@salford.ac.uk).

“For which we haven’t yet a satisfactory name”: The Birth of Linguistically Innovative Poetry and the Practice of a Collective Poetics in Robert Sheppard’s *Pages* and *Floating Capital*.

In July 1987 Robert Sheppard published the first issue of a little magazine called *Pages*. The magazine was a humble affair, comprised of four folded A4 sheets to give eight printed pages per issue. Typescript material was pasted into camera ready copy format and photocopied.<sup>1</sup> The editorial opens:

Anybody concerned for a viable poetry in Britain must be depressed by the persistence of the Movement Orthodoxy from the 1950s into the late 80s; by its consolidation of power for a bleak future; by its neutralising assimilation of the surfaces of modernism; by its annexation of the increasingly fashionable term postmodernism; and by its ignorance – real or affected – of much of the work of the British Poetry Revival.<sup>2</sup>

This is very much a downbeat tone on which to begin a new enterprise. The editorial goes on to reflect on the loss of a ‘power base’ at the Poetry Society ten years earlier, the contribution of universities to this problem, and the relative merits of post-modernism as a viable term for the new work beginning to emerge. Sheppard permits some hopes for the yet unpublished *The New British Poetry* (1988), asking whether the reviewers of Orthodoxy will ‘oppose, assimilate, annex or ignore these important publications’<sup>3</sup>. The editorial concludes:

It is not the spirit of optimism that fuels this project, but a knowledge that the one necessary thing to do is to keep working, to set up processes that may have unforeseeable results. *Pages* is probably not going to affect this situation greatly.<sup>4</sup>

The use of the word ‘necessary’ here alludes to Allen Fisher’s conception of poetry as ‘necessary business’ (mentioned elsewhere in the editorial) and, if not overtly optimistic, Sheppard concedes that each issue of his new magazine might be ‘potentially exciting’ and that ‘my own depression is assuaged by my enthusiasm at receiving the first few manuscripts through the post’.<sup>5</sup> Sheppard is hoping for ‘active engagement’ that will lead to ‘cumulative understanding’ – and it is important to note just how much cumulative understanding of innovative poetry and poetics has followed from this modest starting point, leading to his sustained theoretical, critical and creative work during the subsequent thirty years.

In January 1988, Sheppard published an editorial in the seventh issue of *Pages* which establishes a number of key themes that not only constitute the first clear theorisation of what later became known as Linguistically Innovative Poetry, but also the distinctive attitude of Sheppard towards the role of community in driving aesthetic development, hinted at in the earlier editorial. Under

---

<sup>1</sup> This mode of production is visible in digital scans from the original copy that Joseph Frances (a PhD candidate researching innovative poetry and poetics at the University of Salford since 2017) has digitised for publication on the *Jacket2* website: <https://jacket2.org/reissues/pages>. Frances’ interview with Sheppard about *Pages* is also on the site: <https://jacket2.org/commentary/pages>.

<sup>2</sup> Robert Sheppard, ‘Prescript’, *Pages*, 1-8 (July 1987), 1-2 (p. 1).

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 2.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 2.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 2.

the pointedly punning title of 'Beyond Revival', Sheppard reflects on Blake Morrison's article 'Young Poets in the 1970s'<sup>6</sup> noting Morrison's grudging acknowledgement and dismissal of two important strands of the British Poetry Revival.<sup>7</sup> Sheppard alludes to his previous reflections that the latter group's withdrawal from the activities of the *Poetry Society* in a mass walkout in 1977 had led to the 'loss of an effective power-base'.<sup>8</sup> For Sheppard, this marked-off the poets who emerged under Mottram's influence (he names Allen Fisher, Ken Edwards and Bill Griffiths) from those that followed who 'had to operate in fragmentation and incoherence'.<sup>9</sup> Sheppard reflects: 'I have sensed the difference myself, since as a publisher, I've experienced both periods; as a poet, only the latter',<sup>10</sup> thus establishing the context for his own intervention with *Pages* (alongside other enterprises such as Ken Edwards' *Reality Studios* magazine and Gilbert Adair's Subvoicive poetry reading series) and the recognition of a new poetry emerging under these more difficult conditions.<sup>11</sup> Sheppard articulates the shared 'operational axioms' of this group of writers as follows:

that poetry must extend the inherited paradigms of 'poetry'; that this can be accomplished by delaying a reader's process of naturalisation; by using new forms of poetic artifice and formalist techniques to defamiliarise the dominant reality principle, in order to operate a critique of it; and that it must use indeterminacy and discontinuity as major devices of this politics of form. The reader thus becomes an active co-producer of these writers' texts, and subjectivity becomes a question of linguistic position, not of self-expression.<sup>12 13</sup>

This is a crucial statement which reappeared in the jointly written 'Afterword' of *Floating Capital: new poets from London*,<sup>14</sup> the anthology that Sheppard edited with poet Adrian Clarke in 1991, and which constitutes the first comprehensive public articulation of the poetics of Linguistically Innovative Poetry. In the *Pages* editorial, Sheppard acknowledges Allen Fisher as an important mentor figure for this younger generation of writers and describes how he deliberately launched

---

<sup>6</sup> In Peter Jones and Michael Schmidt, eds. *British Poetry since 1970: a critical survey* (Manchester: Carcanet, 1980).

<sup>7</sup> Eric Mottram coined the term British Poetry Revival for the period 1960-1975: the two strands referred to by Morrison were the group of poets associated with J.H. Prynne at the University of Cambridge and those associated with Eric Mottram at the University of London. See Mottram, 'The British Poetry Revival, 1960-75' in *New British Poetries: The Scope of the Possible*, ed. by Robert Hampson and Peter Barry (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1993), pp. 15-50.

<sup>8</sup> Robert Sheppard, 'Beyond Revival', *Pages*, 49-56 (January 1988), 49-51, (p. 49).

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 49.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 49.

<sup>11</sup> Later in the editorial Sheppard draws on the list of poets published or forthcoming in *Pages* as a way of delineating this group operating in 'fragmentation and incoherence': 'Gilbert Adair, Adrian Clarke, Virginia Firnberg (the youngest, featured in this issue), Harry Gilonis, Peter Middleton, Maggie O'Sullivan, Valerie Panucci and Hazel Smith. Outside London, associated *Pages* contributors include Kelvin Corcoran, Alan Halsey and Andrew Lawson. This list is, of course, not exhaustive, and is – I emphasize – drawn from the contents list of this publishing project.' *Pages* 49-56, p. 50.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 50.

<sup>13</sup> In his later work *The Poetry of Saying: British Poetry and its Discontents 1950-2000* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2005), Sheppard usefully glosses poet and critic Veronica Forrest-Thomson's concept of delayed/suspended naturalisation (from her important work *Poetic Artifice* (Manchester: Manchester University press, 1978. A new edition, edited by Gareth Farmer was published by Shearsman Books in 2017) as follows: 'her theory elevates artifice over poetry's referential function but offers a model of reading that presents naturalisation – the reading of the text as a statement about the external world – as a process that is best suspended to encourage concentration upon the poem's artifice', (p. 67).

<sup>14</sup> Adrian Clarke and Robert Sheppard, 'Afterword', in *Floating Capital: New Poets from London*, ed. by Adrian Clarke and Robert Sheppard (Elmwood Connecticut: Potes and Poets Press Inc, 1991), pp. 121-125.

*Pages* with extracts from Fisher's work *Gravity as a Consequence of Shape*.<sup>15</sup> Sheppard outlines a poetics of community that might sustain these developments:

It's not enough that these similarities be enumerated, these names listed; it is also crucial for such poets to recognise and use their shared poetics, and to begin to exchange their insights and discoveries, to foster debate. [...] To become visible to others, the poets must first see each other clearly. The poetry also demands accompanying documentation, poetics and criticism (something lacking in *A Various Art*). The significance, but not the strength, of much artistic practice is demarcated by the coherence of the discourses that surround it.<sup>16 17</sup>

Here Sheppard reveals his underlying commitment to the multiple forms of a 'shared poetics', later defining poetics as 'the product of the process of reflection upon writings, and upon the act of writing, gathering from the past and from others, and casting into the future, speculatively'.<sup>18</sup> Although he often uses the term to refer to the (non-academic) documents that writers produce about their practice (see below), he seems to include, at least potentially, critical writing here as part of the desired documentation. His distinction between significance and strength in regard to the potential fate of emerging artistic practices shows him recognising the value of a coherent discourse around this poetry: an approach which North American Language Poetry pursued much more effectively than its British peers,<sup>19</sup> although one which Sheppard has sought to emulate throughout his ongoing career whether as a reviewer, academic researcher, editor, or producer of manifold manifesti, statements, and pedagogical interventions. *Pages* itself later became a creative and critical project with a series of single author publications which included creative work followed by critical and creative responses and bibliographical information.<sup>20</sup> More recently Sheppard has reinvented *Pages* as an Internet weblog (or 'blogzine' as he refers to it) which, although its primary focus is on his own developing creative critical and poetics writing, also showcases and links to the work of many other contemporary innovative poets. Sheppard's European Union of Imaginary Authors (EUOIA) project, a collaboration with 23 contemporary

---

<sup>15</sup> A complete version of which was published by Reality Street in 2016.

<sup>16</sup> *Pages* 49-56, p. 50-1.

<sup>17</sup> *A Various Art* was an anthology edited by Andrew Crozier and Tim Longville first published by Carcanet in 1987 and then under the Paladin imprint of Grafton books in 1990. It counts one woman (Veronica Forrest-Thomson) amongst its 17 contributors.

<sup>18</sup> See Robert Sheppard. *The Poetry of Saying: British Poetry and its Discontents, 1950-2000* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2005), pp. 195-196.

<sup>19</sup> Some of the major poetics works of Language poetry include: Charles Bernstein, *Content's Dream: Essays 1975-1984* (Los Angeles: Sun and Moon, 1986) and *A Poetics* (Cambridge MA and London: Harvard University Press, 1992); Bruce Andrews, *Paradise and Method: Poetics and Praxis* (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1996); Ron Silliman, *The New Sentence* (New York: Roof Books, 1987); Steve McCaffery, *North of Intention: Critical Writings 1973-1986* (New York: Roof Books; Toronto: Nightwood Editions, 1986); Bob Perelman, *The Marginalization of Poetry: Language Writing and Literary History* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1996) and Barrett Watten, *Total Syntax* (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1985). Some of the key poetics publications of Linguistically Innovative poetry are: Allen Fisher, *Necessary Business* (London: Spanner, 1985); Robert Sheppard, *Far Language: Poetics and Linguistically Innovative Poetry 1978-1997* (Exeter: Stride Publications, 1999); John Wilkinson, 'Imperfect Pitch' in *Poets on Writing: Britain 1970-1991*, ed. by Denise Riley (London: Macmillan, 1992), pp. 154-72; Adrian Clarke, *Millennial Shades and Three Papers* (London: Writers Forum, 1998). The number and scale of the British contributions are far outweighed by their American counterparts.

<sup>20</sup> Series Two of *Pages* was subtitled 'resources for the linguistically innovative poetries' and ran from April 1994 to May 1998. The 12 issues covered the work of Adrian Clarke, Ulli Freer, Gilbert Adair, Eric Mottram, Hazel Smith, John Wilkinson, cris cheek, Peter Middleton, Rod Mengham, Virginia Firnberg, Ken Edwards, Alan Halsey and Maggie O'Sullivan.

poets to write the fictional translated works of 28 imagined European authors, albeit in quite a different fashion, also demonstrates his ongoing engagement in collective modes of creative activity.<sup>21</sup>

In the ninth issue of *Pages* dated March 1988, Sheppard published four statements of responses to his January editorial of that year under the heading ‘Theoretical Practice’:

Responses to my January editorial, ‘Beyond Revival’, have been varied: from cryptic approval to lengthy qualification; from admonishments from an older writer for suggesting artistic change without the evidence, to a plea from a younger writer to start a literary movement!<sup>22</sup>

These remarks, and the publication of these statements (alongside two of Sheppard’s own parodic poems in the pseudonymous guise of Wayne Pratt which act like mini-manifesti in themselves) illustrate Sheppard’s openness to collective thinking on poetics. He approvingly cites Ken Edwards’ review of *In the American Tree* (1986), the first book-length anthology of Language Poetry edited by Ron Silliman, in which Edwards speculates on the significance of Language Poetry for contemporary British writing, remarking: ‘I have a sense of a poetry as yet largely unwritten, one which will move the terms of agreement on from the great burst of energy of the early 70s’<sup>23</sup>. Sheppard sees 1988 as a ‘crucial point’, on the eve of the publication by Paladin of selected poems by Lee Harwood and Tom Raworth and the appearance of the anthology *The New British Poetry* from the same publisher.<sup>24</sup> While Sheppard acknowledges that it is time for a ‘proper literary critical assessment of the British Poetry Revival’, he is more concerned for the generation of an ‘active poetics to begin to help delineate a poetry that is “as yet largely unwritten”, to encourage writers to take up its challenges’<sup>25</sup>. As suggested above, Sheppard’s commitment to the discourse of poetics is a key aspect of his critical and theoretical thought. He defines it here, almost incidentally, as ‘not a literary critical activity, not a theory of poetry, but [...] a necessary sorting out of what Ken [Edwards] calls “the terms of agreement” between the writers’.<sup>26</sup> Indeed, this issue of *Pages* is an ideal example of poetics in action, containing as it does short position statements by the poets Adrian Clarke, Gilbert Adair, Andrew Lawson and Virginia Firnberg: taken together, they reveal the becoming of a collective poetics.

The focus of the debates in *Pages* is summarised by Sheppard through the question: ‘how can a radical poetics engage a radical politics while either negotiating, by-passing or eradicating the language of representation?’<sup>27</sup> (*Pages* 65-72, 65) and they are worth addressing in turn.

Adrian Clarke reflects that the new poetry is united by ‘the example of Modernism in its most pertinent radical thrusts – Russian Futurism and Dada to I novissimi, OULIPO and

---

<sup>21</sup> See Robert Sheppard et al, *Twitters for a Lark: Poetry of the European Union of Imaginary Authors* (Bristol: Shearsman, 2017).

<sup>22</sup> Robert Sheppard, ‘Theoretical Practice’, *Pages*, 65-72 (March 1988), 65-66, (p. 65).

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 65.

<sup>24</sup> Lee’s Harwood, *Crossing the Frozen River: Selected Poems* (1988); Tom Raworth, *Tottering State: Selected Poems 1963-1987* (1988); *The New British Poetry 1968-1988*, edited by Gillian Allnutt, Fred D’Aguir, Ken Edwards and Eric Mottram (1988).

<sup>25</sup> *Pages* 65-72, p. 66.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 66.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 65.

L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E' arguing that this cannot be responded to in terms of continuing a tradition, but only by 'adapting and inventing strategies for a similarly "critical" art – in the sense defined by Lyotard [...] [that can] release the demystified potential of language'<sup>28</sup>. Gilbert Adair's statement starts by describing how the cultural conditions for this new work developed during the years of Thatcher's premiership:

Fewer opportunities to look at and buy books; decreasing publishing opportunities; wide gaps in continuations of public (i.e. small-magazine) discussions; a one-way 'dialogue' with oppositions that largely expunge us from more public discussions. [...] The context is [...] the high level of conflict accepted by 80s government along with hegemony of consumerist and instrumentalist views of art inside competitive stimulations.<sup>29</sup>

It is in this context that Adair coins the term 'linguistically innovative poetry', immediately followed by the remark in parentheses: '(for which we haven't yet a satisfactory name).'<sup>30</sup> Given the currency of this term extended until the first few years of the twenty-first century, with occasional revivals, this almost accidental naming is resonant not least because of Adair's critique of some of Sheppard's 'operational axioms' for innovative writing. For Sheppard's 'delaying naturalization' Adair advocates '*eradicating* it' and also takes Sheppard to task on his role for discontinuity as a means to resist the 'dominant reality principle'.<sup>31</sup> As an alternative formulation to the latter problem, Adair also draws on Jean-François Lyotard, in this case Lyotard's focus on the "false abstract universality" of exchange (via all-translating money), and work relations', Adair commenting that this constitutes 'a grating between experience and universality that any number of discourses fall over themselves to bridge and exonerate'<sup>32</sup>. For Adair, the dominant reality principle cannot be equated with "realistic" discourse', noting how even advertisements are 'ample in "discontinuities"', and therefore that radical poetry, in its 'cutting across formations categorised as discrete' is only discontinuous 'if it makes *other* relations; or else it is mimesis of actual informational chaos'.<sup>33</sup> Andrew Lawson recognises a similar problem when he argues that:

To privilege what a work 'does and incites' over its meaning may be indeterminate in a reactionary sense in that it reproduces capitalism's imposed trajectory through consumer images and the bizarre farrago of an imaginary history.<sup>35</sup>

As with Adair's call to Sheppard to recognise 'the varied positivities of the forms being made in the 80s', Lawson also seeks a less overtly negative poetics when he suggests that

---

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., p. 67.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., p. 68.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., p. 68.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., p. 68.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., p. 68.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., p. 68.

<sup>34</sup> This interest in making other relations is developed by Sheppard in a later statement 'Linking the Unlinkable' in Sheppard, *Far Language: Poetics and Linguistically Innovative Poetry 1978-1997* (Exeter: Stride, 1999), pp. 54-55, in which his discussion of Lyotard's 'Discussions, or phrasing "after Auschwitz"' leads to a theorising of 'creative linkage' as a form of juxtaposition that is both disruptive but also emphasises new continuities: 'the links so melted into the materials that they disappear' (p. 55). This approach for Sheppard contains an ethical imperative to link to the components of the daily catastrophe, along with all its ecstasies, that we live' (p. 54) – ultimately a resolve to 'link the unlinkable' (p. 55). See discussion below.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., p. 69.

the way through might be to try and articulate these crippling multiple determinations (economic, sexual, political) on the body of the socius and the self [...] and pose against them not indeterminacy [...] but nodal points of coherence that *can* be grasped and worked through.<sup>36</sup>

Virginia Firnberg, the last of the four respondents, registers her discomfort in having her poetic work placed in the issue in which Sheppard's editorial appeared:

By virtually setting precedents (which, incidentally, it took me half a day to understand, and I would never say to myself – I ‘must extend the inherited paradigms of “poetry”’..... by delaying a reader's process of naturalisation, by using new formalist techniques to defamiliarize the dominant reality principle, in order to operate a critique of it; and that it must use indeterminacy and discontinuity as major devices of this politics of form.) – and placing me straight after them, I felt rather strange and full of CONTRADICTIONARY THOUGHTS.<sup>37</sup>

Firnberg's response to Sheppard's position-setting is to attempt to resist the act of taking a position itself: ‘as soon as a name is given to the essence of poetry and a marquee is erected with flags and speeches you lose the essence’.<sup>38</sup> As a composer and performer as well as a writer, Firnberg posits a poetics of space as an alternative way of thinking about radical writing: ‘surely the most exciting interaction of all time is that between space and what crosses it, and that slight perception of what space might be creates a tension which is the third element that makes a poem’.<sup>39</sup> Nevertheless, despite her initial resistance to the practice of poetics as exemplified by Sheppard's approach, Firnberg discloses a ‘series of things that I might say to myself, but never would actually’ which seem compatible with Sheppard's ‘critical’ poetics and even Adair's interest in making ‘*other* relations’, for example in the statement: ‘find new juxtapositions – to wake the word up – thereby constructing an independent language with its own particular parameters’.<sup>40</sup>

This picture reveals a complex state of affairs – with respondents registering their critical disagreement with the details of Sheppard's argument as well as with the discourse in which it is presented. Nevertheless, Sheppard's decision to reproduce these statements in their entirety reflects a tolerance and openness to these different points of view, and a complex curatorial role, as he reflects in the editorial to this issue:

One correspondent suggested that *Pages* become the mouthpiece of this poetry and its poetics, but I feel that *Pages* should be a variable forum, however useful its frequency is to the immediate dissemination of ideas (but there's unfortunately only space enough for assertion, not analysis). Hopefully, another journal might see itself as an anthology of this writing. It is my business to encourage and present, and to maintain a sense of community; to exclude, say, post-Objectivist writers is unproductive. Indeed, their elected agnosticism

---

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., p. 69.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., p. 70.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., p. 70.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., p. 70.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., p. 70.

can be instructive. Tony Baker, as a ‘student of Bunting’, complains that I ‘give too much weight to the various critical apparatuses that follow in the wake of “artistic practice”’.<sup>41</sup>

These remarks immediately precede Sheppard’s definition of poetics quoted earlier as ‘as not a literary critical activity’ although interestingly his regret that there is not space enough for analysis of ideas suggests, to a degree, a commitment to critical, if not explicitly literary-critical, practice. Nevertheless, here Sheppard provides a useful reflection on his exchange with the poet Tony Baker which reveals how he treats different points of view as instructive, thus maintaining, rather than fracturing a sense of community. Sheppard concludes the editorial by once again valorising the role of poetics in this context:

Importantly, it is time for an active poetics to begin to help delineate a poetry that is ‘as yet largely unwritten’, to encourage writers to take up its challenges, and to pay detailed attention to the little of its poetry that is already written.<sup>42</sup>

Despite Adair’s reservations about the term ‘linguistically innovative’, the above-mentioned afterword to the *Floating Capital* anthology that Sheppard co-wrote with Adrian Clarke was the first to use ‘linguistically innovative’ as a critical term. From the outset, the afterword signals the oppositional politics of the earlier statements by Sheppard, Clarke and Adair from the perspective of the early nineties:

The eighties in Britain was a time of divisive and decisively negative social measures, blatant cynical manipulation of official information, continuing support for US military interventions and a small war of our very own in the South Atlantic. If British state policy is unchanged, there has been a change in the perception of it across the media.<sup>43</sup>

This summary of the editors’ view of the years under the Thatcher government – including a reference to the Falklands War in 1982 – immediately gives way, however, to a consideration of how these circumstances and the change in perception of them influenced the production of poetic work in the period:

The suspicion that this mediation amounts to something like Baudrillard’s ‘hyperreality’ may explain some strategies in the texts we have selected for *FLOATING CAPITAL*, for example: the virtual disappearance of citation, testimony and varieties of ‘unacknowledged legislation’ in favour of a warier engagement with their materials, a politics of the sign.<sup>44</sup>

The references to citation, testimony and Shelleyan ‘unacknowledged legislation’ suggest a version of the stereotypical Modernist poem that an engagement with a postmodern theorist such as Baudrillard would displace, whilst the invocation of a ‘politics of the sign’ alludes to the poetics of Language Poetry. Indeed, the introduction to the book is provided by Bruce Andrews – the co-editor of *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* magazine with Charles Bernstein and one of the pre-eminent poets and critics of Language Poetry. As Andrews argues, the arrival of the anthology represents a ‘transatlantic communiqué, reflecting & anticipating a more attractive cross-fertilisation’ between

---

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., p. 66.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., p. 66.

<sup>43</sup> Clarke and Sheppard, ‘Afterword to *Floating Capital*’, p. 121.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., p. 121.



innovative American and British poetries, leading to a feel of ‘some of the same *barriers* being dismantled’, such as:

the assumption that radicalism is mere ‘experiment’; that the social-political claims of poetry (& its grasp of a social order in need of change) are mere embarrassments; that constructivist method & artifice should be confined to well-mannered incremental moves within a regime of stylistic niceties; that the sign system & the conventions of discourse holding the status quo together are absolute horizons rather than materials to challenge and defamiliarize.<sup>45</sup>

Andrews’ remarks resonate with some of the debates unfolding in *Pages* three years previously. He comments: ‘only a drastic adventurousness of language can articulate the crises facing poetry on *both* sides of Atlantic. Foreword as Afterword – Afterword as Kickstand. Questions – Responses’.<sup>46</sup> Following this last phrase Andrews’ introduction develops into a series of paragraphs, each opened with a single word question, followed by a sequence of responding sentences:

Radicalism? The Old is not New. Stop. Give the old engines a holiday – no more the slow, outdrawing & unfolding of continuities, exclusive traditions & necessities. Refusal rips, accepts crisp scathe page – cut-up-ish swoon experimentation Language shines through. Surprise potentiometer.<sup>47</sup>

This style of writing is very much in Andrews’ typical mode of critical response: a kind of hybrid of poetry and poetics familiar from his contributions to *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* magazine, which counterpoints the more analytical and theorised approach of Sheppard and Clarke’s afterword, although both texts share reference points and recognise the same key issues. That said, in the above passage Andrews seems to valorise a poetics of discontinuity that Sheppard and Clarke – following the earlier exchanges in *Pages* – are slightly more cautious about (see below).<sup>48</sup>

To return to Sheppard and Clarke’s afterword, they explain their decision to include the work of Bob Cobbing and Allen Fisher in a separate opening section to pay tribute to ‘their various and substantial productions before the period covered by the anthology and their importance, in a variety of ways, for many of the writers who follow’<sup>49</sup>. Whilst associating Cobbing with Dada experimentation, Sheppard and Clarke note how Allen Fisher’s major large-scale work of the eighties and nineties, *Gravity as a Consequence of Shape*, ‘both confirmed and accelerated a shift away from ideals prevalent in the 60s and 70s in favour of approaches that attend more closely to the paving slabs than to “open field” poetics’<sup>50</sup>. This rejection of ‘open field’ poetics represents the

---

<sup>45</sup> Bruce Andrews, ‘Transatlantic’, in *Floating Capital: New Poets from London*, ed. by Adrian Clarke and Robert Sheppard (Elmwood Connecticut: Potes and Poets Press Inc, 1991), pp. i-v (p. i).

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, p. ii.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, p. ii.

<sup>48</sup> In terms of the transatlantic exchange represented here it is pertinent to note Sheppard’s co-editorship of the anthology *Atlantic Drift: An Anthology of Poetry and Poetics* (Todmorden and Ormskirk: Arc Publications and Edge Hill University Press, 2017) many years later. The anthology contains many poets associated with Language Poetry (Charles Bernstein, Lyn Hejinian) and (Linguistically) Innovative Poetry (Allen Fisher, Geraldine Monk) and, although its introductions by Sheppard and Byrne are not devoted to analysing, theorising or promoting innovative poetry per se (at this point in literary history, this seems no longer necessary), Sheppard’s editorial is devoted to theorising and promoting the discourse of poetics, making a link back to his earlier preoccupations in *Pages*.

<sup>49</sup> Clarke and Sheppard, ‘Afterword to *Floating Capital*’, p. 122.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 122.

same sort of rejection as that expressed earlier by Clarke in *Pages* of the influences of poets significant for the British Poetry Revival such as Charles Olson.<sup>51</sup> Fisher was associated with the Revival at the beginning of his career and his previous large-scale work *Place* explored Olson's method in *The Maximus Poems*, although, from Sheppard and Clarke's perspective in the early nineties, the fascination with place in the seventies is described as 'deadening'.<sup>52</sup> Instead Sheppard and Clarke identify a new poetics more willing 'to deal with the materials that are readily to hand or impose themselves in the act of writing'.<sup>53</sup> Later in the afterword, they describe the 'expanded range of critical strategies in texts whose writers have relinquished claims to proprietorial control of meaning' as a less 'overtly utopian' poetics: thus registering the more negative poetics that Adair and Lawson reacted to in 1988.<sup>54</sup>

An extended passage of the afterword actually reworks Sheppard's 'Beyond Revival' editorial, and offers the most developed statement of poetics for Linguistically Innovative Poetry at the time:

The poets included hold at least some of these operational axioms in common: that poetry must extend the inherited paradigms of 'poetry'; that this can be accomplished by delaying, or even attempting to eradicate, a reader's process of naturalisation; that new forms of poetic artifice and formalist techniques should be used to defamiliarise the dominant reality principle in order to operate a critique of it; and that poetry can use indeterminacy and discontinuity to fragment and reconstitute text to make new connections so as to inaugurate fresh perceptions, not merely mime the disruption of capitalist production.<sup>55</sup>

Comparing this statement with the previous version reveals how Sheppard has incorporated not only Adair's insistence that the process of naturalisation could, at least potentially, be eradicated, but also his concerns that the use of discontinuity should not simply imitate 'informational chaos' (here rendered as the 'disruption of capitalist production') but make 'other relations' (here rendered as 'new connections'). This is a wonderfully clear illustration of Sheppard's commitment to the process of working out a collective poetics. The statement concludes with a focus on the reader's role:

The reader thus becomes an active co-producer of these writers' texts, and subjectivity becomes a question of linguistic position, not of self-expression or narration. Reading this work can be an education of activated desire, not its neutralisation by means of a passive recognition.<sup>56</sup>

These last remarks in turn utilise ideas Sheppard articulated in a previous short poetics piece called 'The Education of Desire', written for students of A-level English literature in 1988.<sup>57</sup> *Floating Capital* therefore can be seen to represent the first maturing of a poetics of Linguistically Innovative

---

<sup>51</sup> Clarke discusses the Revival poets as 'at the mercy of the inane schoolboy enthusiasm for tendentious "explanation" of Pound and Olson, the souped-up, head-free Romanticism of Ginsberg, the camp fashion-consciousness of certain New Yorkers or the less-than-fashionable (though not for lack of advocates) languid provincial neo-Romanticism of post-war England.' (*Pages* 65-72, p. 67)

<sup>52</sup> Clarke and Sheppard, 'Afterword to *Floating Capital*', p. 122.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 122.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 123.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 124.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 124.

<sup>57</sup> Reprinted in *Far Language* (1999), pp. 28-31.

Poetry: now fully distinguishing itself not only from the ‘official “new” poetry of 80s Britain’<sup>58</sup> but also from the poetics and politics of the British Poetry Revival.

Poet and critic Andrew Duncan reviewed *Floating Capital* in the year of its publication alongside Sheppard’s book *Daylight Robbery* (1990). Duncan introduces the anthology as a portrait of ‘an overlapping group of poets [that] has patrolled the routes around Writers Forum, Spanner magazine and workshops, Eric Mottram’s reading series at King’s [College London], and the Sub-Voicive readings’<sup>59</sup> during the previous fifteen years. This sociology reflects the activity of Bob Cobbing’s Writers Forum press, Allen Fisher’s Spanner magazine, and Gilbert Adair and Patricia Farrell’s Sub-Voicive reading series, which was also co-run in the mid-nineties by Sheppard, Clarke and Ulli Freer. In the course of the review, Duncan offers the term ‘Pulse’ to describe the new style in British poetry he finds in the anthology. In response to the ‘stripping down of language to noun strings’<sup>60</sup> in poets such as Paul Brown and Maggie O’Sullivan, he includes an account of the use of metrical stress in Linguistically Innovative Poetry:

The most basic insight of the group is that long constructions act to feeble the word-beat; stress, the propulsive force of poetry, is delayed and so continuously denied by the ‘long cadence’ presented by long clauses, long forms, and polysyllables. Rather than thinking of writing essays/articles and overlaying a metric pattern, one should think of absolute stress, dominating an empty space; and later hang formed words on it.<sup>61</sup>

This characterisation partly derives from the distinctive performance style, particularly of London poets associated with Linguistically Innovative Poetry, which emphasised an accentual, stress-based metre. For Duncan, this focus on the pulse of the line is political: ‘the “long cadence” of the discourse of the state and professions is replaced by Pulse, something to do with blood and breathing. Something sensuous emerges from beneath the shattered orders of learning’.<sup>62</sup> Duncan sees Pulse poetry as a ‘blast[ing] away [of] obsolete structural materials’, suggesting that one could create ‘a fake-Pulse poem by taking an existing poem and just deleting words and syllables until the bare pulse was there [...] forcibly freeing the poem of the deathly grip of social manners and refined usage’.<sup>63</sup> Pulse poetry is therefore inherently critical of the contemporary cultural alternatives which Duncan characterises as:

Blasted genres: prefab Socialism; Marxist alienation; moralizing; religion; bourgeois guardianship; soap operas about people with A-levels; wet lyricism; complacent sensiblerie; National Trust reverence poems; and all the other crap which is killing us.<sup>64</sup>

---

<sup>58</sup> Clarke and Sheppard, ‘Afterword to *Floating Capital*’, p. 124.

<sup>59</sup> Andrew Duncan, “‘Pulse strings out beat of intermittent presence’”: Robert Sheppard, *Daylight Robbery* (Stride, 1990); *Floating Capital: New Poets from London*; edited by Adrian Clarke and Robert Sheppard (Potes & Poets Press, 1991), in *fragmente*, 4 (Autumn/Winter 1991), 91-97 (p. 92).

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 93.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 93.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 93. The reference to breathing suggests a possible connection to Charles Olson’s ‘Projective Verse’ (1950). Despite the rejection of Olsonian poetics by poets associated with Linguistically Innovative Poetry, some of the central tenets of Olson’s poetics, such as the directive that ‘ONE PERCEPTION MUST IMMEDIATELY AND DIRECTLY LEAD TO A FURTHER PERCEPTION’ are nevertheless suggestive of the kinds of formal strategies employed by Sheppard, Clarke and others.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 94.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 94.

Pulse poetry, as Duncan conceives of it, is a kind of energetic, embodied poetics with an emphasis on ‘a personal energy, and word-stress comes out of the poet’s vital pulses’.<sup>65</sup> In other poetic tendencies, the personality is reduced to ‘the prison of the poem [...] a tautology’ but reappears in Pulse poetry as ‘simply a rhythm of blanks and pulses: the word-beat is the total trace of personality [...] Language as a wire connected to the muscles’.<sup>66</sup> Duncan’s vivid and enthusiastic characterisations of this writing convey the excitement this work generated in the eighties and nineties: a tense, explosive and relentless poetry in some way akin to the spirit of Punk from a decade earlier. In his review, Duncan acknowledges Allen Fisher’s importance as a founding figure for this group, **whilst noting** that his ‘approach to the beat is totally different’.<sup>67</sup> He claims to have developed ‘the whole “pulse” theory’ in response to Ulli Freer and Maggie O’Sullivan’s poetry **but acknowledges** that Freer is not in *Floating Capital* and admits that he ‘can’t date the events or name the innovators’.<sup>68</sup> Duncan’s coining of ‘Pulse poetry’ appears to have been the only serious contemporary alternative to the term Linguistically Innovative Poetry, but, despite the infelicity of the latter, it became the one most widely adopted to describe the work of these writers.

*Floating Capital* contains an extract from Sheppard’s long poem ‘Daylight Robbery’ published in the book of the same title (also reviewed by Duncan alongside the anthology).<sup>69</sup> In its sustained sequence of continuous short lines un-coordinated by punctuation and working the dynamics of continuity and discontinuity across the line break, the poem epitomises the energy and fragmentation of Duncan’s characterisation of Pulse poetry, as well as Sheppard’s own description of Linguistically Innovative poetics. Duncan describes the ‘atomistic, pulsed, fragments’ into which the poem is divided as ‘reflecting the barrage of data coming from the TV screen: along with the viewer’s fantasies and reactions’<sup>70</sup>:

Whitewashed thought  
 Flashing articulations  
 Those transparencies  
 Into the daylight modern  
 Intermittent outbursts of unique  
 Movie mind flying skating on  
 Nobody’s dream  
 This dodge into synaesthesia  
 Writing provides feet core  
 Tremble and  
 Skating on a frozen world  
 I speak rest my thoughts speak at war with  
 Video rhyme<sup>71</sup>

---

<sup>65</sup> Ibid., p. 93.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid., p. 94.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid., p. 96.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid., p. 96.

<sup>69</sup> A radically revised version of the poem was published as ‘Living Daylights’ in Sheppard’s selected poems *History or Sleep* (Bristol: Shearsman Books, 2015).

<sup>70</sup> Duncan, ‘Pulse Strings’, p. 91.

<sup>71</sup> Robert Sheppard, ‘from *Daylight Robbery*’, in Clarke and Sheppard, *Floating Capital*, pp. 105-107 (p. 105).

However, given Sheppard's awareness of the risk of discontinuity leading to an aping of the capitalist spectacle warned of by Adair, one might sound a notion of caution in following Duncan's interpretative approach in assertions such as:

the force of the form (the consistent refusal to continue any idea for more than a line) is to exclude the human personality; the poem speaks from a pre-conscious level, trapping reality before a filter reshapes it into part of the personality.<sup>72</sup>

Although the onward momentum of Sheppard's line is forceful and compelling, there is a constant interplay between the possibilities of fragmentation and continuity. Rather than the poem refusing to continue any idea for longer than a line, its phrasal units build up a series of associations so that one starts to sense an argument forming about the experience of contemporary media saturation. The 'modern / Intermittent outbursts of unique / Movie mind' emanated by television, cinema and video are critiqued as 'whitewashed' and 'skating on / Nobody's dream' whilst writing seems to provide a kind of stable instability in engaging with this 'frozen world' by providing both metrical and actual feet: 'core / Tremble and / Skating'.<sup>73</sup> If, according to Duncan, the poem excludes personality by speaking from a pre-conscious level, a narrator does nevertheless appear to articulate a clear statement of the poetics of the poem, as in the lines: 'I speak rest my thoughts speak at war with / Video rhyme,' if qualified by the irony of the interruptive phrase 'rest my thoughts' in this restless poem. If Duncan's readings initially seem broadly compatible with the politics of Sheppard's writing, the characterisation of this work as a kind of pre-conscious, instinctual and unfiltered response to reality risks underplaying the very deliberate and conscious critique of contemporary culture enacted here. The poem is haunted by images of violence at the same time as it recognises such images as manipulative and coercive:

Each story must have  
Binocular voices  
A small boy was knifed meaning from doing  
Street flaked out and puking guts  
In strings left below the audible  
Pool of blood above the visible  
Morality of the lowlife  
Invisible from the helicopter<sup>74</sup>

Here a possible news story about street violence seems coupled to a more abstract, analytical vocabulary in phrases like 'each story must have / binocular voices', 'meaning from doing', 'below the audible', 'above the visible' which feel like they might belong to the discourse of media theory. This interrupts the image of the knifed boy in the street from re-enacting its manipulative shock on the reader, instead leading to a more nuanced critique in which the narrator recognises the danger of the distancing effect of police helicopter surveillance. The poem reflects further on the poetics of its critique:

Logopoeia world in a stolen book  
Between the capital letter and the doubted word

---

<sup>72</sup> Duncan, 'Pulse Strings', p. 91-92.

<sup>73</sup> One might, just about, detect an allusion to the ice-skating scene in Wordsworth's *The Prelude* (1850) (Book One, ll. 425-463).

<sup>74</sup> Sheppard, 'from *Daylight Robbery*', p. 106.

Which is speech wind which  
Is voice image which way now<sup>75</sup>

The use of the term *logopoeia*, an ancient Greek term used most famously by Ezra Pound in his poetics to describe the effect of visual and sonic elements in poetry interacting with meaning,<sup>76</sup> is posited against a ‘stolen book’ and ‘doubted word’ and a ‘capital letter’, which all suggest a poetry aware that it too in turn becomes co-opted by the system that it rejects. This leads to a radical doubt with the implied questions: ‘which is speech [...] which / Is voice image which way now’ which tangle with the intricacies of Pound’s poetics in the references to speech and image whilst also suggesting a more general existential doubt. Later the poem recognises the cost of this activity of pitting its ‘wits against the shreds of chatter’ and critiques its own practice: ‘expressive gestures stolen from the news’.<sup>77</sup>

If at odds, to a degree, with Duncan’s account, Sheppard’s poetry is productively read back against the poetics outlined in the afterword of *Floating Capital*. The new forms of poetic artifice and formalist techniques that seek to fragment and reconstitute text to create critical ‘fresh perceptions’ are those of the phrasal poetics employed in *Daylight Robbery*, an innovation as important to Linguistically Innovative Poetry as the ‘new sentence’ was to Language Poetry. Both Sheppard and Clarke theorised a phrasal poetics in their responses to Jean-François Lyotard’s work (whose influence on the poetics of Linguistically Innovative Poetry should by now already be clear). Clarke initiated this in a paper entitled ‘Listening to the Differences’,<sup>78</sup> delivered to the first Sub-Voicive Colloquium in 1991. In keeping with Clarke’s attitude to Modernism indicated above, at the outset of his paper he rejects the proposal of the colloquium to debate poetics under the banner of the “tradition of *Make It New*”:

[*Make It New* is] a phrase that as it raises the spectre of Ezra Pound and grants it proprietorial rights over a ‘tradition’ into which we are summarily inserted excludes almost all my current concerns.<sup>79</sup>

Positing an ‘alternative modernism’ whose prerogative is a ‘radical challenge to any attempt to ground a tradition’, he finds Lyotard’s book *The Differend: Phrases in Dispute*<sup>80</sup> particularly pertinent to this end:

The way in which Lyotard attempts to subvert such totalizing concepts [tradition, the ‘New’, genre] is by a resort to the phrase, in a sense – wider than that of the grammatical unit – that is contextually defined, but the strategic significance of which is as a linguistic

<sup>75</sup> Ibid., p. 106.

<sup>76</sup> Ezra Pound, *ABC of Reading* (London: Faber and Faber, 1973), p. 63. In his scheme, Pound defines Phanopoeia as ‘throwing the object (fixed or moving) on to the visual imagination’ and Melopoeia as ‘inducing emotional correlations by sound and rhythm of the speech’. Thus, logopoeia in poetry is responsible for: ‘inducing both of the effects by stimulating the associations (intellectual or emotional) that have remained in the receiver’s consciousness in relation to the actual words or word groups employed.’

<sup>77</sup> Sheppard, ‘from *Daylight Robbery*’, p. 106.

<sup>78</sup> Adrian Clarke, ‘Listening to the Differences’ in Adrian Clarke, *Millennial Shades & Three Papers* (London: Writers Forum, 1998), unpaginated.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid., unpaginated.

<sup>80</sup> Jean-François Lyotard, *The Differend: Phrases in Dispute*, trans. by Georges Van Den Abbeele (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988). Clarke quotes from p. 11 (para. 17), p. 66 (para. 102), p. xiii (para. ‘Stakes’) and p. 181 (paras. 260, 262-63).

instance that cuts across genres and categories as it evades closure. [...] With phrases we are set adrift from narrative and logic to struggle with what they present without hope of return to safe ground: ‘for a phrase to be the last phrase, another phrase is necessary to declare this, and thus it is not the last one.’ Further, ‘That there not be a phrase is impossible. It is rather *And a phrase* is necessary. It is necessary to link. [...] The linkage of one phrase with another is problematic, and this problem is politics’.<sup>81</sup>

Thus Lyotard’s work enables Clarke to assert a politics based on a linguistic unit, in a way comparable to Language poet Ron Silliman’s account of the ‘new sentence’ as a device based on the recognition that ‘the sentence, hypotactic and complete, was and still is an index of class in society’.<sup>82</sup> For Lyotard, ‘thought, cognition, ethics, politics, history or being, depending on the case, are in play when one phrase is linked onto another.’<sup>83</sup> Although Clarke acknowledges that the term *phrase* in Lyotard is actually used in a sense wider than that of the grammatical unit, his claims for its ‘strategic significance’ are clearly creatively enabling.

Sheppard in turn was to later revisit similar remarks from Lyotard, and Clarke’s own paper, in the poetics statement ‘Linking the Unlinkable’ (see footnote 34). In Sheppard’s account he is interested in Derrida’s response to Lyotard, which reveals Derrida to be less interested in phrases than ‘in the processes of essential linkage’ which become an ‘ethical imperative’.<sup>84</sup> In the context of Derrida’s argument, the ethical imperative is connected to, as for Lyotard, the Holocaust: ‘if there is today an ethical or political question and if there is somewhere a *One must* it must link up with a *one must make links with Auschwitz*’.<sup>85</sup> Sheppard seeks a broadening of this axiom in both technical and ethical terms to conceive of practice he calls ‘creative linkage’ – a way of talking about juxtaposition and discontinuity that offsets the ‘Adornoesque negativity’ that Adair and Lawson warn of in the earlier discussions in *Pages*.<sup>86</sup> Sheppard acknowledges that his own approach is allied to Clarke’s poetics, and adds that ‘linguistically innovative writers momentarily create new “rules” for linkage, for what suits the particular “case”: the disparate materials in need of procedural linkage’.<sup>87</sup> That the underlying motivation of this approach is to ‘link the unlinkable’<sup>88</sup> provides a key into the central aspect of Sheppard’s writing which is perhaps not overtly declared in these statements of

---

<sup>81</sup> Clarke, ‘Listening to the Differences’, unpub.

<sup>82</sup> Ron Silliman, *The New Sentence* (New York: Roof, 1987), p. 79. For Silliman, the new sentence is a formal intervention which proposes that a sentence has ‘become equivalent to a line’ (p. 90). He describes the formal properties of the new sentence in the following terms:

- 1) The paragraph [rather than the stanza] organizes the sentences;
- 2) The paragraph is a unit of quantity, not logic or argument;
- 3) Sentence length [rather than the line] is a unit of measure;
- 4) Sentence structure is altered for torque, or increased polysemy/ambiguity;
- 5) Syllogistic movement is (a) limited (b) controlled;
- 6) Primary syllogistic movement is toward the paragraph as a whole, or the total work;
- 7) Secondary syllogistic movement is toward the paragraph as a whole, or the total work;
- 8) The limiting of syllogistic movement keeps the reader’s attention at or very close to the level of language,

the sentence level or below. (p. 91)

<sup>83</sup> Lyotard, *The Differend*, pp. xii-xiii.

<sup>84</sup> Robert Sheppard, ‘Linking the Unlinkable: an answer to the question “why do you do what you do?”’ in Robert Sheppard, *Far Language: Poetics and Linguistically Innovative Poetry 1978-1997* (Exeter: Stride Publications, 1999), pp. 54-55 (p. 54).

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 54.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, p.55, pp. 54-55.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 55.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 55.

poetics (except perhaps implicitly in the interest in Lyotard and Derrida's discussion of writing after the Holocaust), that is, his engagement with history and historical documents in particular.

It is perhaps surprising that the politically engaged poetics of Linguistically Innovative Poetry and Language Poetry should not overtly discuss the role of history.. However, one of Sheppard's most significant early poems 'Mesopotamia' – the final section of which is excerpted in *Floating Capital* – provides a model for innovative poetic practice which makes use of discontinuity in harness with creative linkage whilst adopting the sentence and prose paragraph in a way akin to Language Poetry, rather than the phrasal poetics illustrated above. Its originality, however, also lies in its engagement with historical documents – in this case a series of photographs which Sheppard describes in the note to the poem's later publication in *The Flashlight Sonata* (1993):

the titles derive from notes on the verso of contact prints and, in one case, an army Christmas card sent from Hugh Lopus Alway to his sister, my great aunt, Gina, during the First World War.<sup>89</sup>

In the section included in *Floating Capital*, the discontinuities that occur are also part of how the poem ethically attempts to link to the unlinkable narratives of colonial history:

#### Budhists Temple

A figure was leaning against the wall, owl eyes of the death-sport flickering at her fists, affording a view of the jumping scene. Did you suspect, stiffening in your pose, how might that blur of moving flesh have appeared on your face? Buffalo Bill stabbed by seductress, the death on London pavements. I turn the handle and the cards begin to flick, recapturing the Garden of Eden, the flies, mosquitoes and the heat.<sup>90</sup>

These evocative sentences function quite differently to the 'new sentence', generating a kind of ghostly narrativity, despite the discontinuities. In contrast to a poem like *Daylight Robbery*, which is readable as a response to a contemporary experience of society and culture, 'Mesopotamia' appears to derive meaning from the absent context of the historical images that were used in its production. In making links with the unlinkable, we are offered images of moments and events lost in time and space – ancient frescoes, Buffalo Bill, London pavements and a metonymical garden of Eden, full of insects and heat. We are also introduced here to a device that Sheppard developed later in *Empty Diaries* (1998) – the use of female narrators 'each one of whom "knows" she is narrated by a man'<sup>91</sup> in the sentence 'You step behind my eyes and enter the tunnel of her gaze'.<sup>92</sup> This section also contains a phrase which became the title of a 'strand' ('History of Sensation') in the complex architectural network of Sheppard's major work *Complete Twentieth Century Blues* (2008): 'no, that was somebody trying to locate the morning – my chest covered with flies – a history of sensation on the streets'.<sup>93</sup> This powerful conjunction of embodied experience with the narrative of history is emblematic of the overall thematic trajectory of Sheppard's work over the next twenty years.

<sup>89</sup> Robert Sheppard, *The Flashlight Sonata* (Exeter: Stride, 1993), p. 51.

<sup>90</sup> Robert Sheppard, 'from "Mesopotamia"', in Clarke and Sheppard, *Floating Capital*, p. 102.

<sup>91</sup> Robert Sheppard, *Empty Diaries* (Exeter: Stride, 1998), back cover note.

<sup>92</sup> Sheppard, 'from "Mesopotamia"', p. 102.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 102.



Sheppard's convening of spaces to develop a collective discourse of poetics, alongside his creative practice, was decisive in developing the poetics of Linguistically Innovative Poetry. The poetry discussed here represents an inventive and challenging alternative to the official verse culture of the 80s and 90s, and a sustained political critique of the Thatcher era, rooted in a shared set of practices emphasising the power of language in condensed, yet fragmentary, forms to de-familiarise perceptions and inaugurate new visions of reality, whilst, in Sheppard's case in particular, engaging with what I have called elsewhere, the nightmare intersection of history, ethics and desire. The legacy of Linguistically Innovative Poetry is considerable, with many of the writers associated with it continuing to be active as its critical reception has developed. As Linguistically Innovative Poetry has matured and broadened out from its origins, the overarching term 'linguistically innovative' has been shortened to simply 'innovative', although it has been revived recently in the subtitle of the anthology *Out of Everywhere 2: Linguistically Innovative Poetry by Women in North America and the UK*, itself a sequel to an anthology edited by Maggie O'Sullivan in 1996.<sup>94</sup> To the extent that this body of work now has an academic journal devoted to it in the form of the *Journal of British and Irish Innovative Poetry*, co-founded by Sheppard and myself in 2009, it may now also face a new challenge to resist academic institutionalisation. Sheppard's ongoing work as poet, critic, editor, educator and blogger – and his continued commitment to a collectively unfolding poetics – nevertheless continues to offer challenges to conservative modes of poetic production and reception by drawing on this complex history of radical poetic practice.

8512 words

#### WORKS CITED

Andrews, B. 'Transatlantic', in *Floating Capital: New Poets from London*, ed. by Adrian Clarke and Robert Sheppard (Elmwood Connecticut: Potes and Poets Press Inc, 1991), pp. i-v.

Clarke, A. and Sheppard, R., 'Afterword', in *Floating Capital: New Poets from London*, ed. by Adrian Clarke and Robert Sheppard (Elmwood Connecticut: Potes and Poets Press Inc, 1991), pp. 121-125.

Clarke, A., 'Listening to the Differences', in Adrian Clarke, *Millennial Shades & Three Papers* (London: Writers Forum, 1998) Duncan, A., "'Pulse strings out beat of intermittent presence': Robert Sheppard, *Daylight Robbery* (Stride, 1990); *Floating Capital: New Poets from London*; edited by Adrian Clarke and Robert Sheppard (Potes & Poets Press, 1991)', in *fragmente*, 4 (Autumn/Winter 1991), 91-97.

Lyotard, J-F., *The Differend: Phrases in Dispute*, trans. by Georges Van Den Abbeele (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988)

Pound, E., *ABC of Reading* (London: Faber and Faber, 1973) Sheppard, R., 'Prescript', *Pages*, 1-8 (July 1987), 1-2.

---

<sup>94</sup> *Out of Everywhere: Linguistically Innovative Poetry by Women in North America & the UK* (London: Reality Street Editions, 1996).

————— ‘Beyond Revival’, *Pages*, 49-56 (January 1988), 49-51.

————— ‘from *Daylight Robbery*’ in *Floating Capital: New Poets from London*, ed. by Adrian Clarke and Robert Sheppard (Elmwood Connecticut: Potes and Poets Press Inc, 1991), pp. 105-107.

————— ‘from “Mesopotamia”’ in *Floating Capital: New Poets from London*, ed. by Adrian Clarke and Robert Sheppard (Elmwood Connecticut: Potes and Poets Press Inc, 1991), p. 102.

————— ‘Linking the Unlinkable: an answer to the question “why do you do what you do?”’ in Robert Sheppard, *Far Language: Poetics and Linguistically Innovative Poetry 1978-1997* (Exeter: Stride Publications, 1999), pp. 54-55.

————— *The Flashlight Sonata* (Exeter: Stride, 1993)

————— *Empty Diaries* (Exeter: Stride, 1998)

————— *The Poetry of Saying: British Poetry and its Discontents 1950-2000* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2005) Sillman, R., *The New Sentence* (New York: Roof, 1987)