Roy Fisher's Mysticism

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Abstract

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Roy Fisher’s Mysticism

This thesis takes its cue from Roy Fisher’s comment, in 1971, that his poems are ‘to do with getting around in the mind’. This getting around, however, is not quite the simple process of ‘propositions or explorations in aesthetic ideas’, which Fisher suggests. This thesis discusses the relationship between Fisher’s poetry and the empirical reality which his poems actually do describe and engage with. The thesis suggests that this engagement is of a mystical nature, in which Fisher’s sense of linguistic play is allied to an acute awareness of instabilities in both the self and the empirical world. Such play in language and content makes Fisher’s poetry a unique site, in contemporary poetry, for his further engagement with a mystery which is ineffable. Yet, this ineffability is held and controlled by Fisher so that it does not have a theological teleology. Fisher’s poetry does not point towards a mystery which finds its manifestation and exploration in ways which are recognised within a contemporary religious framework.

The thesis is organised into four chapters. The first chapter outlines some of the history and context of Roy Fisher’s writing. It outlines the early critical reception of Fisher’s first substantial publication, City, and his publications in the nineteen sixties. It then discusses some of the interviews that Fisher has given. These interviews are placed in the context of the critical reception of Fisher’s work, during this time, that aligned Fisher with the avant-garde and ‘Linguistically-Innovative’ poetry of the period. In the second chapter, the thesis examines Fisher’s relationship with the ‘self’ in his poetry. In the light of a sense of instability perceived in the self in Fisher’s writing, the idea of the ‘mystical’ is introduced and defined. This is particularly relevant in the light of Fisher’s tussles with the empirical world. A further exploration of the ‘other’ in Fisher’s poetry is undertaken in the third chapter, which examines Fisher’s relationship with the urban, the abject and the woman. In the final chapter, Fisher’s long poem from 1986, A Furnace is discussed in the light of the foregoing, to highlight its own exploration of mysticism.

The second half of the thesis consists of a portfolio of original poetry.
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List of Roy Fisher's texts referred to in this thesis:

- *City* (Worcester: Migrant Press, 1961)
- *City II* (Worcester: Migrant Press, 1962)
- *LSI* (Tarset, Northumberland: Bloodaxe, 2005)
- *SM* (Tarset, Northumberland: Bloodaxe, 2010)

- *Then Hallucinations: City II* (Worcester: Migrant Press, 1962)
Chapter 1: Introduction

This thesis argues that Roy Fisher’s in-between status on the current British poetry scene is related to his unwillingness to ‘say’ things, and his choosing, instead, to depict unusual, even extreme states of mind and emotion. As Fisher does not have a religious context for these states, these states may be seen as having an ‘apophatic’ or negative aspect. Fisher may offer glimpses of positive directions and approaches but, usually, without offering a system or a morality. These states of mind and emotion may be seen as ‘mystical’, in that they reach towards something other than the perceived world in which corporeal beings have their existence.

If Fisher seems particularly capable of doing these things, it is because the technical range of his writing allows him to depict and address such states with a flexibility and brio that sets him apart from his peers in current British Poetry. In addition, the things that Fisher writes about vary from the aspects of the urban for which he is famous, to the arcana of French burial sites, via Elizabethan mages and Coleridge’s chamber pot.

Much is made of the ‘unstable’ self in Fisher’s writing. In part, this thesis suggests that this debate actually masks the rather self-preoccupied nature of some of Fisher’s writing. The thesis goes on to suggest that this leaves some of his writing vulnerable to criticism of its stance towards women, and Fisher’s concern with decay and by-products of urban life. This dissertation concentrates on Fisher’s earlier work: City (1961) through works of the sixties, Matrix (1970), Wonders of Obligation (1979), and A Furnace (1986). There is some reference to works later than this, particularly Texts for a film (1994) to suggest developments in themes in Fisher’s later work. However, his book-length prose poem The Ship’s Orchestra (1966) is not considered here. This is because the fictive and character-based elements in the book lie outside the concerns of this thesis.

Fisher’s unique position in British poetry is reflected in his publishing career, in which he has been published by mainstream and non-mainstream publishers. Like many poetic careers, it started off with pamphlet publication; his first, and to many his most, important publication, City, was with Michael Shayer and Gael Turnbull’s Migrant Press. Fisher has been content to publish pamphlets throughout his career. However, the creation of the publishers, Fulcrum, by Stuart Montgomery lead to Fisher’s being published in the company of other poets from the left-field of both British and American poetry, such as Basil Bunting, Tom Pickard, Ed Dorn and
Robert Duncan. Following the demise of Fulcrum in 1972, Fisher moved firstly to the more mainstream, Carcanet, 1977, and then in to Oxford University Press in 1980. Although Carcanet might be seen as having espoused avant-garde poetics with some of its titles, OUP undoubtedly did not. Following the withdrawal of the OUP poetry list in 1999, he moved to Bloodaxe, whose list, despite its publishing of J.H.Prynne, and possibly Barry MacSweeney and Bunting, does not offer avant-garde, or linguistically-innovative poetry any kind of platform at all. At the same time as his books have been published by more and more mainstream publishers, the commentary on his writing has developed more amongst those with non-mainstream interests.

These non-mainstream interests have tended to be associated with what have come to be called the ‘British Poetry Revival’ of the 1960s and 1970s and linguistically-innovative poetry dating from the 1980s on. For Sheppard, in *The Poetry of Saying*, the British Poetry Revival and linguistically-innovative poetry have as their poetics ‘the centrality of the notions of the discontinuity and indeterminacy as technical elements of poetics’.¹ This ‘indeterminacy’ involves the structure of the poem, as well as the syntactic, semantic and metrical elements from which it is composed; such indeterminacy also demands the active participation of the reader in the work ‘to complete it’.² Sheppard draws Fisher into this poetic ambit through the disrupted narratives of Fisher’s *The Cut Pages*, and also through the ‘referential and perceptual uncertainties’ of Fisher’s shorter pieces.³ Here, Sheppard’s ‘discontinuity’, ‘indeterminacy’ and ‘uncertainty’ line up against ‘continuity’, ‘determinacy’ and ‘certainty’. This thesis attempts to show how these seeming antipathetic elements may reconciled in a consideration of the way Fisher works with his material beyond the technical level.

At the same time, Sheppard’s indeterminacies are not, for example, true of Fisher’s light verse. Such pieces as ‘A Modern Story’ or ‘The Nation’ rely, at least in part, for their satirical effect on Fisher’s pitch-perfect control of narrative and comic timing. I would also suggest that some of the shorter lyrical poems that Sheppard alludes to, including ‘For Realism’ and ‘The Memorial Fountain’, also rely on Fisher’s sense of the pace and power of narrative and structure. It is this control of structure and his making available of humour to the reader that, surely, distances Fisher as a poet *qua* poet from the linguistically-innovative poets that Sheppard discusses elsewhere in *The Poetry of Saying*. However much Fisher might resent his inclusion in mainstream

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² ibid.
³ ibid. Sheppard goes so far as to credit *City* as ‘the earliest extended work of the British Poetry Revival.’
anthologies on the strength of the poem ‘The Entertainment of War’,\(^4\) that inclusion is not based only on the success of this poem; even for mainstream commentators, Fisher is not a ‘one-hit-wonder’\(^6\). This absorption into a mainstream is also based on the fact that those who might look up his work as a result of that poem will find other pieces of his which are equally engaging. Fisher has always been willing to publish his light verse satires, and offer up the sense of humour that imbues so much of his writing. This places his writing at a real tangent to other writers whose poetry has accompanied his, in some of the journals in which Fisher’s work has been published. At the same time, a number of those journals, such as \textit{Grossteiste Review}, \textit{Samphire} and \textit{Palantir}, did have interests that lay with more linguistically-innovative poetry. In addition, commentaries on Fisher’s writing, and the published interviews with Fisher, have tended to come from those whose interests do lie with linguistically-innovative poetics, e.g., Eric Mottram, Sheppard and John Tranter.

It is a central contention of this thesis that Fisher’s writing attempts, as much as anything, to depict states. These may be states of mind, that is a mental condition at a particular time, and this may be a mental condition inflected to varying extents with emotion. However, he has suggested himself that:

‘… almost without exception my poems are propositions or explorations in aesthetic ideas rather than reactions to personal experience. […] The poems are to do with getting around in the mind, and I tackle that in any way I can.’\(^6\)

In addition, Fisher has noted several times that the portrayal of Birmingham in his poetry is intended to evoke a psychological city away from its empirical and observable nature.\(^7\) Famously, Fisher has commented that ‘Birmingham is what I think with’ (\textit{LSI} p.11). These remarks from Fisher might suggest some kind of pure intellectualism of his work, its being ‘explorations in aesthetic ideas’. However, it is typical of Fisher’s pronouncements that they are couched in ambiguity; his poems might be propositions, they might be ‘to do with getting about in the mind’ but he is careful not to elucidate such statements further. We are perhaps no nearer Fisher’s poetry if we assume that it is some kind of intellectual journey which is ‘tackled in any

\(^4\) R. Fisher, \textit{Interviews through Time \& Selected Prose} (Kentisbeare, Devon: Shearsman Books, 2000) p.65
way’ possible; the ‘any way I can’ seems like a huge get-out clause. And the poems themselves contradict any sense that they are dryly intellectual.

The way that Fisher’s poems escape from the intellectuality that he may appear to ascribe to them is that they espouse a sensuality of empiricism, which he may try to both resent and undermine. Following on from his remark about Birmingham being what he thinks with, Fisher describes the mental tool that Birmingham is for him as analogous with a hammer used to drive in a screw where the screwdriver would be the less destructive tool. Thus, it is in this sensual world that Fisher couches the intellection previously remarked on. As he has put it elsewhere, ‘… what I talk about has got body analogues all over it, because I’m a committed puritanical sensualist; I want to talk about body imagery’. Elsewhere he comments that he is ‘interested in hauling words towards concreteness’. This is different, of course, from hauling ‘worlds’ into concreteness; but that is often the effect. Fisher’s apprehension of what sensual transformation leads to pieces such as ‘Metamorphosis’, and the wonderful passage from City in which a courting couple ‘become’ a train guard with a parcel in his hands (LSI p.37). As a result, Fisher’s writing contains strains and contradictions not only in its poetics but in the subject matter the poetics couches.

Rather than assuming a fixed point of view, this thesis suggests that Fisher’s most successful work reconciles these strains and contradictions in its depiction of these states of mind. The states not only form the subject matter of that successful writing but the writing itself is itself mimetic of those states. A passage that exemplifies this is the opening passage of Fisher’s long poem A Furnace. That passage will be examined in some detail in the later stages of this thesis, but let us briefly look at the passage near the beginning of the text:

Whatever
approaches my passive taking-in,
then surrounds me and goes by
will have itself understood only
phase upon phase
by separate involuntary
strokes of my mind, dark
swings of a fan-blade
that keeps a time of its own,
made up from the long
discrete moments

8 R. Fisher, Interviews through Time p.53
9 R. Fisher, Interviews through Time p.63
of the stages of the street,
each bred off the last as if by causality. (LSI p.52)

We can see here that Fisher’s long paratactic sentence mimics the flow of the ‘whatever’ that approaches him. This ‘whatever’ is typical of a kind of place holding vocabulary in Fisher’s writing. It is deictically empty and refers exophorically out of the text to something that neither the reader nor the writer, this latter deliberately, can perceive adequately. Thus, there is a semantic movement in and out of the text, as the reader wonders where and what this ‘whatever’ might be. In addition, Fisher’s mixture of line breaks on prepositions, nouns followed by relative clauses, and adjectives separated from their following nouns means that enjambment also helps the flow of the passage. This latter movement between adjective and noun is emphasized here by the rove over between such pairs as ‘involuntary strokes’ and ‘dark swings’ where the rove over mimics the movement described. Yet, in all this sensual precision there is an essential mystery. It is not only the ‘whatever’ that seems beyond the reader’s comprehension. The situation and the state it evokes seem somehow beyond our ken.

Fisher’s apprehension of this peculiar state with its combination of sensuality and its place in the mind means that the word ‘mystical’ seems to arise naturally in descriptions of Fisher’s work. As we shall see below, the word ‘mystical’ is often used of his work. However, that work is not ‘mystical’ within an organized religious or theological framework; Fisher himself has rejected such a notion. Neither does it have any obvious teleology, i.e., some sense of where mysticism might take us, towards transcendence or a more complete or fitting understanding of mystical otherness or deity. Thus, Fisher’s writing has a secular apophaticism in it, a negative quality that suggests what things are not, but does not suggest what they are.

Such a negativity is suggested in the passage quoted above. Not only do we have the word ‘whatever’ to suggest something inadequately grasped, but below that Fisher writes that understanding of what that thing might be is understood ‘only’ by involuntary movements. Thus the mind’s understanding is subject to the volition of the thing it tries to understand; we note the line initial ‘will’ here. The understanding is also only partially because of its phased nature, with the linking of these phases ‘as if by causality’. The narrator/perceiver here is in the midst of

10 Fisher’s habit of breaking of fully-stressed monosyllabic adjectives from nouns across a line-ending was the subject of some discussion on the Guardian website after Carol Rumens chose ‘The Running Changes’ as a Guardian poem of the week; see http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/booksblog/2008/jun/09/poemoftheweek42

11 R. Fisher, Interviews through Time p.29
something that may be rational and may be subject to some laws of causality. However, Fisher’s ‘as if’, here, undermines the very rationality it espouses. Thus, within the physical nature of the bus journey on which this takes place, the mind is subject to a range of impressions that it tries to understand but cannot.

Another aspect of the apophaticism woven into aspects of Fisher’s project, is a seeming absence of moralizing. Where Fisher’s writing is of the quality of the passage quoted above, and where his writing is an attempt to depict and understand these states, there is a noticeable lack of an overtly ethical dimension to this writing. This lack of moralizing within states can be mapped on to Fisher’s writing about place. Fisher himself has stated his wish to avoid a ‘paysage moralisé’ in his writing. However, if we return briefly to the focus on Birmingham in his writing, the fact that Birmingham is what he thinks with does somewhat cloud the moralization issue. As we shall see below, Fisher is not afraid to write about, and on behalf of, the people of Birmingham. As a result, it needs to be said that there isn’t an absence of morality in the poems. Indeed, there is in Fisher’s writing, a cline from an absence of moralization, a morality, to the presence of moralization in the poems. This is particularly true where Birmingham is the focus of the writing. However much he might wish to mitigate its impact, or as he puts it, ‘It’s not meaning to make the social point but to assume the social point’, Fisher’s writing, like many of his post-war contemporaries, is not shy of drawing attention to the civic politics and social morality of post-war living in Birmingham. This is also true in the satires that have been mentioned above. There is, however, a radical tension between that sense of the urban as a civic entity and the sense of the urban as a mystical state.

The civic and the mystical in Fisher’s writing are also alloyed with an acute sense of the city as at least partly the result of its byproducts. Donald Davie commented that Fisher’s ‘urine-loosened brick’ would enable definitive statement, if Fisher would allow it. For Davie, the relation of human byproduct and human construct is likely to be an ethical one. To which Fisher might reply with his comment about the assumption of the social point. But where Fisher moves this idea away from the making to the assumption is in the sense that Fisher’s city is, in part, the result of byproducts. And this way of looking at the human byproducts of urban living fits with the sense of the bodily analogues we have noted above. This is partly to do with a sense of the city as an organic, living entity. Yet Fisher seems at pains not to have this as the only analogue

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12 R. Fisher, *Interviews through Time* p.60
13 R. Fisher, *Interviews through Time* p.59
with which he is working. If Birmingham is a city of the mind, Fisher is also propelled by its organic, its civic and its mystical qualities. Fisher makes each of these areas available to his writing. At the same time, this may lead his readers to a sense of something unresolved in the organic nature of the urban.

Another unresolved tension in Fisher's writing is his writing about women. Fisher's depiction of women includes the matriarch who not only seems to dominate the domestic but also to give parturition to the civic. Fisher shows this figure as being historically embedded, sometimes in a urban version of the peasantry, but also within the genealogy of the family. Fisher connects these two senses of the peasantry and urban genealogy with his references, often, it must be said rather glancing, to urban migration within the context of the Industrial Revolution. Interestingly, this particular idea of womanhood is confined to his poetry; much of his discussion of the men in his family takes place in the context of his published interviews and his prose autobiography. These men, in particular, his father, were skilled artisans whom Fisher depicts as having their own acute sense of place in the social structure. Fisher's women have their place in his writing chosen by Fisher himself. What seems clear is that Fisher has a particular view of gender roles as historically situated.

What is less clear is Fisher's attitude to women's sexuality. Fisher's portrayal of women outside an historical perspective may be a little more difficult to understand, or even accept. It is a portrayal of sexuality and women's place within sexuality that can smack of the voyeuristic. This is particularly true when he sites these portrayals within a wider social, or urban context. In addition, Fisher sometimes attempts to look at sexuality from an ironic point of view. Where his other satires reveal a pitch perfect sense of irony and a laconic sense of humour, his ironies on sexuality may leave readers cold, and his attempts at proto-feminist wit can fall flat. In poems from earlier in his career, Fisher individualizes women in portraits contained not only in *City* but also in the sequence *Interiors*, some of which will be discussed. At the same time, those portraits might be construed as moving from ‘realism’ to something more discomforting and controversial, and mystical.

What is also present in these discomforting choices is a dialogue with an empiricism that Fisher himself defines as ‘entailments in the real world’. Fisher has always been willing both to subvert the ‘real world’, by showing how its surfaces and appearances are undermined by those

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15 see ‘The Dow Low Drop’ (*LSI* p.26)
16 R. Fisher, *Interviews through Time* p.45
very same surfaces and appearances. He is also willing to undermine the realism his poems posit by drawing deliberate attention to the inconsistencies inherent in the viewer’s gaze. A poem like ‘The Memorial Fountain’ is a good example of this, where Fisher describes the narrator and the ironies in the narrator’s perspective. But it is not only the early poems that contain this dialogue with empiricism. As his writing develops, his interest in evoking states of mind and emotion naturally tends to a subversion of the real world out of which, and within which these states occur. This is, perhaps, where the mysticism ascribed to Fisher finds its origin; in the way in which Fisher’s gaze allows objects and things to be both temporary and consistent, both present and unavailable. And, in evoking these things and states, Fisher also leads his reader into a place where her gaze is problematized.

The empirical instabilities in Fisher’s writing are not only the varying positions and perspectives that he creates for the reader. Instabilities, particularly of self, exist both above and below the surface of the writing in ways which have been commented upon since his work first attracted attention. Fisher also places these instabilities at the centre of some of his early subject matter. As we shall examine in Chapter one, Fisher’s early work looks in some detail at the nature of the unstable self. Poems such as ‘The Empirical Self and Me’, ‘The Memorial Fountain’ and some sections of City investigate the nature of the self as observer and presence. They also examine how that self might be presented in poems.

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The critical reception of Roy Fisher’s work demonstrates that his is a unique and particularised place in British poetry; he is almost an oxymoronic poet. Gregson writes that ‘he is famous for having been largely ignored’.17 For O’Brien, Fisher is ‘the modernist (and postmodernist) the non-modernists enjoy’;18 Wootten has called him ‘the most appreciated under-appreciated poet we have’;19 most recently, Charles Lock has suggested that Fisher has ‘long been known for being unknown’.20 Thus, whatever the uniqueness of Fisher’s place, it seems not to be settled within the usual narratives of post war British poetry. He started writing in the late Fifties at the height of the Movement; however, Fisher does not align himself with either their political or emotional attitudes, or their poetics. As we have seen, his writing has been aligned with the

British Poetry Revival, which took its cue from an idea of the American poetic avant-garde. And the writing has been included in such ‘left-field’ anthologies as Crozier and Longville’s *A Various Art*, and Sinclair’s *Conductors of Chaos*. However, his poetics have also been seen as unthreatening enough for him to have been asked to judge the National Poetry Competition (1985).

Although Roy Fisher published poetry in Britain at the end of the 1950s, his first serious poetic exposure came on the other side of the Atlantic, in America; from journals which were part of that American poetic avant-garde. Gael Turnbull secured the publication of some of Fisher’s early poetry in the magazine *Origin* edited by the American poet Cid Corman. In the summer of 1962, Denise Levertov reviewed the Migrant pamphlet production of Fisher’s *City*, with the title ‘An English Event’. Levertov’s review, and Gael Turnbull’s review of the *City* in the autumn of that year, were published in the magazine *Kulchur*. Both Corman’s and Levertov’s poetics were much conditioned by their exposure to the poetics derived from ‘Black Mountain’ school of Charles Olson. As Perkins comments, ‘During the 40’s and 50’s, Olson developed what came to be known as ‘open form’; alternatively ‘organic form’ or ‘projective verse’, ‘the poem as process’. In this procedure, ‘the poems enact and thus dramatize the instant, unpredictable motions – leaps of comparison, turns of feeling, reversals of argument, associations – of the poet’s mind in composing’. Thus in the first critical context of Fisher’s poetry there is already a recognition that instability lies at the core of the poetic enterprise. And Fisher echoes Olson’s own manifesto on the instability of composition in Projective Verse, in Fisher’s note on *Matrix* in the PBS bulletin that accompanied the award of PBS recommendation status in the spring of 1971, ‘The image that the poem [‘Continuity’] starts with was a fabrication which I tried to notate clearly enough for it to cheat on me: that is, to make my memory of the mere idea very like my memories of real things. That opened the way to the continuity, the next thing, that would simply go with the first, without being part of a rhetorical workout.’ And we note here, Fisher’s recognition that an attempt to record accurately is ultimately self-defeating, but that, in that defeat, is the means to go on. Thus Fisher works from a ‘reality’ towards and within a mental version of that contained in memory.

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That Fisher’s poetics have always presented a negotiation between a seeming empirical stabilities and instabilities I have characterized as mystical is evidenced by the early reception to his work in Britain. In 1969, Peter Porter used a word which stuck to Fisher’s poetry throughout this early period: ‘surrealism’. Porter’s review of *Collected Poems 1968* commented on Fisher’s ability to, ‘celebrate the self-help and cooperation of those Midlands conurbations that Fisher has always lived in. He usually looks for mystery in these house and street scenes, but he neither solicits it nor fakes it’. But the review has a caveat, ‘While the minutiae of life are justly observed, the total effect is turned aside into mild surrealism’. In *London Magazine*, Julian Symons also referred to Fisher’s successful use of ‘a loose lightly-accented line and a semi-surrealist technique to convey a sense of human individuality and separation’. Symons, himself no stranger to either the socially-committed poetry of the thirties, or the New Romanticism of the forties, recognizes that there is in Fisher’s collection both a generalized social engagement but also that ‘such comments alternate with individual pictures most vividly drawn’. Alan Brownjohn in a *New Statesman* review of the same book in the same year, also yokes the heightened quality of so much of Fisher’s writing with the Audenesque, ‘The danger for Fisher is of a kind of detached aestheticism (working/to distinguish an event/ from an opinion): but at its best, his precise evocation of the sheer delicate oddness of ordinary things […] can be almost as haunting as those ravaged industrial landscapes of the early Auden’. Peter Porter in *The Guardian* produces his own interesting gloss on the making of the poetry in *Matrix* and *The Cut Pages*, particularly if we consider it in the light of Fisher’s own statements above, ‘Nothing is wrong with the writing – Fisher is one of the three poets of the avant-garde who can compose a sentence. It’s just that these poems and prose cut-ups take “only disconnect” as their motto, and the reader’s pleasure in each part is blotted out by its sequel’. Where the other reviews comment on alternations, surrealism and detachment, for Porter, these disconnections and ontological instabilities lead to jarring discontinuities rather than a refreshing lack of finality.

The focal point to this early critical attention comes with a review essay that Eric Mottram wrote for *Stand* in 1969. Mottram, as one of the first teachers of American literature in Britain, and also as a friend of Fisher’s, would have been very aware that Fisher’s poetics oriented themselves

26 ibid.
28 ibid.
29 A. Brownjohn, ‘Subways’ *New Statesman* 14th November, 1969 p.701
away from the English sensibilities of the 1950s and 1960s, and across the Atlantic Ocean to the USA. Mottram makes sure that this orientation is noted; writing of City he states:

It is the half-familiar world of the city in Mayakovsky’s Moscow and New York, Eliot’s London and Lorca’s New York. […] – nearer Dos Passos’ Manhattan than those woodcut Christmas cards of romantic Wigan which were circulated in the Fifties. Here is a bombed Midlands city with De Chirico steam locomotives and the bunch of bananas centring a square, but little of that suppressed sexuality and leadership games present in Auden’s Thirties cities and quarries, with men as pilots and leathery cyclists, and the poet as pleasurably hunted victim nearing the frontier.31

Thus, the American visual aesthetic with the bananas central to the visual field and, again, a kind of incipient surrealism is countered to an Audenesque version of camp, even though the actual location is the same. And, although Mottram would not describe these poetics as ‘only disconnect’, his use of the terms ‘half-familiar’ and ‘bombed’ recognizes that Fisher is willing to deal with a fragmented world. Mottram veers away from the thematic continuities of the Audenesque to draw a line between the poetics of modernist fragmentation and the discontinuities of Poundian post-modernism. Fisher has been slightly more forgiving of Auden. In the context of a discussion of his own willingness to keep Birmingham anonymous in his poetry, he is able to accept, ‘I was just excited by the naming that [Auden] did, even though it didn’t look in the least bit like what I saw when I looked’.32

Mottram goes on to comment on the other people in Fisher’s vision of a lost city; provincial in every sense. These people are seen with an exemplary tenderness, but, as Mottram notes, they form a kind of ‘epic theatre [which] contains nearly hallucinatory metamorphoses of the human’.33 These metamorphoses are for Mottram ‘the transformation of the human towards the machine’, partly as the result of a sense of an attenuated civic authority34; an authority that Fisher describes in the first draft of the poem as ‘limited and mean; so limited that it can do no more than preserve a superficial order’ (City p.14). So, the transformations and metamorphoses of the city and its populace remain outside the control of those who might seem to be there to limit such things. Thus the ontology of the city remains uncertain and deracinated, as we shall examine in detail below.

33 E. Mottram, ‘Roy Fisher’s Work’ p.10
34 E. Mottram, ‘Roy Fisher’s Work’ p.12
It is Anne Cluysenaar in *Stand* who defines the surreal in Fisher’s earlier work. In 1971/72, Cluysenaar reviewed the two Fulcrum books that followed *Collected Poems 1968, The Cut Pages* and *Matrix*. She suggests that ‘The Ship’s Orchestra and the *Collected Poems* of 1969, though fine, were I think cruder and less individual than what Fisher is now developing’. Cluysenaar develops a definition for Fisher’s surrealism with a quotation from Breton from 1927 ‘The object, no matter how complete, returns to an uninterrupted succession of latencies which are not peculiar to it and which invoke its transformation’. This comment seems singularly perceptive and farsighted, and not just because of its applicability to Fisher; Breton’s comments also presage those of de Certeau and Lefebvre on the latency of the city. Thus, how the poet engages with the ontological latency of the object, the scene and the self is, perhaps, one of the defining qualities of Fisher’s poetry. In particular, Fisher brings into contemporary poetry an understanding of what ‘not peculiar to it’ might mean; that the individual object might be empirically verifiable, but also contain hidden possibilities that Fisher both recognizes and makes available to the reader as part of a reaching out to what is latent in the ‘real world’ as a whole.

In 1973, Fisher’s early work was a subject of a chapter in the book, *Thomas Hardy and British Poetry*, by Donald Davie. It was, perhaps, this attention by one of the most visible and, arguably, most important poet-critics of his age, that brought Fisher to the notice of a wider public. In *Thomas Hardy and British Poetry*, Davie aligns Fisher with Philip Larkin as sharing with Larkin a ‘temperament [that is] profoundly Hardyesque’ because of Fisher’s ‘social and political circumstances’. What Davie means by this is outlined in Davie’s introduction to the book. For Davie, Hardy writes poetry into the time of its composition, not to limit it but to offer a poetry of historical perspective. That perspective is what Davie also defines as ‘liberal’, as having ‘social democratic principles’. Davie’s *City* is a Hardyesque poem because it accepts civic change where this is good reason for it, although Fisher is ‘at that stage unable to say it clearly, because his verse writing let him down’. However, if we accept Fisher’s urban landscape possesses a range of latencies and is inherently unstable, then, as Andrew Crozier comments in his criticism of Davie, ‘It is tendentious to chide Fisher for not making clear statements or issuing definite judgments, and what Davie attributes to technical deficiency would more properly be seen as marking the excessive character or the common language to which Fisher scrupulously restricts

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35 *Matrix* was a PBS recommendation in 1971; evidence of Fisher’s acceptance by the mainstream of British poetry at that time.
37 Ibid.
38 D. Davie, *Thomas Hardy and British Poetry* p.6
39 Ibid.
40 Ibid.
himself.\textsuperscript{41} Fisher’s own balking at Davie’s judgement was adumbrated to Robert Sheppard ‘I wasn’t aware that he’d exactly written about my work in that book.’\textsuperscript{42} However that might be, Davie’s chapter was entitled ‘Roy Fisher: An Appreciation’ and even if Davie offers reservations, his fame as a critic was, and to some extent remains, sufficient to boost general attention to his subjects.

At this point, in the seventies and early eighties, there is a hiatus in the critical interest in Fisher, and more of a direct interest in Fisher’s poetics. This interest turns, repeatedly, on ideas of self and indeterminacy which, I will argue, we may best understand in terms of mysticism and empiricism. Fisher was interviewed on a number of occasions in this period, the most important of which were with Eric Mottram in 1973, Rasula and Erwin again in 1973 although not published until 1975, Robert Sheppard in 1984, published in 1986.\textsuperscript{43} Another major interview took place in 1989, when Fisher was interviewed for the first issue of John Tranter’s ezine \textit{Jacket}.\textsuperscript{44} As mentioned above, these interviewers came from the ‘left’ of British and, in Tranter’s case, Australian poetics. Mottram’s interview with Fisher was part of a series of interviews conducted with British and American poets of the British Poetry Revival, such as Jeff Nuttall and Allen Fisher, whose poems were also in the same issue of the magazine \textit{Saturday Morning} which printed the interview. In the interview, Fisher talks of the early publishing history of his poems and pointedly draws connections between that early work and the Black Mountain group, and the alienation his poems had from the orthodoxies of the day.

In the same year, an interview with Fisher was conducted by Mike Erwin and Jed Rasula and then published in a whole issue of \textit{Grosseteste Review}, a journal originally edited by Andrew Crozier and Tim Longville, with a pronounced ‘Cambridge axis’ linguistically-innovative bias.\textsuperscript{45} In this interview, Fisher is happy to conform to the notions of indeterminacy and contingency that Sheppard claims to be fundamental to linguistically-innovative poetries. Discussing \textit{City} and \textit{The Ship's Orchestra}, Fisher comments that what concerns him is the ‘effect of indeterminacy’.\textsuperscript{46} In this interview, as well, Fisher echoes his comment in the PBS bulletin that his poems are about

\textsuperscript{41} A. Crozier, ‘Signs of Identity: Roy Fisher's \textit{A Furnace}' \textit{PNReview} 1992 Vol. 18 No 3 p.26
\textsuperscript{42} R. Fisher, \textit{Interviews through Time} p.79
\textsuperscript{43} D. Slade, ‘Roy Fisher: A Bibliography’ p.350
\textsuperscript{45} The ‘Cambridge Axis’ is an often derogatory term used about the group of poets who studied at Cambridge and came under the thrall of the poetries of J. H. Prynne; they include Andrew Crozier, Tim Longville, Michael Haslam, Veronica Forrest-Thomson, Douglas Oliver and Peter Riley. Later representatives include Rod Mengham, Keston Sutherland and Andrea Brady.
\textsuperscript{46} R. Fisher, \textit{Interviews through Time} p.56
‘getting about in the mind’, by commenting that the poems explore ‘inner space rather than in any way attempt to do justice either to the place as itself or to having any large conception of place’. In addition, Fisher comments that his poetry does tussle with language, and the way language will defeat the writer in his or attempts to work with vision, time, perception and consciousness. In doing so, Fisher does align his poetics with the post-modern concern with the arbitrary nature of the sign/signifier relationship.

In November 1981, Fisher broadcast on BBC Radio Three as part of The Living Poet series. He introduced his reading with the following comment about his early writing:

I wasn’t in contact with any of the British poets whose work was seen as most typical of that time [the 1950s], and I wasn’t in sympathy with what they were doing. This seemed to me to exhibit all sorts of misanthropy and resignation, both social and artistic, which meant nothing to me. On the one hand, I was excited by the freedom and imaginative mobility I could see in new American poetry. Writers like Louis Zukovsky and Robert Duncan were still exhibiting allegiance to the claims of early twentieth century European modernism; claims which, to my mind, had been far too hastily dismissed. On the other hand, I was obsessed, it’s not too strong a word, with the local.

This might seem a statement of Fisher’s overall poetics. It appears to oppose Fisher’s view of the poetics of the Movement, misanthropic and resigned, with the poetics of an American, Poundian avant-garde, free and imaginative, yet yoked, in Fisher’s practice, to an obsession with the local. At the same time, what Fisher actually opposes are his somewhat caricaturing description of Movement attitudes to other human beings and the vicissitudes of life, with the world of the imagination as outlined by American poets; the contrasting of a view of life to a view of poetry. Fisher traces his poetic allegiances through that American avant-garde back to the modernism of the 1920s Russian formalists, with which he had aligned himself in 1971. That modernist formalism espouses the concept of ‘ostranenie’ or distancing and alienation, an idea which again returns to the ideas of discontinuities referred to above. At the same time, Fisher’s use of the term ‘misanthropy’ also undermines his own declaration that his poems are about getting about in the mind. Fisher’s disdain for Movement misanthropy posits his own opposing allegiance to human beings, contained in his obsession with the local. If this is that ‘local habitation’ that Shakespeare suggests the poet names; a locale which is inhabited, lived in, then the poet reifies from that ‘airy nothing’ which is the seat of the free and mobile imagination.

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47 R. Fisher, *Interviews through Time* p.62
49 … a somewhat more strenuous echo of Davie’s comment on the poetry of Larkin, a ‘poetry of lowered sights and patiently diminished expectations’ D. Davie *With the Grain: Essays on Thomas Hardy and Modern British Poetry* (Manchester: Carcanet 1998) p.76
Here, again, we have that tension between a world ‘entailed to empirical reality’, \(^{51}\) and the life of the mind, which Fisher’s poems have worked with since the beginning of his poetic career.

In 1989, John Tranter interviewed Fisher at his home in Earl Sterndale. Tranter published this interview in the first issue of his web magazine, *Jacket*, in December 2001. \(^{52}\) Tranter has firmly associated *Jacket* with linguistically-innovative poetics since that very first issue. He asks Fisher biographical questions that situate the poetics in Fisher’s interactions within a wider community of poets, and also within his personal history. At the same time, Tranter asks him about technical aspects of his more linguistically-innovative poetry. Tranter relates the rhythms of Fisher’s poetry to the rhythms of his jazz piano style to draw Fisher into making the contrast between the very much ‘mainstream’ nature of his jazz style as opposed to the non-mainstream nature of his poetry. Fisher points out that not only does he feel his poetic style has more to do with the rhythms of Samuel Beckett, but that it aspires to the depersonalized presentation of Brecht, who ‘put his life where his brain was’. \(^{53}\) It is interesting, therefore, to note that elsewhere in this interview, Fisher comments:

> Quite a lot of the things I have done within recent years have been lookings-back at myself by way of the texts that I wrote then. And I’ve seen myself through the way that I wrote, and wanted to go back and understand that self better through understanding what those texts are twenty years later. \(^{54}\)

Fisher outlines here a process of artistic solipsism; a recursive re-examination of the self through the way his art has dealt with it over the years. What is key here is, surely, the wanting to understand that earlier self better; whereby the self does remain as the focus of the writing. This might not imply as later commentators attest (see below), that the self is immutable, indeed, Fisher appears to be saying that the later self does see the earlier self as different. But Fisher seems to acknowledge that the varying selves do belong to one particular life, that of Roy Fisher. It is Fisher’s own eyes that re-examine that life. Fisher’s own authorizing consciousness initiates this process. This centring of that artistic process is confirmed as he then goes on to comment about the composition of *A Furnace*, firstly this poem is about what he, Fisher, has seen, notated and reported. Secondly, *A Furnace* is about his own ‘cast of mind, you know, the angle the world hits me at, and what it does to me’. \(^{55}\) This comment might suggest that the author is palpably not dead, and also confound the linguistically-innovative idea of contemporary post-modern poetry.

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\(^{51}\) R Fisher, *Interviews through Time* p.56

\(^{52}\) J. Tranter, ‘John Tranter interviews Roy Fisher’

\(^{53}\) ibid.

\(^{54}\) ibid.

\(^{55}\) ibid.
Two email interviews occurred within quick succession of each other at the end of the nineties. The first was conducted by Peter Robinson, and published at the end of Interviews Through Time and Selected Prose published by Shearsman in 2000. Immediately following that was an email interview conducted by John Kerrigan and published at the end of News for the Ear: a homage to Roy Fisher by Stride, also in 2000. Both interviews are characterized by an emphasis on the tension between experience and its transmission. As Fisher comments in the Robinson interview, there is ‘a habitual discomfort with the need to cross a threshold from experience to some sort of transmissible object’.\(^{56}\) Fisher triangulates that discomfort with the feeling that there are always ‘undefined external authorities for the imagination’.\(^{57}\) And yet, Fisher uses the phrase ‘letting the various materials into the poem’, which is, perhaps, both disingenuous but appropriate. Thus the poet both claims the experience and the process of formalizing it, whilst realizing that the process of formalizing is, itself, subject to pressures of expectation. These pressures of expectation may be those of the history of poetry, but also from the contemporary reader who goes to the poetry of Roy Fisher having expectations of what the poetry of Roy Fisher might mean and do. On the other hand, as Fisher freely acknowledges here, it is Fisher who performs the ‘making strange’. Fisher comments that, as a reader, he looks for consistent features in a poet’s language, whilst Fisher, the ‘maker’, may be concerned with ‘single sweeps of the net through profuse material’.\(^{58}\) If these are ‘single sweeps’ then it is Fisher who holds the net handle, even if that ‘Fisher’ is subject to the changes that time and life impose; or, even, as Robinson puts it ‘there’s a metaphysical and an empiricist ‘Roy Fisher’ battling it out here’.\(^{59}\)

Kerrigan’s interview maps onto Robinson’s when Kerrigan sees the empirical in Fisher’s work as concerned with location, and the metaphysical as concerned with ‘the lurching renegotiations of the balance between self and world’ that threw up A Furnace.\(^{60}\) Here Kerrigan’s ‘negotiations’ is mapped onto Robinson’s ‘battling’. In discussing these distinctions we need to bear in mind the comments on the authorizing consciousness patrolling Fisher’s poetry. If that authorizing consciousness is, itself, in dialogue with the authorities of poetry, then that struggle may be more or less strenuous. That dialogue is mapped in Fisher’s poetry onto the ‘negotiation/battle’ that Fisher has with the entailed reality of the world, not to subvert that reality but to work with it and sometimes against it to create some form of poetic truth which is worth the trouble of the poet to transmit. These negotiations find their poetic locus, their poetic truth, for Fisher, in

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\(^{56}\) R. Fisher, Interviews through Time p.104  
^{57} ibid  
^{58} ibid  
^{59} ibid  
^{60} J. Kerrigan, “Come to think of it, the imagination” p.114
‘getting about in the mind’. That mind is the writer’s mind and the access to that mind is down to the skill of the poet. As we have seen above, there are varying kinds of access in Fisher’s writing from the openly narrative satires to the hermetic worlds of *The Cut Pages*.

Elsewhere in that interview, in the context of talking about a later prose poem ‘Releases’, Fisher makes the following comment, ‘The ‘I’ is my unexamined label for the introverted function of myself that thinks such thoughts. That is to say, I think it’s me. Still do’.61 By ‘such thoughts’, Fisher refers to ‘already-familiar images or notions’.62 His final throw-away ‘Still do’ elides the first person pronoun, and the verbal substitution of ‘do’ for ‘think it’s me’, is almost a re-absorption of the statement back into that ‘introverted function’. Elsewhere, in a piece about his writing practices, Fisher wrote the following in 1992:

> I don’t see a poem of mine as a setting for myself as a character, a composition which can in some sense contain me; instead it’s something found and formed within my boundaries and then, maybe, projected out into the language exchange to try its luck.63

Thus, Fisher does not see himself as ‘character’ in his poems, i.e., as a persona either real or fictionalized within some kind of narrative which contains such characters in the poem. On the other hand, and Fisher’s noun phrase in apposition performs a sleight of hand here, there is a ‘me’ that the poem does not contain ‘in some sense’. Of course, a poem does not need to contain the ‘me’ that might be its authorizing consciousness, and the empiricism that Fisher does reach out to is a way of evading that containing. But, as the next sentence suggests, the poem occurs within the boundaries of the self which is Fisher. It is perhaps disingenuous to suggest that a poem is ‘found and formed’ as these terms might contain contradictions. However, the ‘forming’ is testament to the existence of that authorizing consciousness whose name is Fisher, as is the equally disingenuous ‘projected’ with its multiple sense of something pushed beyond the boundaries with some force, but also the sense of a ‘projection’ which might imply that the poem is still attached to some point within the boundaries. This description of the poem as an ‘it’ takes us back to the idea of the poem as a bounded ‘heterocosm’ in the New Criticism of M.H.Abrams, and others.64 This ‘it’ seems self-contained and the ‘to try its luck’ personifies the poem as a bounded entity with its own existence. That is somewhat different from the discontinuities and uncertainties that Sheppard finds in Fisher’s work, and suggests the kinds of control that Fisher’s ‘projections’ enact. Whatever his commentators might feel, therefore,

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61 J. Kerrigan, ‘Come to think of it, the imagination’ p.107
62 ibid.
Fisher, himself, does not feel afraid to identify the authorizing consciousness of his poetry with himself. This thesis follows Fisher in that identification.

While Fisher might espouse a Beckettian poise and self-abnegation, he must be one of the most interviewed poets of our time; Fisher is always good for a quote. Thus, as we finish this survey of Fisher’s comments on his own writing, it is worth bearing in mind Kenneth Cox’s comment on Fisher’s utterances. Cox, in typically penetrating style, remarks that Fisher’s statements on his poetics are similar to watching a magician who offers to show you how a trick is done, only for that demonstration to turn into yet another trick.65

Andrew Crozier, whose 1992 essay is, indeed, titled ‘Signs of Identity’ states that Fisher’s work is especially concerned with identity, and the relationship between the identity of the observer and the identity of the observed, whether that observed be animate or inanimate. Crozier’s main thrust in this dense and rather over-complicated essay is that, in his tussle with identity, Fisher operates a ‘textual surplus’. In a nod towards cognitive linguistics, Crozier comments that Fisher’s use of the word ‘pit’, for example, creates a surplus of meaning.66 ‘Pit’ not only contains the meanings ‘cinema’ and ‘grave’ but it reverberates with meanings beyond these and any other standard ‘dictionary’ meanings and connotations of ‘pit’. Fisher as ‘poet qua poet’ recognizes this and, although Crozier does not use these terms, Fisher’s struggles with empiricism and the world entailed in reality are struggles with language and the metaphorical, denotative and connotative meanings of a word. Crozier comments:

\[ A \text{Furnace}\] involves extended reflection on the nature of signs and of cognitive enquiry: how signs are produced from sense perception but have significance that is modified as enquiry is pursued; how this variation divides signs from the contexts in which they arise, from the general cases of both the perceptual field and conventional significance. The sign thus ‘rides over intention’ and its singularity is multiple. It accomplishes its own identity and meaning and is at the same time invested in the world as our access to it.67

This is language as quantum physics; dissolving in the moment of its measurement. Crozier suggests that Fisher’s struggles with identity are because language cannot offer a settled meaning for any word, or catenations of words. Crozier includes the word ‘I’ in this, calling it ‘the unwonted self’.68 At the same time, Crozier excludes transcendence from the poem. Thus the authorizing consciousness of the poem is held in the clutches of the language it, itself, uses; and

\[66\] See also J. C. Ransom, The World’s Body (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1938) on New Criticism’s sense of the poem’s autonomy creating boundaries for the poem.
\[67\] A. Crozier, ‘Signs of Identity’ p.29
\[68\] ibid.
seems to settle for in accomplishing its own identity. Identity is what resisting language allows the writer, rather than what the operating writer creates for him- or herself. For Crozier, these are then ‘signs of identity’ rather than self-constituting identity. In this way, Crozier rejects the mystical from the poem, stating that there is no movement towards transcendence in the piece.

Whereas Crozier’s critique of *A Furnace* was resolutely post-structuralist, in 1996, Ian Gregson stepped back from that post-modern position and aligned Fisher with Christopher Middleton and Edwin Morgan as ‘retro-modernists’. Gregson defines a ‘retro-modernist’ as a poet deploying a ‘relentless defamiliarising’ of the kind advanced by the Russian formalist critic Victor Shklovsky, and picks up on Davie’s quoting Fisher’s own identification as a ‘1920’s Russian modernist’. Gregson also sees Fisher in an ‘argument with realism’ where, as Crozier, what is ‘real’ changes according to the ‘levels and kinds of subjectivity from which it is perceived’.69 Gregson posits that, ‘estrangement for Fisher is crucially achieved by moving from the hard clarity and objectivity of imagist techniques to effects which insinuate distortive states of mind and beyond them to effects which are sometimes painfully expressionist or wildly or playfully surrealist’.70 Whereas Crozier sees language as the problem, and from the post-structuralist perspective the poet held in the grip of problematic language, Gregson sees Fisher as ‘achieving’ and ‘moving’ between techniques. Crozier’s point of view is that Fisher gives himself up to the language to allow the semantic surplus that the words and strings bring with them. The poet’s authorizing consciousness selects and controls what it can but knows that it has a job on its hands. The poet then accepts that tussle rather than pretends, as the Movement poets did, that through form and ethics, they rather than the language are in charge. Gregson, as I read him, posits Fisher as a poet for whom the techniques of imagism, expressionism and surrealism are still available to be made anew in the second half of the twentieth century. It is through those techniques that the tussle with language is undertaken.

However, Gregson is careful not to suggest that Fisher is simply in thrall to earlier techniques that he mints anew. Gregson’s main point is, like Crozier and Sheppard, to point out the nature of indeterminacy in Fisher’s writing. Gregson states that Fisher’s central concern is ‘with the complexities of perception and that problematic nature of representation’.71 In *City* and particularly in the works that follow it ‘there are doubts where the self ends and its environment begins’.72

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70 ibid.
72 ibid.
Technically, this is achieved through the ways that Fisher’s changes in tone and style interact recursively with each other. Emotionally, this is achieved by an active, yet also ambivalent, mixing of the objective and the subjective.

Fisher’s mixing of styles and tones, the objective and the subjective, the self and the other are theorized by both Gregson and Sheppard by reference to the work of Mikhail Bakhtin. Whilst Gregson inclines more to the sense that ‘estrangement’ is the presiding technique for Fisher, he is willing to suggest that the dialogic plays its part in the interactions and mixings that Fisher uses. Sheppard, however, is more open in his siding with the dialogic; Fisher’s poetry and that of other writers of the non-mainstream are engaged with a social poetics of form. The Movement, according to Sheppard, focuses on the realistic presentation of ‘a recognizable social world’ and thus closes the range of readers’ responses down. Linguistically-innovative poetry releases the surface of the poem as part of the democratization of the reading. The surface of the poem is mapped on to a general artifice of the contents of the piece. Thus, suggests Sheppard, the totality of the poem is part of a dialogue with the active reader able to obtain meanings from all parts of the poem equally, dialogically. As Bakhtin puts it:

As a living, socio-ideological concrete thing, as heteroglot opinion, language, for the individual consciousness, lies on the borderline between oneself and the other. The word in language is half someone else’s. It becomes ‘one’s own’ only when the speaker populates it with his own intention, his own accent, when he appropriates the word, adapting it to his own semantic and expressive intention.\(^{73}\)

Where Bakhtin’s emphasis is upon the speaker/writer’s own intention, he leaves open the place for the other’s intention, accent, and appropriation. This engenders the poem as an arena for equal appropriation by both reader and author. Similarly, Fisher temporizes with the reader and avoids a sense of final commitment to final meaning. And this thesis will go on to suggest that it is Fisher’s avoidance of a totalizing teleology that allows his poetry to be so powerful. A power which I will go on to characterize as the noetic reach of his poems enables them to move so effectively.

Sheppard, in line with the thesis/narrative he constructs, sees Fisher’s poetry as ‘foreground[ing] its own artificiality’ in order to hold ‘a text in suspension, so that its qualities of saying are extended, its fixity in the meaning of the said, delayed’.\(^{74}\) For example, as I have mentioned elsewhere, in the group of poems ‘Interiors with Various Figures’, the fractured nature of

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\(^{74}\) R. Sheppard, *The Poetry of Saying* p.89
narrative is mapped onto the fractured nature of the relationships that the poems enact through Fisher’s disruptions of conversational expectations. As Sheppard points out, these poems also describe objects which appear, within the poems, as equally mutable thus disturbing ‘the integrity of an observing self’. Later, he suggests that the ‘I’ in Fisher’s writing authorizes the poem only in its absence, in its loss of subjecthood, by setting up the scene and then retreating behind its inherent mutability in the language. What I take Sheppard to be saying here, in his meaning of ‘the said’ in Fisher’s poems, is that the whole poem is a performative, in Austin’s terms. What Fisher the maker, the authorizing consciousness of the poem, does is to construct the performative. The self that is represented by the ‘I’ in any Fisher poem is part of that verbal construct. The perlocutionary force of that performative cannot be controlled by the authorizing consciousness of the poem, i.e., the poem wields its effects beyond the subject’s control. The poem liberates itself into the understanding of the reader.

Whereas Bakhtin is, perhaps, the dominant figure in prevailing accounts of Fisher’s work, this thesis will examine other ways of approaching the states of Fisher’s poems. Thus, the subjects’ perlocutionary loss of control, its loss of subjecthood itself is how the French feminist, Irigaray, sees mysticism. She argues that this loss of subjecthood and selfhood in mystical experience offers woman an escape from patriarchy. The medieval female mystics embraced mysticism in order to escape from the teleology of a masculine Christian theology. Their ‘often self-inflicted abjection paradoxically opens up a space where [their] own pleasure can enfold’. That the poem is abject is not what Sheppard is arguing, and as rebarbative as the ‘mainstream’ writers might see the ‘non-mainstream’, that perception is not in contention here. However, the liberating of the performative into the understanding of the reader is likely to offer the ‘difficulty’ of the poem-utterance to the reader as well, an escape from the teleologies of mainstream poetics. The surface difficulty of that language might not be the poet’s abjection but it might indeed be the site of the poet’s pleasure, in Fisher’s words, the ‘state of mind’ of the poet. This might imply that linguistically-innovative poetics is the poetics of mysticism, rather than simply mystification. If that poetics of mysticism is correct, then what this thesis has to do is to suggest what kind of mysticism Fisher provides and what kind of mystic he is.

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76 R. Sheppard, The Poetry of Saying ibid.
77 J. L. Austin, How to do things with words (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1962)
78 T. Moi, Sexual/Textual Politics (London: Routledge, 1985) p.137
In the next three chapters of this thesis, I will characterize the mysticism of Fisher’s poetry by reference to definitions of mysticism posited, mainly but not solely, by Don Cupitt. This definition will firstly embrace the notion of the self and its instabilities in the next chapter. In chapter three, this thesis will look at the way such notions are developed in Fisher’s poetry’s interactions with ideas of the other. In the final long chapter, all these considerations will be used to discuss Fisher’s long poem *A Furnace.*
Chapter 2: Fisher and Self

That the writer and the I of the poem are one and the same has occasioned some debate. To some extent, this reaches its apogee in discussions of Romantic poetry with its emphasis on consciousness, nature, the development of the poet, and the mapping of all three in the poetics of the time. As Taylor puts in it Sources of the Self, for the Romantics the artistic self ‘an exceptional being, open to a rare vision; the poet is a person of exceptional sensibility.’ Here, the poet becomes that person of exceptional sensibility, because his writing forms an untrammelled conduit leading the reader to that ‘rare vision’. The writing allows the reader to perceive the poet as that exceptional being. Therefore, when Wordsworth describes the Solitary Reaper, ‘The poem treats the speaker’s reflections as entirely his own, not owing anything to convention as mediation between object and subject’. Rather more damningly, Easthope maintains that the lyrical ‘I’ represents:

the good old English transcendental ego, the “I” that surveys the world with splendid confidence from a position of supposed exteriority, reflects upon it (or meditates), and masters what it sees. An unreflecting free-standing ego is assumed and enacted in the secure positionality of “I am that coal,” “I’m not surprised,” “I was there,” “I climbed.”

As Easthope’s rather broadbrush irony suggests, the more recent mappings of that connection between the writer and the ‘I’, by later commentators, have happened in anti-thesis. Adorno posits the lyric ‘I’ as historically situated, appearing ‘today to be shaken to the core by the crisis of the individual, the collective substratum of poetry is thrusting upwards at the most widely various points, first simply as a ferment of individual expression itself, then perhaps also as an anticipation of a condition that transcends naked individuality in a positive way.’ Here, the stable connection between writer and subject is embodied in the lyric ‘I’, until, as part of the ferment encouraged by Romanticism, the lyric ‘I’ becomes part of its own struggle, with itself and with the other around it. For Culler, that crisis is embodied in Baudelaire’s romanticism, with its questioning of how one can experience or come to terms with the modern world. And whether an authorising lyric ‘I’ is sufficient and necessary to do those things.

However, the first commentators on Fisher’s writing seem to be harking back to that kind of lyric ‘I’, where the ‘self’ and the authorising consciousness of the poems were one and the same.

80 A. Easthope, Englishness and National Culture (London: Routledge, 1999) p.106
81 A. Easthope, Englishness and National Culture p.29
City’s first editor, Michael Shayer wrote in his introduction to the first edition of the poem’s ‘personal nakedness’ (City p.2). Eric Mottram writes of its ‘percentage of direct description and autobiography’.\(^{84}\) Donald Davie’s view was that the ‘I’ of City was not a persona.\(^{85}\) Even recently, Peter Makin has suggested that ‘Roy Fisher is a massive “presence” in English-language poetry; and perhaps a poet establishes himself in this way by being (verbally), with extreme accuracy, himself. But his self may take in greater or lesser swathes of what is around it.’\(^{86}\) Makin is writing about something slightly different to the previous commentators; Makin, I take it, is writing about the sense of Fisher’s voice, the sense of the indefinable style and tang of a poet’s presence on the page. This is a technical matter. However, Shayer, Mottram and Davie wish to establish that the person who speaks in the poems is the poet himself. This is an ethical matter. But both these perspectives overlap in the sense in which they wish to establish that it is the poet who is responsible for the poems, and for the ‘I’/Self that is declared in the poems. In the case of Shayer, Mottram and Davie, they wish, surely, to establish that Fisher has a moral responsibility for the statements and opinions held in the poems; Fisher may then be judged as correct or incorrect in his statements or opinions.

That scrutinised self may be wholly or partially moralised. We have seen how Davie wishes to locate Fisher in a socially liberal tradition. In this tradition, the poet must take responsibility for his or her judgements because of their effects, to use Fisher’s term, their entailments. These entailments include a moral responsibility to others. For the poet, the sense of a moral responsibility can be highly politicised as in Yeats’ concern that his writings might have sent men out to die. Or it could be attempted absence from the moral sphere, in the case of the language poets’ attempts to rend the signifier from the signified.

The early commentators, Shayer, Mottram and Davie, believe the authorising consciousness and the ‘I’ in the poems is one. However, Fisher himself comments that the ‘I’ in the poems is neither stable nor coterminous with the ‘Roy Fisher’ who has claimed authorship of the poems. If such comments do give access to the authorising consciousness of the poems,\(^{87}\) Fisher’s reply suggests that the mutability of that consciousness is mirrored in the kind of persona evoked in the poems. Fisher suggests that in the poems he wrote up to The Thing about Joe Sullivan, he was much preoccupied with not appearing in the poems. This was the result of his feeling his

\(^{84}\) E. Mottram, ‘Roy Fisher's Work’ p.10.
\(^{85}\) D. Davie, Thomas Hardy and British Poetry p.171
\(^{87}\) … and we have Kenneth Cox’s warning to bear in mind here (see below).
personality too strongly and wishing not to impose that on the reader. From Joe Sullivan on, he suggests, he was feeling ‘more comfortable in his own skin’. Thus, the ‘I’ that appears from these poems on is in perpetual negotiation with the authorising consciousness.

If that authorising consciousness, that is, Fisher himself, is mutable, then the negotiations with the ‘I’ are inherently unstable. This is, perhaps, to say no more than the poet and the poems change over time; that the vicissitudes of the life inspire the vicissitudes of the poems. But what is important here is that Fisher seems more willing than most poets to orient his poetics towards this negotiation. Such a recent statement occurs at the beginning of Fisher’s collected poems, ‘These poems no more amount to a biography than I do’ (LSI p. 9). However, Fisher actually does amount, as a human being, to a biography. O’Brien glosses this as:

Because of Fisher’s inclusion of consciousness itself in his poems, the poetic imagination has, as it were, no back wall to rest against. The mind itself is continually becoming part of the picture. While this has become a commonplace of contemporary thought, few notable English poets have sought to live by its implications as Fisher has.

O’Brien is perhaps wrong to suggest that there is no ‘back wall to rest against’. This is because Fisher has ‘places where a thought might grow’; places have limits, however vague and porous those limits might deliberately be. And Fisher has used a range of metaphors to suggest those limits. For example, Fisher talks about the poems ‘getting around in the mind’, and the sense of a recursive re-examination of the self is one way in which Fisher gets about in the mind. In his introduction to the 1971 edition of The Cut Pages, Fisher comments that ‘The point of interest for me here was not so much the ideas as the slowed-down exploration of the kind of field in which ideas exist, and the ways they have of succeeding one another.’ Thus, for Fisher, there is a ‘field’ for these ideas. This field might be quite porous and itself coterminous with the mutable self, but there is a field. In his interview with Rasula and Irwin, Fisher notes that City is ‘meant to be about a city which has already turned into a city of the mind’. Weatherhead, however, feels that Fisher ‘much more wary, believes the poet’s creative act is itself an infliction and, in his poem City, asserts that he should absent himself from his city for fear of endowing it with a structure’. Fisher, then, has a wincing engagement with the urban; if Birmingham is what he

88 R. Sheppard, Turning the Prism pp.6-7
89 S. O’Brien, The Deregulated Muse p.116
thinks with he acknowledges it as a particularly blunt instrument, capable of destruction even in
the moment of perception (LSI p.285).

Here are the opening lines of ‘Handsworth Liberties’:

Open –
and away

in all directions:
room at last for the sky
and a horizon;

for pale new towers in the north
right on the line.

It all radiates outwards
in a lightheaded air
without image;

there is a world.
It has been made
out of the tracks of waves
broken against the rim
and coming back awry. (LSI p. 270)

If this is the Birmingham that Fisher ‘thinks with’, then the field is a perceptual field, with a locus
which may or may not be the authorising consciousness of the poem. Whatever the ‘it’ is that
radiates outwards, the deliberate etiolation of the pronoun renders ‘it’ an empty placeholder that
allows the writing to have a centre that is also an absence. That absence was further reflected
upon by Fisher in 1987, in a prose commentary on the composition of the ‘Handsworth
Liberties’ sequence. Fisher notes that these poems grew out of a mental association he made
between particular pieces of music and particular locations near his childhood home in the
Handsworth district of Birmingham.94 Thus the poems are doubly combined with musical and
physical associations that are only available to Fisher but which he wishes to communicate to the
reader. Fisher wishes both to unconfine that location for the reader with the adjective ‘Open-
…’. At the same time, the poem establishes that the horizon exists as a physical barrier that
throws perceptions back, so that the places between the centre and the rim are created out of
that relation.

This is very far from the Romantic ideal of the poet as a person of exceptional sensibility
confident in his or her ability to effortlessly transcend themselves and reach out to a clearly

perceived other. At the same time, where Fisher eschews the movement of the self towards the divine, he does not eschew a mystical movement that enables an exploration within the states of mind of the perceptual plane. Fisher establishes the creation of a world ‘in the tracks of waves/broken against the rim/ and coming back awry’ between centre and rim of the horizon that signals a unique sense of self in Fisher’s writing. It is in this ‘coming back awry’, I would suggest, that Fisher ‘gets about’ and establishes the locus of the authorising consciousness.

It is also, perhaps, why there can never be a totalising ‘I’ at the heart of Fisher’s writing. Fisher wishes to explore the ways in which that perceptual field is created in and out of itself. He sets up states of mind in which that perceptual field can be explored in all its riches ‘as far as the eye can see’; and not only visual, but also tactile, olfactory and auditory, as he remarks to Rasula and Irwin.95 These sensual organs located as they are in the physical body also draw attention to Fisher’s own comment that these analogies are explicit, ‘… what I talk about has got body analogues all over it, because I’m a committed puritanical sensualist; I want to talk about body imagery’.96 It is this sensual exploration that may ultimately lead to the kind of synaesthesia that Fisher describes in ‘Handsworth Liberties’. But what is ‘puritanical’ in Fisher is not so amongst the medieval female mystics from Hollywood’s pantheon whose ‘authority depended on extraordinary visionary, auditory, or somatic experiences of the divine presence’.97 Such authority in Fisher is, as I have suggested above, in his ability to overlay such body imagery upon the states of mind that he also explores.

What such a synaesthetic exploration may also lead to is the possibility that the horizon that is the rim of Fisher’s perceptual field, of Fisher’s ‘mind’ contained within the body. Peter Robinson, one of Fisher’s most important contemporary critics, chooses a more simplified position in his description of the self, ‘My inclination is to understand the realm of individual consciousness as entirely coordinated with, and inseparable from the contingent fact of an individual body, with its vicissitudes, in the world. […] situated conceptually at the point where a perceiving subject, a self, seeks to make meaning-filled form from what is experienced in a field of vision, a human situation’.98 This suggests that perceiving and making ‘meaning-filled form’ is a process, in which both the subject and the object are mutable. It is in constantly and explicitly

95 J. Rasula, and M. Erwin, Nineteen Poems p.13
acknowledging this mutability that makes Fisher unique and important. As he commented in 1977, in a poem ironically called ‘Style’:

Those intricacies
of self and sign. The power to mimic
and be myself. I couldn’t. (LSI p. 207)

This mimicking of the relationship between self and sign is metonymic of the ‘coming back awry’ between the horizon and the locus of the perceptual field that creates the world. Fisher abruptly establishes a phoric reference in the word ‘those’ that appears to refer anaphorically forward but retains a sense of a backward cataphoric glance to nouns before it. At the end is the careful ellipsis after ‘I couldn’t’, which forces the reader into questioning ‘what’ the ‘I’ couldn’t do; as well as the jokey, throw-away nature of that elision. The effect of these sleights of hand on the coherence of the discourse is violently centrifugal, while the meaning is centripetally opposite, and pulls the reader back into the intimacies of the nexus of self and sign. Part of the pressure of such an utterance, I would suggest, is in the equally centripetal identification that the reader is likely to make between the ‘I’ and the author, Fisher. The reader is bounced by the utterance between self and sign, and the power to mimic that relationship, whilst retaining a sense of identity/selfhood that the presence of the first person singular pronoun automatically induces. If this short excerpt is about style, it is about the style of proceeding rather than the style of the surface of the poem. It may be, in Robinson’s terms, about proceeding within the confines of the one body, the one perceptual field, one human situation.

In its concentration on process as flux, Fisher’s poetry also mimics Cupitt’s recent descriptions of the process of mystical writing:

Mystical writing, like the deconstruction of which it is the forerunner, has the effect of dismantling all substances, hierarchies, scales, and foundations, and so melting everything down into immanence – a one-level continuum. […] From this perspective what is the religious object to be? It is something that Heidegger calls Be-ing or E-vent, which is (roughly) all existence seen as continuous temporal process, as Becoming, or Forthcoming.99

Cupitt comes at mysticism from a particular point of view, that of the theological apostate. Cupitt embraces a post-structuralism and the realm of difference that have created a self-defining process of mythical play. In this proceeding of constant deferral and play, nothing exists outside the symbolic order. For Cupitt, this is the ‘mysticism of secondariness’, where happiness is created in the locus of play without the ethical paradigms bequeathed by the Abrahamic

traditions. These mystics are men and particularly women whose unwitting rationale was the subversion of a system. The mystics subverted a hierarchic church by treading the borders of rationality and faith; such was their ‘play’ within the ethical structures of the medieval church, that many of these mystics were actively banned and their writings burned. Fisher’s subversion is hardly quite as life threatening but it has some equivalence in Fisher’s work in its attacks on civic authority and the mechanisms of urban life. Fisher might seem to paraphrase Cupitt’s message with ‘No system describes the world’ from ‘Metamorphoses’ (LSI p.317).

The ontological position of mysticism in Cupitt’s purview is that it is ‘a form of religious consciousness that actively rejoices in and affirms all features of the postmodern condition’ which is ‘always in secondariness, we are always moving around as a sniper does, trying different angles’. Cupitt sees the mystic as exploring the perspectives, particularly on God. But not only God, these mystics see ‘all existence […] as continuous temporal process, as Becoming, or Forth-coming’. In this Heraclitean fire and flux, the hierarchies are dismantled and everything is melted down to one immanence. The mystics looked for a personal communication with an immanent deity without the intermediary of an organised priesthood; this is one reason why they were often considered heretical. A consequence of this levelling immanence was that the ‘common people’ also had access to the Godhead too; immanence equals access. And where Cupitt sees ‘one immanence’ Fisher sees ‘hidden relativities’, and also we are reminded of Anne Cluytsenaar’s comment on the surrealist ‘latencies’ in Fisher’s writing. In A Furnace, such a Heraclitean fire ‘persuades obstinate substances to alter their condition and show relativities which would otherwise remain hidden by their concreteness’ (A Furnace p.vii). This is an ontology of flux where the imagination of a poet in a place between the centre and the rim perceives the world made out of the tracks of waves coming back from the rim awry.

In ‘The Memorial Fountain’, itself a ‘memorial’ to water and its ontological flux, Robinson sees Fisher as attempting to create ‘a further removed “self”’. Here, Fisher steps ‘outside the poem to comment not only on the recorded scene but on the artist recording that scene’. However, this withdrawal can only be partial, as Robinson notes that ‘the embedded self of the poet writing is […] present in word choices, all of them, but particularly of verbs and adjectives…’ which is

100 D. Cupitt, Mysticism after Modernity p.7
102 D. Cupitt, Mysticism after Modernity p.3
103 ibid.
104 P. Robinson, Selves and Situations p.5
one definition of the authorising consciousness of the poem.\textsuperscript{105} This does not invalidate Robinson’s initial point as the poet watches himself within a poetic hall of mirrors. Russell Hoban describes this in his masterpiece of children’s literature, \textit{The Mouse and his Child}, ‘The last visible dog’: the label on the can of dog food shows an anthropomorphised dog in the position of a waiter holding a tray, on which is a can of dog food on whose label is a picture of an anthropomorphised dog in the position of a waiter holding a tray, on which is a can of dog food whose label shows an anthropomorphised dog, etc., each ‘view’ receding until ‘the last visible dog’.\textsuperscript{106} ‘This is an ontology in both constant diminution of, and progression into itself; its intentionality in permanent regression, ludic or otherwise, as we have just examined in the short excerpt from ‘Style’. In the second part of \textit{City}, published as \textit{Then Hallucinations: City II}, Fisher echoes this, ‘I can call up a series of such glimpses that need have no end, for they are all the bodies of strangers’(\textit{City II} p.5). Here, Fisher’s modal verbs ‘can’, and ‘need’ create a field in which ability, possibility and necessity combine in a raw and brooding self-hood that regresses even in its projections, because the other is a stranger from which the subject is deracinated.

For commentators on mysticism, this process of negotiation between Self and Other is both noetic and an expression of the ineffable. Both these terms are open to negotiation. The \textit{Shorter Oxford Dictionary} defines noesis as, ‘a process or aspect of perceiving or thinking, as opp. to an object of perception or thought’\textsuperscript{107}; an interesting foreshortening of the area of the definition to the subject. Both Katz and Matilal paraphrase William James’ espousal of the noetic that forms part of James taxonomy of mystical experience. Katz suggests the noetic is ‘although similar to states of feeling, mystical states seem to those who experience them to be also states of knowledge’.\textsuperscript{108} Matilal paraphrases James’ notion of noetic as ‘the experiencer becoming directly aware of the ultimacy of the experience’.\textsuperscript{109} These definitions overlap somewhat in the words ‘perceiving’, ‘knowledge’ and ‘aware’. In these concepts, the subject apprehends, or takes in, from the object. In this taking in, the ‘mystic’ gains a knowledge of the object. Katz and Matilal’s definitions also overlap in their use of the word ‘experience’, which may translate for my use of the phrase ‘taking in’.

\textsuperscript{105} ibid.
\textsuperscript{106} R. Hoban, \textit{The Mouse and His Child} (London: Puffin, 1975)
Coterminous with the knowledge and experience gained in mystical experience is the sense that the experience is ‘ineffable’, defined by William James as ‘the incommunicableness of the transport is the keynote of all mysticism’.\textsuperscript{110} Katz paraphrases James thus, ‘an experience or subject that defies expression such that no adequate report of its content can be given in words – it follows that its quality must be chiefly experienced; it cannot be imported or transferred to others’.\textsuperscript{111} In 1961, Stace, too, stated that ineffability was a key category in genuine mystical experience. Ineffability was combined with ‘paradoxicality’ ‘to cloak experience from investigation and hold mysterious whatever ontological commitments one has’.\textsuperscript{112} This latter comment seems to suggest that the mystic is involved in deliberate obfuscation. However, Cupitt’s view is slightly more forgiving; ‘mystical texts were understood to contain descriptions of mystical states which in turn were thought of as being, needing to be, pure non-linguistic states of consciousness’.\textsuperscript{113} And for Augustine ineffability was a logical contradiction, ‘Thus there arises a curious contradiction of words, because if the unspeakable is what cannot be spoken of, it is not unspeakable if it can be called unspeakable. And this opposition of words is rather to be avoided by silence than to be explained away by speech’.\textsuperscript{114} Jantzen is also unequivocal in her attitude to ineffability, stating that mystical writers, ‘come across as skilled in linguistic usage, and not in one genre only but in many’.\textsuperscript{115} For Cupitt, the mystics were above all writers, wordsmiths who came into themselves and their mysticism through the very act of writing, ‘Not reporters but \textit{writers}, in the sense of being intellectuals, people highly conscious of language, people who convey their message, not by pointing to something outside language, but by the way they play games \textit{with} language, tormenting it because it torments them, keeping to the rules in such a \textit{wicked} way as to get round the rules’.\textsuperscript{116}

Fisher’s equivalent to this kind of torment, I would suggest, is in the discomfort that the early poems feel in the process of their creation. They enact not only the wincing at process that Weatherhead finds, but also the noesis enacted in them is provisional at best and tormented at worst. The autobiographical element in the early poems is discomfited by the processes of apprehension that the poems enact. In this, the subversion is not of authority, let alone theological authority, unless it is considered that Fisher is subverting the authority of the lyric

\textsuperscript{110} W. James, \textit{The Varieties of Religious Experience} (London: Routledge 1902[ 2002])p.367 \\
\textsuperscript{111} S. T. Katz, ‘Language, Epistemology and Mysticism’ ibid. \\
\textsuperscript{112} W. Stace, \textit{Mysticism and Philosophy} (London: Macmillan, 1961) p.49 \\
\textsuperscript{113} D. Cupitt, \textit{Mysticism after modernity} p.33 \\
\textsuperscript{115} G. Jantzen, \textit{Power, Gender and Christian Mysticism} p.280 \\
\textsuperscript{116} D. Cupitt, \textit{Mysticism after Modernity} p.61. Cupitt’s italics.
tradition or the moralised voice of the Movement poets for whom he had such little sympathy. Fisher's subversion is of the authority of the voice itself, where the authorising consciousness is willing to place that discomfort with noesis on the surface of the writing, even make it the subject of the writing.

In *Then Hallucinations: City II*, Fisher enunciated an ontology of the deracinated self which appeared to respond, at that time, to his needs as an artist:

> I have often felt myself to be vicious, in living so much by the eye, yet among so many people. I can be afraid that the egg of light through which I see these bodies might present itself as a key-hole. […]

> I want to believe I live in a single world. That is why I am keeping my eyes at home while I can. The light keeps separating the world like a table knife: it sweeps across what I see and suggests what I do not. The imaginary comes to me with as much force as the real, the remembered with as much force as the immediate. The countries on the map divide and pile up like ice-floes: what is strange is that I feel no stress, no grating discomfort among the confusion, no loss; only a belief that I should not be here. I see the iron fences and the shallow ditches of the countryside the mild wind has travelled over. I cannot enter the countryside; nor can I escape it. I cannot join the mild wind and the shallow ditches, I cannot lay the light across the world and then watch it slide away. Each thought is at once translucent and icily capricious. A polytheism without gods. (*City II* pp.8-9)

For the persona of the part of *City* quoted above, the self lives in such conscious contingency with the other that it feels an extreme guilt, reflecting upon its existence as vicious and violent in its voyeurism. And if we interpret the ‘egg of light’ as metaphorical of the eye, then the self here is afraid that it might penetrate the lives of others not simply because the eye is a key hole, but also because the light is a key that allows that self to enter the lives of others. Here the artist/writer takes on the guise and viciousness of the Peeping Tom of Powell and Pressburger’s eponymous film, or adopts the attitudes outlined in Sartre’s famous section on ‘The Look’ in *Being and Nothingness*.¹¹⁷ Both Powell and Pressburger, and Sartre emphasise the self-consciousness of ‘gaze’. For Sartre, the viewing I is caught in a kind of ‘inflagrante delicto’ of the eye, caught gazing in through a keyhole at the object by a third person. At this moment, the viewing I is confirmed in the limits of its existence because of the self-conscious shame that it feels. The extremity of this feeling is ameliorated slightly in Fisher because part of the self-consciousness he feels is a self-consciousness towards the nature of his art, of the unstable contradictions that a perceiving realism will adduce.

On the one hand, the persona suggests that it does actually possess insights into the ‘lives’ of others, and that its insights into the other are valid, that there is a noesis. On the other hand, what the eye perceives are ‘bodies’; as the persona goes on to say, ‘I see them as homunculi, moving privately each in a softly lit fruit in a nocturnal tree’ (City II p.5). The persona seems confident in its own ability to perceive; but its own feedback mechanism creates a capturing process where by it establishes the other as the contents of a jar, albeit a frugivorous jar with its own lighting system, and hung in the Tree of Night. Although it does issue a disclaimer ‘Yet I can find no sadism in the way I see them now’ (City II p.5), we might see this as disingenuous – where are homunculi normally kept?

Below this, the self retreats from the Peeping Tom confidence of the earlier utterance; its ontology is deracinated and kept sequestered. Because the self wishes to believe that it lives in a single world, it is initially forced to limit the world that it sees. The light becomes almost too bright for it, sweeping like a search light across the field of vision in ways which throw up suggestions beyond the ontology of the self; both the ‘imaginary’ and the ‘remembered’ are so ontologically surplus that the self acknowledges both confusion and loss. Although the self states that there is no discomfort or stress in this process, it remains ontologically and noetically deracinated. Its vision remains in a state of limbo neither able to enter what is envisioned nor being able to escape it. Yet this vision is essentially unthreatening; the wind is ‘mild’ and the ditches ‘shallow’.

The ‘I’ is suspended between the volition of belief, ‘I want to believe’ and the parallelism of the repeated, and re-emphasising, ‘I cannot’ plus its infinitive. Within the grammar, the ‘I’ is suspended by and between verbs of perception and cognition where the self ‘feels itself’, and ‘wants to believe’.118 The ‘I’ sits in the subject position and ‘cannot’ means and contains not only ability and possibility but also permission. This suspension is held within the iterative simple present tense; the mental processes here part of the facticity of the self ‘getting about in the mind’. Light, itself immaterial, is the subject of the material process verb ‘divides’. The light performs operations outside a self ontologically arrested at the nexus of its own perceptions and cognition.

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In addition, the ‘can’s outweigh the ‘want’s and the ‘should’s. In particular, that rather odd locution in the second line of this passage ‘I can be afraid’. What Fisher pushes onto the surface of the passage is the tension held in the modal auxiliary ‘can’ between ‘ability’ and ‘possibility’. Fisher’s Self, here, is arrested between the volition of his own ability, his willingness to use that ability, and the nature of a possibility that his self must negotiate with. He has neither the ability nor the possibility of entering the countryside, nor can he escape it. Thus, this selfhood appears to be held in an ontological friction between its own resources, that is, ability, and what the external world offers it, i.e., possibilities. Fisher’s quest is partially a Romantic, noetic quest for the possibilities of unity with ‘the mild wind and the shallow ditches’, but a quest matched by the seeming inability of his being able to avail himself of those possibilities. This mimics Hollywood’s comment on the ontology of the mystic, ‘a potential antithesis is created between the will and the desire, on one hand and the life of the annihilated, free and detached soul on the other’.  

Fisher wants to ‘lay a light across the world’ for the momentary illumination that might afford him, but he seems neither to have the ability or the possibility. As Bush comments on this passage, ‘The metaphysical underwriting finally demands the authority of multiple visions, but without the gods’. This is the ontologically icy caprice of the self frozen by its own thought. The light that has separated the world is not susceptible to the control of the visionary; the visionary cannot use the light to illuminate the world and then watch it dissipate with the view left intact, and the visionary has ceded control of the vision to the light. The light offers translucency but not transparency, a partial vision and opening up, but not the reifying Romantic wholeness that thinking might bring to the self. The visions, internalised within the sheltering and sequestered self as ‘thoughts’, have a volition of their own, their own alterity. This is Fisher’s ‘ineffability’, where the vision hangs tantalizingly within the consciousness, and where the writing does articulate it. At the same time, that vision is so circumscribed and caught within the self that the limits of the vision are acknowledged in the moment of apprehension.

On the one hand, Fisher is caught between the noesis that the self aspires towards, and ‘wants’; that it needs to be most fully alive, to eschew its own deracination. On the other hand, Fisher is caught by the sense of a blocked, and blocking, ineffability that the self recognises even in the moment of its own volition. Perhaps this is what Fisher means when he comments on the

‘dramatising’ of the self in his writing. The self is Hamlet-like in its inability to deal with choice. The selfhood of the writer is, itself, a dramatic creation, where City is, as Kerrigan suggests, a bildungsroman. Kerrigan notes that this passage comes from ‘a layered contrivance’ that had been salvaged from Fisher’s attempt at a large novel of Birmingham, and which had been, in part pieced together by Fisher’s then editor, Michael Shayer, so that ‘the subject could hardly be consistent’. This chimes in with the comment that we noted above in the poem ‘Style’ and also in Fisher’s introduction to The Long and the Short of It that we have noted before, ‘These poems amount to no more of an autobiography than I do’(LSI p.6). It is interesting that Peter Robinson does not repeat in the context of Fisher, his [i.e. Robinson’s] comment on W.S.Graham in the previous chapter in his book on poetic ‘selves’, that ‘the “I” furthers its continuities by rendering the discontinuities it experiences.’

Glover, from a post-Saussurean perspective, sees the dramatisation of the ‘I’ as linguistic, dependent upon the cohesions and coherences of the text around it; the literary ‘I’ takes on dimensions according to the fictions of which it is part:

‘I’ is adhesive, elusive and irreducible. At least part of the explanation of these properties is that this is an indexical: a word which varies in what it refers to according to features of the context in which it is used. (Some other indexicals are ‘this’, ‘here’ and ‘now’).

Glover’s ‘I’ is a more elastic than the ‘I’ that may be ‘merely’ ironized. Here, an ‘I’ that is ‘elusive’, yet also ‘adhesive’ and ‘irreducible’, is situated in the times and places that are realized in the context. At the same time, as Glover notes, this ‘I’ does not actually refer to anything, other than a rather mysterious ‘self’. Whereas other indexicals such as ‘here’ or ‘now’ may be realised in the context, the ‘I’ may not be, in the same way. Glover’s ‘I’ is a linguistic reification of the ‘I’ that is unstable in Fisher; indeed, in Glover’s usage, it is the unstable ‘I’ in all literature as the significations of the signs are worked out on the surface of the text. It is the control, or lack of it, perhaps, that constitutes Cupitt’s sense of play, mystical or otherwise.

As Gregson notes, in later interviews, Fisher distanced himself from the ‘statement’ that this passage from Then Hallucinations: City II appears to make. The Fisher of his later work might not see the fragmentariness of the consciousness of the City poet, as discomforting and would tend

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121 R. Fisher, Interviews through Time passim.
123 This comment was written some forty-five years after City was published.
124 P. Robinson, Selves and Situations p.85
126 J. Glover, I p.69
to ‘enjoy’ it, or ‘play’ with it. As Gregson notes, ‘City is unusual in the intensity of the state of mind that lies behind it’. Fisher’s creation of the voyeur in his own work is a centripetal device which delimits his visions even while City itself is a work which privileges fragmentation and instability, and which moves technically between high surrealism and/or expressionism in the ‘poems’ and documentary realism in the prose sections; and Davie, among others, has considered the prose passages to be more successful than the poetry. For Gregson, ‘Fisher’s more mature work presents an ambivalent context where objective and subjective are buoyantly mixed’. It is not only the technical distance that Fisher had travelled between the publication of the text in 1962 and his commentary on it in 1975; it is also, surely, an ethical distance as well.

It is a moot point whether ‘buoyantly’ is a term we can completely agree with. In his mature works, there is a more-than-occasional tendency for the wily, disclaiming Fisher to significantly muddy the waters his readers are buoyed upon. In the first edition of A Furnace, Fisher prints footnotes at points where he appears to be limiting the reader’s stance. At the end of the first section of A Furnace, ‘Calling’, Fisher describes landscape near his current house in Earl Sterndale, Staffordshire. He mentions Gradbach Hill, and under the passage prints this note:

Gradbach Hill. In North-West Staffordshire close to the Three Shires Head, where Derbyshire, Cheshire and Staffordshire meet. Facing it across the Black Brook is the rocky cleft called Lud’s Church, a place whose supposed connection with the composition of Gawain and the Green Knight I am willing to believe in. (A Furnace p.10)

If the ‘I’ here is ironised or dramatised then there seems almost no point to this note at all. Certainly, Fisher did not need to add the final clause; there are a number of ways in which this might have been re-written to leave out the first person. The note adds a layer of mythos to the poem. Fisher the poet creates a connection with the Gawain poet and adds the gravitas of Arthurian legend to the gravitas already lent by Fisher’s references, in this text, to John Cowper Powys. If the ‘I’ here is not Fisher the person and writer, then the last visible dog-iness of this kind of utterance disappears into an infinity without, to mix the metaphor, any rabbit in the last visible hat.

Gregson feels that Fisher is involved ‘in continual argument with realism [that] Fisher respects’ and ‘what has especially concerned him is the way that the “real” changes according to the levels

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127 I. Gregson, Contemporary Poetry and Postmodernism p.173
128 I. Gregson, Contemporary Poetry and Postmodernism p.175
129 D. Davie, Thomas Hardy and British Poetry passim.
130 I. Gregson, Contemporary Poetry and Postmodernism p.177
131 In LSI (2005), these footnotes are printed at the end of the book.
and kinds of subjectivity from which it is perceived.\footnote{I. Gregson, \textit{Contemporary Poetry and Postmodernism} p.2} This is the dialogic self, that produces from different parts of it(self) according to the moment of its production, and where, when, what and how that production arises. It is this dialogic self which Fisher has become comfortable with in the period since the voyeurism of \textit{City}; the arena of play and torment that Cupitt finds in the writings of the mystics.

In ‘The Memorial Fountain’, from 1965, we can see Fisher tussling with what is paradoxical between Self and Other which Fisher the artist both finds and makes explicit; the description is both piercingly accurate but also understated:

…water in the basin
where the column falls
shaking,
rapid and wild,
in cross-waves, in back-waves
the light glinting and blue,
as in a wind
though there is none.

Harsh

Far-off scaffolding
bitten against the air. (\textit{LSI} p.166)

Fisher’s interpolation of ‘though there is none’ offers the first clear sign that the writer is ‘describing’. But the next phrase ‘Harsh skyline!’ offers another intervention, with its initial isolation at the end of the orthographic line, its violent enjambment across the lines and its exclamation mark; in a very ‘traditional’ fashion, the poet apostrophises an image for the reader. ‘The Memorial Fountain’ continues with:

Sombre mood
in the presence of things,
no matter what things;
respectful sepia. (\textit{LSI} p.167)

This ‘sombre mood’ has arisen out of an exclamation on the aesthetic of the situation. Fisher now suggests that the real ‘presences’ of these things is affective in a quasi religious sense. In terms of the empiricism outlined above, the things, as the object of the art, affect the subject; there is enough in these things for them to be noetic, and ontologically affective. The subject is ‘in the presence of things’, both engaged by and held at one remove from the things that the subject is ‘respectful’ of in the manner that a fading photograph is respectful of the objects captured within its borders. Again, Fisher the poet has taken the decision to place these things
within the borders of his perception, but he is held at an ontological distance by the respect that
the scene engenders in him. Thus it is interesting that in the layout of the poem on the page, the
two parts introducing ‘This scene’ and, below it ‘And the scene?’ are set in indented sections; the
question mark pushing these ‘scenes’ into rhetorical moments of their own.

Although, at this moment in the text, Fisher’s ‘I’ is absent from his own reportage because the
sentence does not contain the first person or some suitable copula verb, it is the writer who, out
of his selfhood, is managing the scene. In Robinson’s terms, the ‘I’ establishes its continuities in
realising the discontinuities it experiences; the I here may be seen as the authorising
consciousness. While the narrator of the perceptions does not claim the sombre mood as his
alone, and his absence opens that mood out for anyone’s possession, the reader is lead to share
Fisher’s sensibility and witness; thus the narrator’s solipsism pulls the reader into collusion, the
sombre mood becomes ours too.

This absence of the first person narrator continues into the section where Fisher outlines the
‘process’ of the art itself:

As for the fountain:
nothing in the describing
beyond what shows
for anyone;
above all
no ‘atmosphere’. (LSI p.167)

Fisher’s gerund ‘describing’ floats free of a grammatical subject; the nouns ‘nothing’ and ‘what’
also avoid any deixis that might suggest what the ‘nothing’ or the ‘what’ might actually ‘be’! And,
when Fisher points out, ‘as for the fountain’, he attempts to thrust aside the description with
which he started the poem, and push the object of the poem to the point of aesthetic nullity in
order to render it totally available to every gaze. In the overt eschewal of ‘atmosphere’, he would
appear to complete that process; and reject the means to push beyond the scene. The use of
quotation marks around the word also destabilises it in the light of the different voices and
registers the poem uses. In the next two lines, orthographically connected to the six above them,
he states, ‘It’s like this often - / I don’t exaggerate.’ We could assume that the pro-form ‘It’s’
points towards the fountain, itself, but the ‘this’ that the ‘It’ is like is far more problematic. Since
the poem has been commenting on the ‘artistic’ process itself, the reader is further bound in an
acceptance of the accuracy, or the achievement of the poet’s poem. Because Roy Fisher’s name
is attached to the poem, the reader has to accept on Fisher’s terms that the ‘It’ is like the ‘this’,
that there is epistemological consistency. This binding-in of the reader into Fisher’s reading and
description of the memorial fountain, is further tightened with that following line ‘I don’t exaggerate’; how does the reader ‘know’ that Fisher doesn’t exaggerate?

The final passage of ‘The Memorial Fountain’ runs as follows:

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

Romantic notion. (LSI p.63)

Moore suggests that:

… the mystic’s paradoxes are central to his experience, and contradictory descriptions are one of the most striking characteristics of his attempts to say what his experience was like. Worse still, it is evident that the mystic not only feels that the experience was of a contradictory sort, but … that the object of his experience has contradictory properties.  

In this early poem, Fisher presents the struggle over what such paradoxes and contradictions might mean to him. The permutations of relationships now seem infinitesimal; as Fisher asks the reader, again, to step aside and view ‘the scene’, which now includes the ‘poet’; in ethnographic terms, the poet has become the participant observer. As a result of the ‘poet’s’ taking the reader into his confidence, the reader is drawn into the further assumption that the poet is Fisher, himself, and we are party to the inner struggle of that poet to privilege realism over a kind of ‘scholasticism of opinion’. Finally, Fisher ironizes the situation further by stating that this ‘working / to distinguish an event / from an opinion;’ is a ‘romantic notion’. ‘Romantic’ in the commonplace sense of its being unrealistic, and ‘romantic’ in the larger sense where ‘Romanticism’ stands for the larger quest for wholeness and unity between subject and object through the transparent medium of the language. Fisher ironises both meanings here, and appears to pull the rug out from under his own position as the authorising consciousness. The

attempt to distinguish an event from an opinion is un-‘realistic’, since both realism and artifice may fail in their own ways and we note that Fisher calls himself a ‘poet’ in this piece. And it is the poet who decides to write, to allow the authorising consciousness to work. It is also Romantic in the larger sense of the poetics of the situation, where the poet seeks for noetic wholeness, in the face of the difficulties in pressing ahead with that desire. In which case, in this ‘scene’, Fisher acknowledges the force of what is unknowable and unsayable, the paradoxicality of the scene.

The eponymous object of the poem, the memorial fountain itself, militates against an easy empiricism by its very existence. The fountain, itself, does not stop moving, and has instability built in and its existence as a ‘memorial’ of events ‘fixed in the past’ is undermined. In that Fisher the writer commemorates the thirty-five-year-old man watching the fountain, the memorial fountain might be metonymic of the commemorative act of poetry itself. Michael O’Neill comments that ‘The Memorial Fountain’ ‘…displays an eloquent guardedness about the rewards of the self-scrutiny to which it is impelled’. Elsewhere, Ian Gregson suggests that Fisher’s poetry involves a ‘scepticism [that] leads him to reflect upon perception to show how disconcertingly the ground between objective and subjective shifts, and to reflect upon representation to show how a further questionableness is introduced when perception is translated into language or art’. Gregson paraphrases himself somewhat with the comment that in Fisher’s poetry ‘…there are doubts about where the self ends and its environment begins’. The poem is written in open acknowledgement that the knowledge gained in the experience is tormentingly provisional; the knowledge itself is a kind of play, in Cupitt’s terms, as the water itself plays. In this version of the ineffable, the Memorial Fountain is both the empirical ‘entailment in the world’ and it is not. It is both available for apprehension and not, and the poem enacts its own provisional noesis, its getting about in the mind, between the absent locus of perception and the rim of the visible world. The Memorial Fountain is outlined in words on the blank page but cannot enact the real presence of the ‘thing itself’.

This ontological doubt, the excitation of Fisher’s relationship with empiricism, is further explored in ‘Wonders of Obligation’ from 1979, the poem that Fisher chooses to open his The Long and the Short of It: Collected Poems (2005):

135 I. Gregson, Contemporary Poetry and Postmodernism p.172
136 I. Gregson, Contemporary Poetry and Postmodernism p.173
We know that hereabouts
comes into being
the malted-milk brickwork
on its journey past the sun. (*LSI* p.1414)

In the first two words of the book, with that first person plural, Fisher draws the reader into collusion with the purpose of the following verb ‘know’. Fisher’s use of the simple present tense reinforces the certainty of that verb; there is a definiteness about the cognition presumed here. Although this is followed by ‘that’ as a complementizer joining the verb to the complement ‘hereabouts’, there is also the sense that ‘that’ here has a deictic function, a pointing to something, as if Fisher had written ‘We know that’ and both line and clause ended there. When Fisher adds to that ‘hereabouts’, our certainty is undermined; Fisher does not offer the definitive ‘here’ but loosens that deixis with ‘hereabouts’; and with this loosening adds pressure on the verb ‘know’. Therefore, at the very beginning of *The Long and the Short of It*, Fisher appears to eschew the voyeuristic solipsisms of *City*, and attempts to create an inclusive epistemology that seems to be coterminous with the ontology of the poem. However, while the solipsisms of *City* might have been centripetal in their explicit voraciousness, the first line of *The Long and the Short of It* is no less centripetal. Fisher creates a complicit epistemology which is no less controlling than that outlined earlier.

In the second line, of ‘Wonders of Obligation’ we have a claim that existence, ‘comes into being’. What is emerging into existence is withheld by the inversion of subject and verb, but we, the readers, are already complicit in that knowledge. In the next two lines, Fisher both reinforces that reification and undermines it. The reader first meets ‘malted-milk’, much as she might meet it if she went into the Co-op; for ‘malted-milk’ as an epithet normally applies to biscuits, and yet this is applied to something altogether more solid ‘brickwork’. Fisher might seem to be playing with the aural chiming of ‘bis…’ with ‘brick…’, but in terms of ‘reality’ there is a clear tension between the friability and edibility of ‘biscuits’ and ‘brickwork’. However, in both images, there is also the accessibility that is domestic, and Fisher draws upon the common colouring of the two ‘things’. To the certainties of that first line verb, ‘knows’, then, Fisher adds the ‘reality’ of the brickwork. If this is noesis, then it is noesis with a comforting domesticity.

If, however, in the first three lines of the poem, Fisher draws the reader into a complicit reality, in the final line of the stanza, Fisher deliberately undermines that complicity. By stating that the brickwork is ‘on its journey past the sun’, Fisher ‘establishes’ what both is and is not real. The
brickwork cannot move, it cannot have ‘journeys’; by definition it is fixed unless it is being or has been demolished and lost its fixity; let alone have journeys ‘past the sun’. However, in this last adverbial phrase, Fisher pulls a final rug from underneath the reader. Where a reader is used to such commonplace notions as ‘The sun passed behind the tree’, scientific knowledge tells us that such a proposition is false, and that, in the scientific sense, Fisher is correct. Our metaphorical sense of the language, though, means that the sentence and its proposition are perfectly acceptable. Thus Fisher’s empiricism holds both the scientific realism and the linguistic reality in tension. Fisher pulls the reader both into and away from ontologies of realism and ‘Wonders of Obligation’ continues to twist and turn under the yolk of empiricism.

In this text, the self provides the reader with an epistemological certainty that was missing in the earlier texts. It is that certainty that holds the address of the poem, and holds the reader and the persona of the text in a firmer relationship. As the poem states later, ‘The things we make up out of language/ turn into common property./ To feel responsible/I put my poor footprint back in’ (LSI p.15). This eerily paraphrases the passage from Bakhtin that we have examined before: 

> As a living, socio-ideological concrete thing, as heteroglot opinion, language, for the individual consciousness, lies on the borderline between oneself and the other. The word in language is half someone else’s. It becomes ‘one’s own’ only when the speaker populates it with his own intention, his own accent, when he appropriates the word, adapting it to his own semantic and expressive intention.¹³⁷

Bakhtin establishes language as common property by placing it at the edge of the self, where the self meets the other. Language is common because it is shared, which implies that words exist outside the responsibility of the speaker until the moment when the speaker turns to use them. At that point the speaker takes responsibility for them by colonising them with his or her own intentions. Katz, also, sees the descriptions of mystics as ‘intentional’, ‘The mind can be seen to contribute both the problem and the means of its overcoming; it defines the origin, the way and the road, shaping experience accordingly’¹³⁸. In ‘Wonders of Obligation’, Fisher examines these notions of obligation and responsibility, by showing how the poet, and the narrator of the poem view the difficulties that the self has in its responsibilities towards presenting itself and the other as honestly as art and language will allow it. As Fisher explores how an artist’s responsibility for the artifice is explored in ‘The Memorial Fountain’, so he explores the artist’s ethical responsibility in Wonders of Obligation.

¹³⁷ M. M. Bakhtin, The Dialogic Imagination p.283
This poem contains ethical and social dimensions that problematize a convenient and simplistic, deconstructed notion of the de-stabilised self. The somewhat enigmatic title was, Fisher suggests, picked up by his noticing the Catholic term ‘holidays of obligation’. However, although ‘obligation’ with its concomitant notion of ‘responsibility’ is central to the meaning of the text, then the reader notes that it is suspicion and mistrust that colours the relationship of Self and Other in this poem. The problem for the authorising consciousness of the poem is whether responsibility needs a fixed self or a fixed other for mistrust and suspicion to occur. A particular Self needs to feel that stability is threatened for it to mistrust and be suspicious of an Other or, as in this case, a set of Others. If an obligation is posited by either the Self or the Other towards the other party, then the mistrust is surely directed towards the failure of the other party to fulfil their side of the perceived bargain. In that case, a particular self may need to have a particular sense of stability let down, undermined, destabilized.

In the verse that follows those opening four lines of the poem, Fisher indicates a clear instance of the abnegation of responsibility:

The face of the designer
sleeps into a tussocky
field with celandines…(LSI p.14)

In this case, the ‘designer’, the person responsible for the brickwork is dead, his obligations discharged through time and mortality. However, the design remains fixed in the configuration of the brickwork, and, thus, the selfhood that brought about that design, in that part, remains in existence, fixed in the design of that configuration. At the same time, the world around the grave moves into and out of its station; the afternoon ‘comes on steeley and still’, ‘part of the skyline/settling to a dark slate/frieze of chimneys/stiffened to peel away/off the western edge.’ While the human, mortal designer sleeps, the world around and outside his control moves in and out of place according to the perspective of the poem. What the poem seems to say is that the noesis of the human is limited by death, a view that Fisher later explores in A Furnace. Fisher suggests that that world is now beyond the knowledge of the designer, and whatever the designer’s original intentions were then the world absorbs them and moves on.

Following this, Fisher writes:

I saw
the mass graves dug the size of workhouse wards
into the clay

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139 R. Fisher Interviews through Time p.105
provided
for the poor of Birmingham
the people of Birmingham,
the working people of Birmingham,
the allotment holders and Mother, of Birmingham.
The poor.  (LSI p.14)

As Robert Sheppard remarks in his interview with Fisher, Fisher is here ‘hammering home the name’ in a way that seems very atypical of Fisher's poetry until this poem.  

And Peter Robinson suggests that Fisher's insertion of the definite article at the front of the repeated noun phrase ‘subjects the pigeon-holing noun phrase to a mutedly angry scrutiny’; scrutiny from a self that, in the very address here, is on the surface of the text. That self here owns up to what its sight offers it in terms of knowledge, but the repetitions establish class references, the force of which is create a political tone here and ‘assume the social point’. The semantic grouping of ‘workhouse wards’, the people’s standing ‘in the fish-queue’, ‘poor’, ‘working people’ and the final conclusive noun phrase ‘The poor’ within these repetitions, conveys a sense of class solidarity. In this, Fisher creates the parameters of the world in which the poem gathers its knowledge. Beyond it are those who are not of that class, and also those who drop the bombs at night who perceive this world as its target, leaving those who live in the terraces between the targets ‘at a loss’ (LSI pp.14-15).

In Fisher’s vocal delivery of this poem, there is a tendency for his Birmingham accent to become much more noticeable. This is particularly true in the following section where he uses a generalising and collusive second person, and moves into a dialect grammar:

Once the bombs got you
you were a pauper:
clay, faeces, no teeth; on a level
with gas mains,
even more at a loss than before,

A little old woman
with a pink nose, we knew her,
had to go into the pit, dead of pneumonia,
had to go to the pit with the rest,

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140 R. Fisher, Interviews through Time p.77
141 P. Robinson, ‘Last Things’ in eds. J. Kerrigan, and P. Robinson, p.102
142 R. Fisher, City Poems: a cassette recording (Department of English, University of Keele: Clocktower Recordings, 1988)
it was thought shame. (LSI ibid.)

Fisher’s repetition of Birmingham with ‘the poor’ and ‘pauper’, along with the repetition of ‘had to’, this latter technically a modal of obligation, set up the spectre of the obligations and responsibilities of the civic authorities at a time of war. Fisher comments in another interview that, ‘From where I was when letting the various materials into “[Wonders of Obligation]’ I didn’t see the more political or social items –those with class-system markers on them – as being of a different order; the social class was my own, and though it no longer exists I haven’t knowingly signed up to any other’.\(^{143}\) And Fisher comments that there is a levelling of these people in the aftermath of an air-raid. Here, Cupitt’s levelling of immanence is the class solidarity that Fisher exploits by appearing to adopt its attitudes to depict the social world. Immanence is also here in the exclusions it evokes, in particular, of the civic authorities; authorities who are present in their authority, but not in the humans who create that authority. Of course, for a former university teacher to make such gestures is disingenuous in the least, and this disingenuousness also destabilises the self at the centre of this text. However, within the text, Fisher feels it is necessary for that self to stabilize itself within a social setting, for the notions of obligation and responsibility to have credence.

Ironically, then, the narrator moves next to describe the mistrust he feels within the confines of his own milieu:

Suddenly to go
  to the school jakes with the rest
  in a rush by the clock.
What had been strange and inward
become nothing, a piss-pallor
with gabble. Already they were lost,
taught unguessed silliness,
to squirt and squeal there.
What was wrong? Suddenly
  to distrust your own class
and be demoralised
  as any public-school boy. (LSI p. 15)

The self-hood which is stabilized in the class-identity of the previous section becomes refocused and destabilized in the isolation he feels amongst his own class mates; an isolation he projects out into a different, yet equally internalized demoralization. Then, as we have seen elsewhere, Fisher punctures the rim of the world he is adumbrating. How does Fisher know that public-school boys are demoralized? Had he been to too many showings of Lindsey Anderson’s If? Or

\(^{143}\) R. Fisher, *Interviews through Time* p.107
Peter Brook’s *Lord of the Flies*? This enunciation of a personal attitude and projection of stereotypes outside his own experience in this way is unusual for Fisher. When Fisher enunciates a class-solidarity, this might act as validating his experience and statements. When he projects stereotypes outside the rim of his world then he can seem to flounder, as we shall examine in more detail. And when he describes a further need for stabilized ethical self, such ontological distortions might render both his ability to empathise with a particular class, and his fear and mistrust of that empathy, too unstable to offer ontological coherence.

The debate about such ontological coherences in the other is continued later in the poem when Fisher compares ‘the first farmyard I ever saw’ with ‘The other farm I had/was in an old picture book’. The description of the first, Lloyd’s Farm, is, on the surface, an objective presentation of that farmyard as ‘mostly midden’ with a sagging barn, a house and a rutted lane. The second description picks out the artifice of the picture as an ‘idyll’ with ‘Bruno the hound’ and ‘the World’s Tabbiest Cat’. While Fisher acknowledges that his description of Lloyd’s farm ‘moralises’ it as the book farm ‘always was’, he ‘swears’ that ‘I saw them both then/in all their properties,/ and to me, the difference was neutral’ (*LSI* p.18). We cannot, I would suggest, simply accept this last statement. One might remain awestruck by Fisher’s technical, poetic achievement, and moved by the range of debate and subject matter his poetry possesses. However, it is, perhaps, a step too far to assume that the young Fisher, precocious as he undoubtedly was, was able to see both the farm ‘entailed in reality’ and the idealised drawing in his childhood book in ‘all their properties’. And, surely, Fisher’s use of the word ‘properties’ with its huge semantic claim undermines its validity. Fisher seems to withdraw from the claim in the equally large counter-claim that to him ‘the difference was neutral’. Here, Fisher seems to be putting the self of the poem up to ransom. It is difficult to countenance such claims, yet in the ‘I swear’, Fisher almost begs the reader to acquiesce in the stances he claims to take. One’s judgement seems balanced on a knife edge. If this is Cupitt’s linguistic play, then that play drags the, possibly reluctant, reader with it, if only to respond to Fisher’s elicitation of empathy.

Fisher further jeopardises that ontological coherence in the next section, where he describes an owl, a hare and a moth. Initially, these three animals have a ‘creatureliness’ in which to contain their selves. They are ontologically bounded by an animal nature. However, and at the same time, Fisher personifies each of them: the owl misjudges the moment and leaves its ‘omen undelivered’; the hare contains goodwill which Fisher declares will ‘do for you and me’; and the moth first climbing up the outside of the window trying to get into the room and then seen...
asleep on the curtain, exemplifies the part of Fisher that is ‘not used to things’. Whom the omen is for, we don’t know. However, if it is the narrator of the poem who recognizes it as an omen, then part of that understanding of the omen is undertaken by the narrator. As we have just seen, the hare’s ‘goodwill’ is for the narrator and for the ‘you’, possibly the colluding reader. And finally, the moth exemplifies part of the narrator’s personality. These strategies map the human onto the animal, allowing their beings to intermingle.

Fisher’s personifying of the creatures is in the same moment an acknowledgement of their creatureliness. In describing the animals, Fisher uses the common human currency of recognising animals as different from humans. And it is this common recognition that allows personification to have force and to gather in that personification, qualities that are outlined and highlighted by their placement in the lives of animals. This recognition is introduced by the words, ‘And now the single creature/makes itself seen,/isolate’ (LSI, p.18), that preface the descriptions of the animals. As we have seen, each of the animals is particularised by the definite article preceding their naming: ‘the barn owl’, ‘The hare’, and ‘the huge fusty Old Lady moth’; thus, their ontological separation is emphasised. As we have noted, the owl brings an omen, the hare goodwill, and the moth a representation of discomfort at reality. In this skewing of roles away from some more traditional visions of the animals, such as, the ‘wise Old Owl’, Fisher brings the creatures within his own ambit; he makes them at one and the same time his and their own.

In each of these displacements: the projection of class stereotypes; the contrast between the farms; and the personification of the animals, Fisher examines the nature of his own knowledge and awareness allowing it to reach out to seeming limits of understanding and yet playing on those limits and understanding. In doing so, Fisher stretches the nature of what it means to ‘get about in the mind’, allowing the limits of that mind to become porous in the understanding and empathy with an other. At the same time, Fisher is careful to establish the other in its own integrity, creating an intermingling of self and other, which has its own noetic function, its own understanding of the self reaching out, the porosity of the boundary of the self, and the porosity of its understanding of the integrity of the other.

In the next section of the poem, Fisher seems to acknowledge that these interminglings may result in a surplus which the ‘poet’ cannot control:

    Now I have come
    through obduracy
discomfort and trouble
to recognize it
my life keeps
leaking out of my poetry to me
in all directions. It’s untidy
ragged and bright
and it’s not used to things. (LSI pp.18-19)

The poetry may seem to be the boundary of the life but it cannot contain it. And the life leaks through the porous boundary ‘to me’. This might be analogous to the bursting of a blood vessel under the skin, an oedema. And Fisher mimics that bursting in the absence of commas between the adjectives and the lack of other punctuation in the immediate co-text of the poem, so that boundaries are elided and meanings squashed together. But as we have seen, what that ‘me’ might be is, itself, deeply questionable, and questioned; is that ‘me’ the ontological boundary, the mind in which ‘Wonders of Obligations’ plays and explores?

This is also reflected on in the next verse where the boundary of the self is reflected upon directly:

Scent on the body
inherent or applied
concentrates the mind
holds it from sidelong wandering.
Even when it repels
it pushes directly. (LSI p.19)

Fisher suggests here that the olfactory will form the boundary of the self. The smell of the body when naturally generated comes close to the animal nature of the human since the body’s smells cannot always be controlled. Here the ontology of the human becomes reified in its lack of control, and in smells that may be unpleasant and repel. The artificial smell applied to the body reinforces the sense of the skin as the outer limit of the self because it confirms the skin as that limit. At the same time, artificial scent may make that boundary attractive to others and thus reach out to them. In both cases, it is the limit of the body, the skin, and, more particularly, its smell, which controls the relationship. Fisher, by a sleight of hand, inhabits the inside of this, and allows himself to be controlled and limited by it. Fisher’s noesis is held here by the body and its smells.

Towards the end of the poem, he repeats the personification of an animate being, this time an insentient plant:

Fine edge
or deflection
of my feeling towards
anything that behaves or changes,
however slowly; like
my Bryophyllum Good Luck,
raised by me from a life-scrap and
now lurching static from its pot,
its leaves winged
with the mouse-ears of its young.
I’m vehemently and steadily
part of its life.

Or it slides
sideways and down, under my suspicion –
Now what’s it doing? (LSI. p.21)

At the edge of this personification, Fisher appears to claim a self which has enough integrity not only to own feelings but for those feelings to have edges or be deflected. In this case, though that self posits a stability in the face of the mutable other, the Bryophyllum gathering its own life together. Fisher’s ontological presence is ‘vehement’ and ‘steady’, whereas the life-scrap of the Bryophyllum is dependent until, it seems, it is now a nurturing parent of its own kind. At this moment, it appears to have taken on a stasis that not only ‘lurches’ but also slides; movement which is sardonically noted by the suspicious gardener.

At the end of the poem these ontological instabilities are gathered in further failures of obligation towards others and the others’ relationship with the self:

Suddenly to mistrust
The others’ mode:
The others. Poinsettias or moths,
or Kenny and Leslie and Leonard,
Edie and Bernard and Dorothy,
The intake of ’35; … (LSI p.21)

The Self that Fisher presents not only distrusts the others, but mistrusts their actions, and it is not only the people but also the plants and insects who fail to understand their side of the bargain. In naming the other members of the intake of ’35 from the year Fisher entered primary school, Fisher establishes an individuality that exists in relation to his ability to name. Although not quite on the scale of Adam’s naming the animals, Fisher apportions identity and a measure of stability to the others and their modes, and in doing so constitutes his own. In the litany of people’s names, Fisher repeats the trope of the repeated naming of Birmingham, at the beginning of the poem, where repetition is emphasis. In establishing the names of the entities around him, he locates him-Self.
In this section we will examine how the mystic ontology of Fisher’s poetry reaches out to the urban, the abject and the feminine. In reaching out to these three kinds of other, I will suggest that Fisher attempts to bridge the contradiction between the ineffable and the noetic. I will suggest that he does this as part of his reconciling the empirical world to its instabilities. At the same time, Fisher acknowledges that the instabilities of the empirical world, and the instabilities of the self that engages with that world, are worth making explicit in the poetry. This making explicit is, in part, what I mean by Fisher’s ‘noetic reach’, where the authorising consciousness of the poems writes about the empirical, entailed world, in a way that seeks a radical perception of that world, which will offer a more radical kind of knowledge. By radical, I do not only mean a new political perception of the world, but more importantly, a new way of seeing and empathising with the world. Fisher, himself, offers an equivalent. In speaking about these poems in 1988, Fisher comments that they are written in ‘the sort of mood which feels for a cosmology in whatever presents itself’. This chapter will also attempt to show how Fisher interacts with the urban and, in particular, with the abject, in a way that allows him to deal with instabilities present in the fabric of the urban, and instabilities of humanity within that fabric. Fisher accepts, empathises with and reaches through these instabilities for that noesis and that cosmology. In addition, I will attempt to show that these instabilities particularly characterise Fisher’s depiction of the female presence in the urban.

a. Mystic latencies

As we have noted before, the implicit contradiction between the ineffable and the noetic was pointed out by Augustine as long ago as the fifth century, ‘Thus there arises a curious contradiction of words, because if the unspeakable is what cannot be spoken of, it is not unspeakable if it can be called unspeakable. And this opposition of words is rather to be avoided by silence than to be explained away by speech’. In the twentieth century, that avoidance would be echoed by Wittgenstein’s famous ‘Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent’. One response to the necessity of avoidance and silence is an apophatic theology, in which one states what God and the ineffable are not, rather than what they are. The opposite of this is a kataphatic theology in which the positive qualities of God are adumbrated. Religion has

144 R. Fisher, City Poems: a cassette recording
always attempted to find ways round this dilemma. In Islam God is simply called ‘Allah’, literally ‘The God’, and the Hebrew Bible has its equivalence in Yahweh meaning, in some versions, ‘I am’. For Muslims, the linguistic ineffability of God is ameliorated by the ninety-nine names of God, which adumbrate the qualities that Allah possesses. For Judaism, God is a participant in the narratives of the Hebrew Bible; he is known by his deeds. Postmodernism has provided a secular equivalent for the twentieth and twenty-first centuries in Derrida’s concept of \( \text{différance} \). And there have been constant attempts to align \( \text{différance} \) with negative theology since Derrida first enunciated the concept in 1963. Thus, apophasis is one kind of bridge between the ineffable and the noetic.

Another link might be forged through Cupitt’s post-modern espousal of the mysticism of secondariness, whereby ‘There is no such thing as “experience” outside of and prior to language.’ Cupitt’s mystics are all writers; and the mystic experience can only come from writing:

\[
\text{Writing is mysticism; religious experience is self-expression in religious art. Mysticism is mystical writing: that is, it is writing and only writing that reconciles conflicting forces and turns suffering into happiness.}
\]

Such notions bridge ineffability and noesis by implying firstly, that neither really exists. If nothing exists outside language, then ‘nothing’ cannot be written; what is ineffable, or, in Augustine’s translator’s terms, ‘unspeakable’, is, literally, that which is beyond language and which is beyond existence and ontology. Cupitt additionally reconciles the ineffable with the noetic by yoking them in the writing. The very act of writing both posits the ineffable but also constructs it too, much as Augustine has constructed it in the first quotation we examined. Here, Cupitt looks back to Feuerbach and the sense that religion is a projection of humanity’s needs. However, one problem with Cupitt’s account is that he often narrows the intentions of the writer to the accession of some form of happiness, with writing as a kind of \( \text{jouissance} \). An example Cupitt gives here is of St John of the Cross writing his poems in prison ‘to make religious happiness out of the various conflicting forces bearing upon him and the personal suffering he is undergoing’. Cupitt acknowledges the subversive intent of many mystical writers, both male and female; and also implies that, in all this, writing is a way of making sense of the world. Valuable as Cupitt’s account is, Fisher’s writing is both this and much more,

148 D. Cupitt, Mysticism after Modernity p.74
149 D. Cupitt, Mysticism after Modernity p.74-75
150 ibid.
bridging the gap between the ineffable and the noetic by creating a language and a mysticism that emerges from the empirical world that he finds.

Another way of bridging the gap between the ineffable and the noetic is by looking at the way in which Fisher may respond to Breton’s notion of the latencies of an object. Breton wrote in 1927 ‘The object, no matter how complete, returns to an uninterrupted succession of latencies which are not peculiar to it and which invoke its transformation.’\(^{151}\) As we saw above, the context here was Breton’s surrealism, a surrealism which Fisher has responded to, if not totally espoused. Breton’s statement is not only useful for its central focus on latencies. Breton also suggests, by the use of the word ‘returns’, that an object may have one presence or ontology at one moment within the view of one artist and then have a different presence or ontology in the view of a different artist. In fact, in other versions of this quotation, it is the artist who returns the object to these latencies. However, the return Breton invokes is not to a simple stasis but to a new existence. Such new existences and latencies, Breton suggests, are not peculiar or particular to the one object, which might further imply that the latencies are cultural, or within the language, or symbolic order, that Cupitt posits.\(^{152}\) The latencies are also within the volition of the artist, shifting with the artist’s intentions. That intentionality is espoused by Fisher in his comment to Peter Robinson that although he had a debt to surrealism and to the idea of an object’s latencies, he was not interested in the ‘aleatory’, or the randomised, chance orientation that surrealism has towards not only towards objects but also within the consciousness.\(^{153}\) The element of control is still central to his artistic endeavour, and the location of the authorising consciousness of his poems.

In contrast to the notion of the artist at the centre of their creation, mysticism is seen as a suborning of self to a perceived other. Thus, the mystic moves the self towards an attainable or unattainable other on a noetic path. As Zaehner puts it, mysticism is ‘the realization of a union or unity with or in (or of) something that is enormously, if not infinitely, greater than the empirical self’.\(^{154}\) That ‘something’ may realise itself to mystics as having an objective reality; ‘the supreme spiritual Power behind the world of our surface consciousness. The activity and experience of contemplation, for [the mystic], is ontological’.\(^{155}\) On the other hand, as Cupitt

\(^{151}\) cited in A. Cluysenaar, ‘New Poetry’ p.72  
\(^{152}\) We have seen some of this response to latencies in the discussion of ‘The Memorial Fountain’ in chapter one.  
\(^{153}\) R. Fisher, *Interviews through time* p.106 However, Fisher has stated that he threw the I Ching before writing *A Furnace*. J. Kerrigan ‘Come to think of it’ p.114  
demands and Fisher would undoubtedly prefer, the epistemological reach, the empathy, in
Fisher’s work, is not towards a supreme being. That supreme being, or Zaehner’s ‘something’
has its analogies in Fisher’s use of a word such as ‘whatever’; these terms themselves indicate the
instabilities with which the noetic reach engages. As we have noted, Fisher’s sense is of feeling
towards a cosmology rather than suborning or unifying himself with something behind or
beyond the consciousness.

Such ontological contemplation is, as we have seen, Fisher’s ‘getting about in the mind’. The
question here, however, is how bounded is that getting about, and what is the impact of the
other on the boundaries of the mind, and the getting about that is taking place within it, in terms
of the empathies and reach we have just described. One view of this relation between the other
and an epistemological questing is outlined by Streng who contrasts the ‘total-working’ of the
mystic consciousness with the ‘part-working’ of the ‘common’, analytic awareness. The total-
working mystic consciousness is ‘synoptic, intuitive, noetic; it confers a knowledge that is
inarticulate in conceptual terms but is suggested in a positive way by concepts’. This view of
the mystic’s epistemology is that it intuits the relationship of the parts to the whole, and that
intuition is of an experience that is ‘undifferentiated, distinctionless’. Thus the getting about is,
itsel, a porous activity, undifferentiated within and finding the edges and boundaries permeable
and unstable. Perhaps this sense of what is undifferentiated and distinctionless is one way in
which the object is returned to its latencies.

One such permeable, latent approach to epistemology is in Fisher’s ‘arrangement and
presentation of fetishes’. Fisher defines fetishes as:

the business of primary orientation, the way we learn, as young animals with unsorted
language and suspicious senses, to negotiate the places and creatures we find ourselves
among, and to decide, if we have any choice, where to lodge ourselves in the culture-
packages the others live by. In that world, usually a phase that flourishes then gets
slimmed down for action, phenomena of no matter what kind can carry a high potential
for focusing and channelling energy.’

These ‘phenomena of no matter what kind’ may be intuited within the perceptual field as
signifiers of the whole; they may be metonymic. But they may also resonate within the mind of
the writer who relates the parts to the whole. Here, Fisher talks of the use of fetishes in the
novels of John Cowper Powys, the dedicatee of A Furnace. As examples of fetishes in Powys,

157 W. J. Stace, Mysticism and Philosophy p.144
158 R. Fisher, Interviews Through Time p.115
159 Ibid.
Fisher adduces ‘thin bread and butter, weed-grown ponds, walking-sticks, sodden mosses –
carried forward into the adult lives of his characters and offering, I think, quite different faces of
subjective existence to different readers.’\textsuperscript{160} Fisher, as one such reader, sees such fetishes used by
Powys to hold together Powys’ ‘almost shapeless novels’.\textsuperscript{161} Such fetishes pin down the
instabilities of the other without attenuating its mutabilities. Fisher would also have noted this in
the poetry of late High Modernism: Basil Bunting, in particular, develops \textit{Briggflatts} poetically by
images that might hold together the fragmented world of the text. In \textit{Briggflatts}, Bunting uses
music. For David Jones in \textit{The Anathemata}, this meant the reuse and reminting, as ‘fetishes’, of
the iconography of Christianity, which Fisher sees as indicating Jones’ larger allegiances to that
more ‘stable and eternal’ belief system.\textsuperscript{162}

Fisher has no such allegiances, and his epistemological reach is towards something altogether
more unstable, mutable and personal. His initial reach is, as we have seen, towards the fetishes
of the city. And that city is not immutable but nor is it an iconic city with an iconic dynamism
such as New York or London. The city that is presented is Birmingham; a drab, post-industrial
city in the hands of a civic authority whose attitude is ‘limited and mean’ and which can do little
more ‘than preserve a superficial order’ (\textit{City} p.14). Thus Fisher reaches noetically through that
superficial order towards a unity within the entity of the city, towards an ambivalent empathy
with the inhabitants of the city, and a feeling for the latency of the city in its physical creation,
destruction and recreation. This noesis is partly crystallised in Fisher’s comment ‘Most of it has
never been seen’ (\textit{City} ibid); which is not some arrogant claim on Fisher’s behalf to suggest that
only he has seen the city. If Fisher enacts a noetic reach into the city, it is not coterminous with a
notion of ownership. Nor is that reach a claim about the exact boundary between what is visible
and what is invisible. Fisher does not suggest that only his eyes have a valid vision of the urban.

It is also possible to see Fisher’s obsession with the local as searching for fetishes to lodge
himself among the ‘culture-packages that others live by’; to find his place amidst Cupitt’s
mysticism of secondariness These ‘culture-packages’ of Fisher’s ‘fetishes’ are the things that this
chapter will examine. One might be the attitudes to the abject that we will discuss in detail
below. This attitude is one where, for example, one does not urinate in public. But Fisher
describes urinating in public and does so in order, not only to show how authority is twitted, but

\textsuperscript{160} ibid.
\textsuperscript{161} ibid.
\textsuperscript{162} R. Fisher, \textit{Interviews through Time} p.114. see also Jones’ comments on Christian symbolism in ‘Preface to The
also what this might indicate about the populace can be ‘natural’. This obsession with the local and the culture-packages of the local are also Fisher’s equivalent to Breton’s vision of Paris, as a ‘territory of desire as much as reality’. Thus, it is within that obsession that Fisher’s ontology is enacted, a feeling and reaching towards the ineffable in a city that has mostly not been seen; or hadn’t been seen, in Fisher’s judgement, at the end of the nineteen-fifties. Furthermore, as he puts it elsewhere, this was ‘a city which has already turned into a city of the mind. [Not] an historical/spatial city entailed to empirical reality’.

### b. Fisher’s urban other

It is important to describe Fisher’s noetic reach within the city and how that reach mimics and often predates the commentary on the city and its populace that urban theory has suggested. That theory has looked at the way in which organic existence within the city has been orchestrated and regulated by civic authority. And such authority is subject to considerable scrutiny and ambivalence by Fisher in a great deal of his major writing. In particular, he shows considerable empathy towards the ways in which the human occupants of the city can lose their sense of both place and identity within the post-industrial urban landscape. In City, Fisher reaches towards a city that at the time of writing was in a particular period of transition and mutability. Part of this was the result of the predations of German bombers during the Second World War, as enunciated in City, ‘The Entertainment of War’, and ‘Wonders of Obligation’, and the enforced rebuilding that followed. However, part of this is down to the insensitivity of Birmingham’s civic authorities:

> … when destruction comes, it is total: the printed notices on the walls, block by block, a few doors left open at night, broken windows advancing down a street until fallen slates appear and are not kicked away. Then, after a few weeks of this, the machines arrive. (City p.9)

The printed notices appear by no-one’s hand, there is not even a verb either active or passive; the doors are, passively, left open, and the windows take on their own agency with the intransitivity of ‘advancing’. Finally, the houses themselves are empty so that even the contempt of kicking the slates away is missing. All of this is worked with an accumulating parataxis that emphasises the depersonalisation of the acts involved. Then the final act is the equally depersonalised arrival of the machines. This destruction is total and totalizing, and implicit in this

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164 R. Fisher, Interviews through Time p.56
is that the German bombers were not total but partial; it is the civic authorities of Birmingham who destroy totally, who change a home, into a house, into an empty ex-building.

This emptied and emptying world is matched by a depersonalised relationship between the citizens and the authorities. Civic authority appears to ignore these people because, as Fisher has just noted, they are ‘mostly very old’, and the wars that most of them have lived through ‘have come down the streets from the unknown city and the unknown world’ (*City* p.8). That world is unknown because the people do not move towards it, it ‘comes down’ to them; ‘coming down’ as if from a figure on high, which, Fisher implies, the civic authorities are. Thus there is an ironic parodying of Zaehner’s ‘something that is greater’, which in Fisher’s terms is the unknown city and world beyond the city, that may bring down even war on people who have no investment in it. These people may be marginalised through age but also hidden in a changing world reality. Physically, too, ‘When these people go into the town, the buses they travel in stop just before they reach it, in the sombre back streets behind the Town Hall and the great insurance offices…’(ibid p.9). The mode of transport that these people have and which is provided by the authorities, i.e., the buses, stops short of the centre of power. The people may be part of the city, the voters and citizens of it, but they are blocked from unity with it. The city and the world are ineffable to these people even though they are part of them, and what Fisher speaks to is that sense of the ineffable amongst the ordinary populace. This is an ineffability that encroaches on these people, and thus presents its own kind of volition and power; a volition and power which is carried on, and may be part and parcel of the tide of war. In moments such as these, Fisher balances the empirical world and the ineffable that it occludes by reaching towards a clearer sense of what both might mean to the ordinary people of Birmingham.

The spirit of the ordinary people is not indomitable, Fisher seems to say, and its ways are anarchic, its resistances unpredictable and untrammelled, ‘phases that flourish’. In this he predates De Certeau’s descriptions of the *tactics* of the populace as opposed to the *strategies* of the authorities:

[The populace] trace ‘indeterminate trajectories’ that are apparently meaningless, since they do not cohere with the constructed, written and prefabricated space though which they move. They are sentences that remain unpredictable within the space ordered by the organizing techniques of systems […] They circulate, come and go, overflow and drift over an imposed terrain, like the snowy waves of the sea slipping in among the rocks and defiles of an established order.\(^{165}\)

We might conflate de Certeau’s ‘indeterminate trajectories’, with the mentalities of the flâneur that ‘bring out the abolition of the boundary between inner and outer’. For Fisher, such moments might not only be irruptive but also haunting:

What could they ever say?
Wrecked people
with solitary trajectories,
sometimes rich clothing,
moving against the street currents
or lit from above, standing in bars;
always around the places
where the whores in the afternoon
radiate affront. (LSI p. 67)

Fisher’s flâneurs are ‘wrecked’, and their association with the ‘whores’ brings to mind the sexual disgust that inhabits other parts of Fisher’s writing. Their trajectories are not simply indeterminate but also solitary and pitched against the trajectories of the street. The old, who reach the town by bus and then move around the centre of the town in the shadows of the looming municipal architecture, the wrecked flâneur and the whore are all both liminal and part of the whole. They circulate with unpredictable, solitary trajectories that others may mimic and take up. Such people are only theoretically confined to the paths and roads that authority has constructed, but, as De Certeau and Fisher suggest, they will hold to patterns that are not pre-ordained or prefabricated, but which they have found for themselves; rat-runs, short cuts, back alleys. And, as Fisher emphasises here, these rat-runs and short cuts are not only physical but psychological and emotional too. These particular citizens of the city are wrecked, or radiate effrontery, and abolish the barriers between inner and outer, by parading their brazen needs, broken or not, within the ambit of both their peers and the authorities.

The narrator’s stance here is deliberately distanced; ‘wrecked’, ‘solitary’, ‘whores’ and ‘affront’, would not normally be seen as terms of approval, particularly in the juxtapositions that Fisher uses here. If the whore’s effrontery is ironically directed at the civic authorities who would be expected to exact a legal penalty for prostitution, then this subversion is undermined by the use of the word ‘whore’. The men who associate with the whores are not identified by Fisher as flâneurs and nor does he identify himself with them. It is noticeable how little use is made of the term flâneur in Fisher criticism and even Santilli who does see Fisher as a flâneur, is keen to posit him as a particular brand of flâneur. For Santilli ‘Like Wordsworth and Ruskin, Fisher the flâneur

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166 M. Sheringham, ‘City Space, Mental Space, Poetic Space’ p.101
167 Note recent media uncertainty as to the terminology to use about sex workers murdered in Ipswich and Bradford in 2008 and 2010; Fisher’s usage, in 1961, is certainly pejorative.
wanders through the city but rarely, if ever, goes inside.\textsuperscript{168} Fisher is rarely the strolling \textit{flâneur} of the archetype and, in addition, we might ask what Santilli defines as ‘inside’. As we have seen above, Fisher’s early views of the city were vicarious and distanced. But Fisher is constantly alive to the porous nature of the city, in the way that Benjamin adumbrates in his writings on Moscow and Naples. To Benjamin, these cities are ‘primitive, […] whose porosity is the mingling of the inner and the outer in the movement between the street and the courtyard’.\textsuperscript{169} The porosity of Fisher’s authorising consciousness in the urban is of a different kind; on the one hand, the inner, vicarious and projected, and on the other, the outer, a network of trajectories that is anarchic and un-preordained. These two attitudes mingle in the early writing to create a dynamic to Fisher’s noetic reach within the post-industrial city. It is not just the \textit{flâneurs} and the whores who are alive to the porosity, the general populace can be too, and Fisher’s reach is towards that porosity with its concomitant instabilities.

As if to support de Certeau, Parker suggests that movement through the city was transformed by increasing historical confinement. For Parker, the medieval city loses a ‘democratic geometry’ because strategic thoroughfares were constructed through it. These thoroughfares responded to the needs of the mercantile and religious city, and tended to converge on the main institutions and markets. In dividing the city in this way, these thoroughfares created ‘vocational locations’, or ‘quarters’, that divided labour. In these quarters, a hierarchical household was created with the master and his family in the central floors, the servants in the basement, and the artisans in the outhouses or the attic.\textsuperscript{170} Fisher describes almost exactly this in his ‘Antebiography’[sic]:

Jewellery of some sort had been the family trade for at least three generations; they’d lived in a succession of homes never more than walking distance from the same nest of small workshops just out side the city centre. This was the Jewellery Quarter, a congested patch maybe three quarters of a mile square on the crest of Hockley Hill. It was the archetype, almost a concentrate, of the Birmingham system of proliferating small manufacturies which developed through the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The “masters” would start by having their workshops attached to their houses, all over the district; the workshops would extend piecemeal to cram the backyards, then the gardens. At that stage the master would move his family a mile or two out to a new suburb, and every room of the original house would be filled with workbenches or clerks’ desks. There were hundreds of these establishments in Hockley, dark and chaotic, their work spaces linked by rickety stairways and catwalks.\textsuperscript{171}

\textsuperscript{168} N. Santilli, \textit{Such rare citings: the prose poem in English literature} (London: Rosement/Associated University Presses, 2002) p.198
\textsuperscript{169} S. Parker, \textit{Urban Theory and the Urban Experience: Encountering the City} (London: Routledge, 2004) p.16
\textsuperscript{170} S. Parker, \textit{Urban Theory and the Urban Experience} p.151
\textsuperscript{171} R. Fisher \textit{Interviews through Time} p.10
Thus, in a conflation of the actual with the trope, Fisher notes how the physical position of the workers (and note how absent they are from this picture!), at their workbench or desk, is metonymic of the power relations that were metastasizing between them and their ‘masters’. As the masters move away from the workplace, the workers move closer to it. And, here too, the unprefabricated is present in the rickety stairways and catwalks; built they might be, but their unstable nature and their identification with the animal in ‘cat’-walks divorces them from the masters who might have ordered them, as surely as the darkness and the chaos encroaches on the ‘establishment’. Here the inner and the outer are particularly porous; a nexus of connections that establish work within darkness and chaos. In contrast to the usual un-adjectival nature of his poetic style, Fisher’s prose here is punctuated by an adroit, selective use of adjectives and adverbs to point up the conditions that his imagination sees: ‘congested’, ‘piecemeal’, ‘dark and chaotic’, and ‘rickety’. The description is exemplary of Fisher’s empathetic reach into the lives of his forebears.

As the living space of the urban worker is transformed through the processes of capital and history, for the French urban theorist, Henri Lefebvre, the city is inscribed and prescribed in the current of time:

Space is nothing but the inscription of time in the world, spaces are the realizations, inscriptions in the simultaneity of the external world of a series of times, the rhythms of the city, the rhythms of urban population . . . the city will only be rethought and reconstructed on its current ruins when we have properly understood that the city is the deployment of time. \(^\text{172}\)

These rhythms occur from such as, traffic control, opening times of schools and shops, and other less obvious rhythms, such as itineraries that apply both to urban resident and to tourist. Thus the city itself has a kind of circadian rhythm that mirrors that of the body itself. ‘Opacity and horizons, obstacles and perspectives are implicated, for they become complicated, imbricate themselves to the point of allowing the Unknown, the giant city, to be perceived or guessed at.’ \(^\text{173}\) For Lefebvre, the city and the urban cannot be ‘recomposed from the signs of the city’ for two reasons. Firstly, things and events alone cannot reveal how the rhythms of the city combine, overlap, dissolve and recombine to create urban synthesis. Secondly, the recording of these rhythms does not offer access to the immanence or the excess of the city. \(^\text{174}\) In a passage that has remarkable echoes of the beginning of Fisher’s *A Furnace*, what is necessary for Lefebvre is a

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\(^{173}\) Ibid.

\(^{174}\) Ibid.
particular ‘praxis that can take charge of … the gathering together of what gives itself as dispersed, dissociated, separated, and this is in the form of simultaneity and encounters’. For Lefebvre, there are no clear methods for this kind of praxis, only other metaphors such as receptivity and exteriority: ‘One has to let go, give in and abandon oneself to its duration’. Lefebvre calls this ‘rhythmanalysis’. As Robert Musil puts it in *A Man Without Qualities*, the city is ‘one great rhythmic throb and the perpetual discord and dislocation of all opposing rhythms’. In this aspect, the urban is, as Streng suggests, ‘beyond a knowledge that is articulated in conceptual terms but is suggested in a positive way by concepts’, requiring the articulation of the artist. The modern city is replete with its own latencies; no wonder it has been so attractive to the surrealists, and to a writer like Fisher.

Fisher’s ‘version’ of Lefebvre’s rhythmanalysis from the beginning of *A Furnace* is as follows:

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Whatever
approaches my passive taking-in,
then surrounds me and goes by
will have itself understood only
phase upon phase
by separate involuntary
strokes of my mind, dark
swings of a fan-blade
that keeps a time of its own,
made up from the long
discrete moments
of the stages of the street,
each bred off the last as if by causality. (LSI p. 52)
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This might be understood by reversing the cause-consequence relations of Fisher’s own single sentence: causes, as yet inexplicable, create discrete moments in the stages of the street, these stages enable Fisher towards a phased and passive understanding of what, in turn, the city surrounds him with. In Lefebvre’s terms, Fisher has ‘let go’ because it is only through passivity that he is able to understand. This is also encoded within the grammar of the sentence because ‘Whatever’ is not only subject of its own clause ‘Whatever approaches my passive taking in’ but that clause is itself subject of the verb phrase ‘will have itself understood’. In Halliday’s terms, the material process of ‘approaching’, in the subject clause occurs at the same time as the mental process of ‘understanding’ in the predicing clause; we might suggest that the material is able to

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175 ibid.
176 ibid.
178 F. J. Streng, ‘Language and Mystical Analysis’ p.145
ground the mental. In Fisher’s, two ‘actions’ approaching and understanding occur at the same time, as the ‘will’ contains the volition of the ‘whatever’. For Lefebvre, the inexplicable causes at the start of this chain are the circadian rhythm of the city; thus the city is organic and ‘body’. This organicism is, to some extent, encoded in the ‘inexplicable causes’ at the start of the chain, and Fisher’s characteristic, one might almost say ‘signature’, ‘whatever’. That ‘whatever’ is ‘guessing at’ in Lefebvre’s terms, but Fisher’s poetry about the city, in recording stability and instability, reality and sur-reality, possesses the synoptic, intuitive tools that Amin and Thrift find so frustratingly absent from Lefebvre’s analysis, concluding with what might almost be a vote for Fisher: ‘In the end, the window in [Lefebvre’s] analysis remains a stimulant for the gifted artist/analyst to mobilize a lot more than the powers of perception and reflexivity’.

Here Lefebvre’s ‘Unknown, the giant city’ is co-terminous with Zaehner’s mystical ‘something’. And it is Fisher’s great gift to see all this in Birmingham and to seek out the radical knowledge and mystical empathy, and fetishes that might allow him to turn this into a radical urban poetry.

Fisher melds both the history and the rhythm of the city in the alternating occlusion and revelation of the lives and deaths of the city’s inhabitants. As we have noted above, Fisher is acutely aware of the division of the inhabitants of the city into those whose lives and communities are being lost, with the razing and redevelopment of bomb-sites and older industrial areas. The lives of those who ‘have’, on the other hand, may be lived in houses that are ‘model/chief residences of the model factories, set upon slight/elevations of the middle way’ (LSI p.76). Those lives are contrasted elsewhere with those whose have:

identities, recorded by authority
  to be miniaturised; to be traceable
  however small; to be material;
  to have status in the record;
  to have the rest, the unwritten,
  even more easily scrapped. (LSI p.62)

Thus the humans come and go, their lives recorded and made material in the records, but the community and culture they represent is ‘even more easily scrapped’. The family genealogist traces the family history to find names and relationships, but a sense of what those lives might really mean has been lost by those self-same authorities. These authorities might offer a visual record of the city, that might be seen, and written records which may actually result in dispersion.

and occlusion of identity and individuality. It is the artist’s duty, Fisher seems to be saying, to re-imagine those lives and reconstitute them in the creative act, in the search for a poetic/noetic truth.

Such truth saying finds that further occlusions can come from within the social group itself:

Hard to be there, the place
unable to understand
even its own Whig history
for what it was; teachers
trained not to understand it
taught it, and it never fitted. Even less
did the history of the class struggle
reach down or along to the working-class streets where work and wages
hid, as the most real shame.

Don’t
ask your little friend
what his father does;
don’t let on we’ve found out
his mother goes to work;
don’t tell anyone at all
what your father’s job is.
If the teacher asks you
say you don’t know. (LSI p.66)

The ‘hiding’ of work and wages is metonymic of the relations of status and class that have permeated the consciousness of the working people of Birmingham and whose voice Fisher mimics here. When Fisher reads this passage aloud, his accent becomes far more noticeably Birmingham provincial, particularly as he emphasises the repeated negative imperative and the subsequent parallel clause structures. It is interesting too, that ‘hid’ occurs at the beginning of the line, as the ‘Given/Theme’, and its gloss, ‘as the most real shame’ occurs as the ‘New/Rheme’ in the sentence, with the final emphasis on the noun ‘shame’. Fox has pointed out how shame is important within working-class British culture, particularly amongst working-class women; functioning to keep these women silent within self-imposed ethical and social boundaries. This hiding and occlusion is also present in the teaching of the teachers who teach but do not understand. The hiding and occlusion is articulated by ironic evasion which, for

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Fisher, is evidence of class deracination; an alienation that is presaged in the use of ‘there’, ‘place’, ‘it’ and ‘its’ in that free-floating manner that we have noted above. Here, the social is not assumed, it is placed on the surface of the text.

In the poem ‘In the Wall’ from 1974, Fisher comments thus:

A trodden place,  
a city: the feet have been  
everywhere – on the pillows,  
across the benches, on to the walls.

Deep under the viaduct arches  
the bare earth is barren;  
no rain or daylight. It is dead  
dirt. The naked foot,  
the soft parts  
have been set down here too. (LSI p.132)

In this passage, the sense is of the city as a trodden place that is both ambulatory and static. Not only envisioned but also trodden upon, trodden down and violated with feet that have trampled the private places - on the pillows, but have also tramped into the abandoned places of the city. These are the dead places created by man in his building over the earth of the original place. These are places created without daylight or rain and, thus, die. With typical Fisher irony, it is the naked, atavistic man, the naked, atavistic self, who is part of this trampling of the original earth but also, in this passage, the earth may be felt through the naked skin of the sole of the foot; always below us making its presence felt. Here the e/irruptions have been trodden upon where the synoptic, intuitive self feels the other beneath it as both uncanny and abject ‘dead dirt’. This sense of the intuitive self feeling towards the abject in the city and the instabilities that accompany this particular kind of noetic reach are also found in the Fisher’s exploration of the abject.

c. The mystical abject

Kristeva in *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* describes the ‘abject’ as ‘what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite’. However, whereas Kristeva sees the abject as lying across boundaries, Maud Ellmann suggests that the abject defines the boundary, ‘Waste is what a culture casts away in

order to determine what is not itself, and thus to establish its own limits’. The ‘abject’ lies between the self and the other, being waste, having been expelled from the Self, most importantly from the body, the abject ‘has only one quality of the object – that of being opposed to I’. 

Kristeva’s autobiographical view of the abject is one of horror. Kristeva’s prose, in translation, is unsparing:

Loathing an item of food, a piece of filth, waste, or dung. The spasms and vomiting that protect me. The repugnance, the retching that thrusts me to the side and turns me away from defilement, sewage, and muck. The shame of compromise, of being in the middle of treachery. The fascinated start that leads me toward and separates me from them.

One of Fisher’s fetishes, as early as City, is the urban as comprised of ‘Things which have escaped’ (LSI p.35), and ‘byproducts’. This sense that the city is a permanently disintegrating other aligns him with T.S. Eliot, on whose view of the city Ellman comments ‘In fact, the horror of The Waste Land lies in its osmoses, exhalations and porosities, for this miasma is the symptom of disintegrating boundaries’. Thus instability is built into a notion of the abject.

In City, Fisher echoes Eliot’s sense of the abject city in the following passage:

Brick-dust in sunlight. That is what I see now in the city, a dry epic flavour, whose air is human breath. A place of walls made straight with plumbline and trowel, to desiccate and crumble in the sun and smoke. Blistered paint on cisterns and girders, cracking to show the priming. Old men spit on the paving slabs, small boys urinate; and the sun dries it as it dries out patches of damp on plaster facings to leave misshapen stains. I look for things here that make old men and dead men seem young. Things which have escaped, the landscapes of many childhoods.

Wharves, the oldest parts of factories, tarred gable ends rearing to take the sun over lower roofs. Soot, sunlight, brick-dust; and the breath that tastes of them. (LSI p.35)

Fisher’s descriptions of urine, and other forms of human waste were picked out early on. Davie noted Fisher’s ‘almost obsessive image of urine-loosened brick.” O’Brien picked up on Davie’s note, and others have referred to it since. Kerrigan glosses this with, ‘What neither [Davie

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186 J. Kristeva, Powers of Horror p.1
187 ibid.
188 J. Rasula and M. Erwin, Roy Fisher: Nineteen Poems and an Interview p.18
189 M. Ellmann, ‘Eliot’s Abjection’ ibid.
nor O’Brien] notes is the animation brought to the text by the I’s neurasthenic propensity to
taste human breath in the air, to zoom in on body secretions and scrutinize decay. And surely,
the sense of the abject as one of Fisher’s fetishes, his ‘culture packages’ amidst which his noetic
reach is operating, is part of this animation.

Such animation from the abject is both necessary and revolting. As we have seen, at the end of
‘Wonders of Obligation’ Fisher writes:

Suddenly to distrust
the others’ mode;
the others. Poinsettias or moths,
or Kenny and Leslie and Leonard,
Edie and Bernard and Dorothy,
the intake of ‘35; the story of the Wigan pisspot
of about that time, and even
Coleridge’s of long before;

I have to set him
to fill it by candlelight
before he transfigures it; (LSI p.21)

In his interview with Peter Robinson, Fisher glosses these otherwise rather recondite lines by
explaining that he was referring to a passage towards the beginning of The Road to Wigan Pier
‘…at any hour of the day you were liable to meet Mr Brooker on the stairs, carrying a full
chamber-pot which he gripped with his thumb well over the rim’. In addition, the comment
on Coleridge refers to the well-known passage on urine from Coleridge’s Notebooks:

What a beautiful Thing urine is, in a Pot, brown yellow, transpicuous, the Image,
diamond shaped, of the Candle in it, especially, as it now appeared, I having emptied the
Snuffers into it, & the Snuff floating about, & painting all-shaped Shadows in the
Bottom.

These lines are interesting in the context of our previous discussion of class and obligation as
they explore the nature of disgust. Fisher appears to be showing up the contrast between
George Orwell, social commentator and Eric Blair, old Etonian; and Orwell’s reaction to human
waste becomes even stronger, ‘On the day there was a full chamber-pot under the breakfast table
I decided to leave’. In contrast to Orwell/Blair, Coleridge’s vision is of the beauty in the colour

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193 J. Kerrigan, ‘Roy Fisher on Location’ p.21. Also see above, Irigaray’s comment on the way that abjection opens
up a space for pleasure.
194 R. Fisher, Interviews through Time p.107
195 G. Orwell, The Road to Wigan Pier (Hammondsworth: Penguin, 1937[1962]) p.11
197 G. Orwell, The Road to Wigan Pier p.15
and semi-texture of the urine; its ability to carry the reflected light of the candle and the patterns made in it of the snuff. Coleridge is able to accept the aesthetic of the urine, although perhaps one of the reasons this passage from Coleridge is so famous is that it remains so singular.

Fisher gathers all these things as items to distrust. He aligns not only the chamber pots and the imagery and emotions they evoke, but also his classmates from 1935 whom he carefully names and individualises. Fisher avoids trust in the syntax, too, with his use of the infinitive ‘to distrust’ with the adverb ‘suddenly’. He seems afraid to own up to or even trust his own feelings by giving the verb any kind of subject let alone the first person. He emphasises the presence of the other here not only in the repetition of the phrase ‘the others’ but also placing its repetitions at the beginning of the line with the shorter phrase ‘the others’ taking the bulk of the stress in the repetition, and giving it the only full stop before the set of parataxes that follow. These parataxes gather a vast range of distrusted ‘others’ from fauna and flora, to named humans, to mineral substances such as urine. In addition, Fisher distrusts the story itself, placing the origins of his distrust outside himself by using the external obligation of ‘I have to’ rather than the self-obligation of ‘I must’. Fisher has to set Coleridge, we assume, to fill the chamber-pot with urine. Thus the poet, Fisher, watches the poet, Coleridge, piss into a china bowl, and distrusts not only the imagery, but also the need to report the micturition, and the micturition itself, and also Coleridge’s transfiguration of the pisspot into a thing of beauty. That he feels obliged to write and publish such a passage suggests the inner momentum and motivation to explore the relation between the abject and the community, and the disgust and yet obligation his noetic reach impels Fisher towards.

It is interesting to compare these passages from Orwell and Fisher with a passage from another observer of Birmingham, the novelist Walter Allen, cited as one of the group of Birmingham novelists by Louis MacNeice. Fisher had met Allen and, in conversation with Robert Sheppard, cites Allen as one of those who had ‘seen’ Birmingham. In the novel All in a Lifetime, Allen writes:

> It stank, but since we had been born in it the stink was not thought remarkable or even offensive: it was, I am sure I believed as a child, just the normal, natural odour of air. I remember that when I was a man, and an ardent and bitter socialist, I once went back to Fussell Street to look at the place where I had spent the first ten years of my life; and then the stink – it was of ordure and urine- hit me in the face physically, like the blast

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See also, A. Croft, Red Letter Days: British Fiction in the 1930s (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1990)
from a furnace, and for a moment I thought I might vomit. I was outraged to think that I
had been brought up in such nauseating conditions, and my bitterness was naturally
intensified.201

For both Allen and Orwell, as fellow socialists, it is the political bitterness that is intensified by
the physical terror in the face of the abject. It is worth noting that Allen published All in a
Lifetime at a time when Fisher was gathering the materials for City, and although there might well
have been a class affinity, there is a profound aesthetic difference, as there is between Fisher and
Orwell.202

Where Orwell and Allen are physically disgusted by the abject in the city, Fisher accepts the
organic presence of humans in the city. In Fisher’s city, the air of the city is composed of
industrial smog, but equally composed of the exhalations/expiration of its inhabitants. In Then
Hallucinations: City II, in a passage from excised from the reprinted City, Fisher writes of the sense
of pleasure that odours bring him, particularly when he closes his eyes in the environment:

An orderly underground bar full of men, towards closing time. […] Then odours come,
and I am fetched off into memory: memories not of actual things but of imagined ones;
or at times I feel that what I am imagining is masquerading as memory. Great
wakefulness and pleasure of the senses. […] I have no sense of walls. The limit of the
world is smoke, rolling in the distance, trailing between the horns of the bull. (City II p.4)

If smells come upon Fisher, they delimit his world in a way which permeates limits, not only for
the body but also for the mind and the imagination. His first direction when smelling is
Proustian, into memory, of experience contained in his mind, experience with a history that has
already undergone enactment, and thus has temporal boundaries. In addition, he is ‘fetched’ into
this place, where Fisher’s careful use of the passive voice reinforces the involuntary nature of
this. Then memory becomes imagination, and imagination memory; thus mental experience
becomes its own liminality, its own abjection between the memory of the subject and the
imagination that reaches out to the other, where the ‘I’ has no sense of walls. As he puts it in a
section from A Furnace:

… that body of air
caught between the ceiling
and the cupboard-top, that’s like
nothing that ever was (LSI p.55).

201 W. Allen, All in a Lifetime (London: Michael Joseph 1959) p.47
202 ‘Allen was born in 1911(?) in one of the streets very near to where my father was being brought up, and probably
went to the same local school. Son of another jewellery clan in that nest of jewellers and silversmiths’ (R. Fisher,
personal communication 2008).
As has been remarked, it is in such moments that Fisher’s poetry is a critique of the contradiction between the ineffable and the noetic. The space above the cupboard is like a nothing that has had an existence through time. Fisher reaches for the knowledge of this nothing, and recognises a place that is an absence. That absence, however, is located among the exhalations and abjection of urban humanity. If this is not quite an excuse for exuberant celebration, it is the occasion for a fuller noesis of the manifold dimensions of that city.

Fisher’s reach for the noesis in the city is also a blending of senses that generates his feel for the rhythms, spaces and fetishes of the city. That blending of senses in Fisher’s poetry is quite capable of moving into synaesthesia. In a note on the group of poems ‘Handsworth Liberties’, Fisher writes of how pieces of music attach themselves, in his mind, to localities associated with his childhood, ‘so that the reverie of listening to music just connected itself up with the reverie of walking on familiar ground’. In synaesthesia, the senses may become mixed in such a way that, for example, a smell or a particular touch sensation may have a particular colour. The sensations of both music and smell push the self of the poems’ narrator into a transcendent reaching towards the other, in this case a locale. The sight of the chamber pot, and probably its smell repels Orwell from the other he is seeking to explore – the ‘working class’ other. However, as with Coleridge and the urine in the candle-light, smell occasions in Fisher a movement away from the limitations of both class disgust and class identity into a state which transcends both; a state where Fisher appears to be quite happy to inhabit the liminal. That liminality might be unstable but Fisher chooses to explore the liminality as part of his reach towards a radical knowledge of what the city might be entailed in reality.

Bell and Lland take up this idea of liminality when they comment that Fisher often seeks a ‘new materiality’ which is more akin to that of ‘the more expressive range of mucus’. Here, ‘It is in the conjunctive flow of the body’s amorphous attributes that the possibilities for liminality and border crossings become available …’. In turn, they quote Fisher’s comment on Pound, ‘In language my specialization is in the pathology of soft tissues, transient and perishable substances; when it comes to bone I’m out of my element. I’ll still turn to Pound for a reminder of what hardness is.’ Bell and Lland comment that for Fisher, the process of osmosis involves the

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203 R. Fisher, ‘Handsworth Compulsions’ Numbers 2 1987 p.27
205 ibid.
intimate fact that breathing and excretion actually make the world, where porosity and the osmotic flow runs from body to world and not the other way round.

More problematic for this thesis’ account of Fisher’s search for a radical knowledge is the sense that Fisher’s view that the sexual life in others, is a kind of affliction. This is particularly true in City where it is possible that Fisher’s early development as a writer is shown in revelatory prose; revelation that in later editions of the text Fisher censors severely. In the following passage from City, I indicate where Fisher has excised with square brackets, and where he has inserted material in later editions by putting the newer phrasing in triangular brackets:

Yet whenever I [am forced to realise] <see> that some of these people around me, [people I have actually seen, whose hopeful and distended surface I have at moments touched, are bodily in love and express that love bodily to dying-point,] I feel that it is my own energy, my own hope, tension and sense of time in hand, that have gathered and vanished down that dark drain; [that it is I who am left, shivering and exhausted, to try and kick the lid back into place so that I can go on without <the> fear]. And the terror that fills that moment or hour while I do it is a terror of anaesthesia; <of> being able to feel only vertically, like a blind wall, or thickly, like the tyres of a bus.

Lovers turn to me faces of innocence where I would [rather see faces of bright cunning] <expect wariness>. They have disappeared for entire hours into the lit holes of life, instead of lying stunned on its surface as I, and so many, do for so long; or instead of raising their heads cautiously and scenting the manifold airs that blow through the streets. [Sex fuses the intersections of the web where it occurs into blobs that drag and stick; and the web is not meant to stand such weights. Often there is no web.] (City p.18; LSI p.40)

Fisher radically tones down the original; not only replacing the passive formulation of ‘am forced’ in its iterative present tense, by the active perception of ‘see’. He also shows how for the other, love transcends the borders of self and other, by showing how his acknowledgement of the transcending power forces him, Fisher/narrator, back on himself, in yet more terror of abjection, as if sex and the male projection of semen, so vividly described in the final sentences of the original, actually threaten the social fabric. The web itself both captures the semen and displays it in a moment where the abject is not pleasure but disgust.

In contrast to ejaculation, male expectoration and micturition are essential to the city’s primordial continuities, in which Fisher looks ‘for things […] that make old men and dead men seem young. Things which have escaped, the landscapes of many childhoods’ (LSI p.35). Urine

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207 Compare also the amelioration of the utterance in the present perfect tense ‘whenever I have been forced’ with Fisher’s use of the simple present ‘whenever I am forced’. 
both inside and outside the urinal may also be an ironic comment on the power of authority. In
the architecture of the pre-second world war Birmingham, the need for public urinals brings with
it a baroque artistry, ‘public urinals surrounded by screens of cast-iron lacework painted green
and scarlet’ (*City* p.11). And Fisher ends the first version of *City* with a description of poetry as a
hole in the floorboards down which he pokes his life away with his ‘cheek against urinal floor’
(*City* p.21); lines which, again, Fisher has never reprinted. This is not quite a vision of the poet
pissing his life away in pursuit of his art, but it might not seem so very far off!

In ‘For Realism’ he describes a man facing into a corner and urinating whilst women step over
the stream and the man talks to other men who call out (*LSI* p220). In the later, ‘Texts for a
Film’ he has the following lines:

*A zone of the air, ankle-high,*
*Where dead stuff drops or hovers*  
*In the taboo.*

*Dog zone,*
*Shoe zone. Don’t sit. Avoid*  
*Falling. Don’t eat what’s been dropped.*

*Disinfect dirty money if you find it.*
*Eyes Down. Watch your step.* (*LSI* p.286 [Fisher’s italics])

In this passage, Fisher appears to mimic and thus ironize the kind of horror that Kristeva
describes as abjection. Fisher does that here by his italics, his emphatic imperatives and,
unusually in Fisher, the capitalization of the first letter of the line. This is, indeed, the ‘zone of
air’ that Kerrigan notes. In addition, this is a situation where the ‘taboo’ creates its own set of
imperatives that the speaking voice enunciates.

Fisher suggests that the ‘authorities’ may issue their own guidelines, but society will go its own
sweet way; although the commands and obligations of a particular set of mores limits the
interaction that people may have with waste. Fisher, in drawing attention to it and depicting it in
‘poetry’ shows that this is knowledge that cannot be simply absorbed within a civic servility. In
this, Fisher further mimics de Certeau’s division between ‘strategy’ and ‘tactics’. By refusing to
be horrified by waste, Fisher establishes a place for it which is liminal and yet porous in the way
that conforms to Kristeva’s thinking. By ironizing it, and also placing it within an accepted set of
‘working-class’ mores, such as the man urinating in the street, in public view, Fisher also shows
how the abject can be deeply subversive in the context of the post-war British industrial landscape.

With the reservations I have suggested here, I feel that Fisher’s noetic reach in and through the abject seeks to notate where the instable other becomes most physically itself. That instability is encoded in the revulsion and disgust that encountering the abject engenders. Fisher acknowledges the most difficult, most disgusting part of the empirical world not only to reify it in his poetry but also to reach through it to that radical knowledge and acceptance that holds the abject at the moment it holds the ineffable.

d. Fisher’s uncanny Woman

As we have seen, mystics and mystical writing can be both anti-authoritarian and disruptive. We have also seen how Fisher’s engagement with the city and its by-products is an attempt to access an ontology of the urban that critiques ideas of authority in the city at the same time as engaging with the irruptive force of the abject. How does Fisher reach out towards a more singularly human other/subject matter? This section will suggest how Fisher’s writing about women also has always critiqued ‘traditional’ portrayals of women, at the same time as showing them in particularly archetypal roles. In doing so, this thesis further problematises Fisher’s relationship with the concept of gender. At the same time, Fisher’s depiction of the relation of man to woman shows the inherent instabilities of that relationship and how such a relationship is destabilised further within the urban environment.

In the sequence Interiors with Various Figures (LSI pp 261-67), Fisher creates a linguistic liminal between self and other that engages with what has come to be known as the ‘uncanny’. In these pieces, Fisher constantly disrupts the reader’s expectations of the discourse. They are often Pinteresque in their domestic setting and in their explorations of how power might ebb and flow between the sexes, with bizarre gender relationships and dialogue between the participants that are often quite surreal. These pieces also reach out to a noesis that explores the boundaries between the symbolic and the concrete. Fisher explores the latencies of male/female relationship within which the irruption of semantic and expressive intentions override the homeostasis of norms and expectations within these domestic interiors. Their very title, redolent as it is of the nomenclature of painting, suggests not only the fact that there is a situation which is described and which is inside a posited ‘domesticity’, but that there are others who are disposed and situated within those interiors.
Commentators on ‘the uncanny’ draw attention to the fact that Freud’s German title to his essay is ‘Das Unheimlich’, or literally ‘the unhomelike’. Fisher’s narrative interiors suggest domesticity, but are distinctly ‘unhomelike’. Derived from Freud’s essay on the uncanny from 1919, Kristeva quotes Freud as saying, ‘the uncanny is that class of the frightening which leads back to what is known of old and long familiar’. And Kristeva glosses this with:

“The death and the feminine, the end and the beginning compose us only to frighten us when they break through. [...] Such malevolent powers would amount to a weaving together of the symbolic and the organic – perhaps drive itself, on the border of the psyche and biology …

Kristeva reaffirms Freud’s gloss of the home as the womb, and noticeably conflates the ‘feminine’ with the ‘beginning’. Nicholas Royle also comments that the uncanny is ‘bound up with a compulsion to tell, a compulsive storytelling’ and Fisher’s Interiors have narratives which the reader seems only able to perceive dimly below the surface of the poems. In reaching into the uncanny, Fisher shifts the ground not only from under narrative, but also from the position of humans within that narrative. Not only are the narratives ‘unhomelike’ and undomesticated but they are also ungrounded and float free from Kristeva’s ‘organic homeostasis’. At the same time, because they retain enough sense of the usual for those narratives and portrayals of human within the domestic, their sense of the uncanny is heightened.

In the first of the poems from the sequence ‘Experimenting, Experimenting’, a man and a woman are in a room:

Experimenting, experimenting, the long damp fingers twisting all the time and in the dusk
white like unlit electric bulbs she said
‘This green goes with this purple,’ the hands going,
the question pleased: ‘Agreed?’

Squatting beside a dark brown armchair just round from the fireplace, one hand on a coal scuttle the other prickling across the butchered remains of my hair,
I listen to the nylon snuffle in her poking hands,
experimenting, experimenting.
‘Old sexy-eyes,’ is all I say.

So I have to put my face into her voice, a shiny baize-lined canister that says all around me, staring in:
‘I’ve tried tonight. This place!’ Experimenting. And I:

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210 N. Royle, The Uncanny (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003) p.4
‘The wind off the wall paper blows your hair bigger.’

Growing annoyed, I think, she clouds over, reminds me she’s a guest, first time here, a comparative stranger, however, close; ‘Doesn’t welcome me.’ She’s not young, of course; trying it on, though going on about the milk bottle, tableleg, the little things. Oh, a laugh somewhere. More words. She knows I don’t live here […]

…but she shuts her eyes big and mutters:

‘And when the moon with horror –
And when the moon with horror –
And when the moon with horror –’

So I say ‘Comes blundering blind up the side tonight’.

She: ‘We hear it bump and scrape’.
I: ‘We hear it giggle’. Looks at me, ‘And when the moon with horror,’ she says.

Squatting beside a dark brown armchair just round from the fireplace, one hand on a coalscuttle the prickling across the butchered remains of my hair, ‘what have you been reading, then?’ I ask her, experimenting, experimenting. (LśI p.261-62)

Slightly self-consciously, perhaps, Fisher establishes from the very beginning that both the texts and the relationship are, somehow, experimental. The time is at ‘dusk’, where the crepuscular lends itself to the liminality of the moment, neither day nor night, in which the fingers are isolated and ironised within the metaphor ‘white like unlit electric bulbs’. The fingers are at once confined and confining, unable to release light to lighten. Then Fisher uses a seemingly exophoric ‘this’ in ‘This green goes with this purple.’ ‘This’ is exophoric from the speech that contains it, that is, it refers outside and away from its immediate context in the discourse. As such, it might appear to refer out to the colour of the walls, or carpet, or ceiling, or even items of clothing. In referring out of its discourse context, it pulls the reader into the room but without specifying what it is that the reader is ‘looking at’ or perceiving; thus the scene’s indeterminacy is confirmed. The figurative interior contains colour but not the surface the colour stains.

In the next stanza, Fisher gives indications of the interior in a way which seems very class specific. The details of the armchair, fireplace, coalscuttle, and the colours of the scene, not only the green and purple alluded to in the first stanza but also the dark brown of the armchair in the second, seem entirely typical of the dull, dark interiors of post-war Britain. It is noticeable, then, that Fisher repeats the lines ‘Squatting beside a […] of my hair’ in the final verse of the piece, creating an empirically realized context for the two people.
What also intensifies the liminality of the piece is the sense of the dialogue as full of non-sequiturs. Grice's model of conversation, the 'Cooperative Principle' describes expectations created in the hearer by the speaker. These expectations were based on four maxims: Quality, that the speaker be telling the truth; Quantity, that the speaker gives neither too little or too much information; Relation, that the utterance be relevant to the hearer; and, Manner, that the utterance be clear enough for the speaker to understand it.211

It is clear from the speeches isolated above, and the free indirect speech that Fisher interpolates at points in the piece, that there is considerable flouting of all four of Grice's Maxims. When in the woman's first turn, the woman asks the persona/narrator about the colours the relevance of the narrator's reply, 'Old sexy-eyes' seems minimal, unless by some quirk of fate the woman has one green and one purple eye. The maxim of Manner is flouted because the utterance is quite unclear to the reader and by the narrator's own admission, 'is all I say'; so flouts the Maxim of Quantity. Of course, whether or not the utterance flouts the Maxim of Quality depends upon the speaker and hearer's own understanding and not the reader's. Thus, the reader is held between his or her own reading and the relationship which is offered as part of the 'meaning' of the text. The relationship between the man and the woman is liminal in that they seem to understand the various presuppositions that their flouting of the Maxim of Quantity creates, and it is the reader outside the relationship who is confused.

The reader might assume that the next conversational turn 'I've tried tonight. This place!' belongs to the narrator, and the woman's next turn 'Doesn't welcome me.' might support that; whereby, the relevance of 'I've tried tonight', with the ellipsis of the object after the verb tried, i.e., 'tried what tonight', might be explained by the narrator's having tried to clean his room up, to decorate it. However, of course, that assumption, in Grice's terms the 'implicature', would be undermined by reference back to the woman's comment about the matching of the green with the purple, as if she were responsible for the decoration, etc. of the room.

At the end of this piece, the narrator and the woman move into a chant about the moon. This violation of the Maxim of relation has rather less to do with conversation, and more to do with its position in a text that purports to be a poem. The relation of the utterances about the moon is secured by the use of the pro-form 'it', the use of 'we' to link the narrator and the woman in

mutual perception of the moon, and linking of the phrasal subject ‘And when the moon in horror’ to its verbal predicate ‘comes blundering blind up the side’ by the narrator. The central relevance of the phrases to each other for the reader, I would suggest, is in the continuation of the rhythmic impulse between the two speakers. It is perhaps, the Maxim of Manner that appears violated to the reader because of the description of the ‘action’ of the Moon. The two speakers appear to share a mutual understanding, which the reader can witness but not satisfactorily elucidate. Finally, the narrator utters the only ‘transactional’ utterance of the whole conversation, ‘What have you been reading, then?’ whose literalness of meaning offers a final moment of humour, and release.

The ‘I’ of this poem negotiates a meaning with the woman that excludes the reader in a kind of interpersonal apophasis. The dialogue lacks technical relevance; the reader is held in a state of knowing more of what the relationship is not, than what it is. The female other is held at a point of understanding that is not realised, even though the context of the nineteen fifties room is not only made explicit but emphasized by repetition. As Royle comments, ‘[the uncanny] is not “out there” in any simple sense: as a crisis of the proper and natural, it disturbs any straightforward sense of what is inside and what is outside’. The reader of this piece is held on the inside of the room observing its detail thanks to the effortless precision that Fisher creates not through realisation of empirical detail but by suggestion, and the interplay of non-sequiturs from the human inhabitants of the scene. That pulling of the reader into the scene only further serves to disturb that ‘straightforward sense of what is inside and what is outside’ as the reader is trapped in the effort of making that ‘sense’. Fisher creates a world which bridges an interpersonal ineffability, a unspeakable quality, with a sense of the noetic, partial and occluded as that is.

A concomitant of the uncanny feminine is that Fisher can, himself, marginalise women in his poems, and portray them as uncommunicative and somehow impotent. In the third poem in the sequence ‘The Lampshade’, the other person in this interior, a ‘she’ wraps her hair around the eponymous lampshade ‘to stage an interview with it/inside the hair[…]’Thinking what she had told the lampshade,/what it had volunteered,/the moist globe in her hair’ (LSI ibid). The feminine cannot communicate with the narrator, preferring to communicate with the inanimate, at the same time as internalizing that process. Female figures in the poems are often described as sitting or sprawling on the floors of the interiors. In ‘The Lampshade’ the woman ‘sits on the floor/watching me/through brass eyes’ (LSI ibid). In the fourth poem in the series, ‘The Steam

212 N. Royle, *The Uncanny* p.2
Crane’, the woman ‘sprawl[s] with no shoes, wet with something from the floor [she] didn’t see in the dark’ (LSI ibid). In poem six, ‘The Foyer’, an ‘old woman’ is ‘Collapsed long-legged on a public armchair beside the doorway under the/ lamp whose straight petals of orange glass hide its bulbs,/ […] Your dress and cardigan, flowery and crisp, stand away from your brown/collapse and resignation like a borrowed hospital bathrobe./ The heat flushes you in patches, the confinement take your breath’ (LSI p.265). The women and the narrator in these pieces are ‘roofed in with lassitude’ (LSI ibid). In both this piece and the previous, ‘The Steam Crane’, the woman is addressed in the second person singular: a pattern which is carried into the next three pieces in the sequence where the feminine is indicated only obliquely in the response of the narrator who has become ‘a man-shaped hole in the world’ (LSI p.266). In terms of the grammar, Fisher’s protagonists ‘do’ very little, there is a minority of ‘material’ process verbs, and many verbs of the ‘mental’ process and behavioural kind. This culminates in poem nine, ‘The Arrival’ where much ‘action’, material, mental or behavioural, is held behind a curtain of modal auxiliary verbs ‘You would think the light had eaten it away down to the threads./ You, being you, would expect the light to do a thing like that./ You wouldn’t notice’ (LSI p.267); so the spectacle of witness is held in the volition of the capricious other. Fisher’s movement in this sequence from third person, ‘she’, to second person, ‘you’ establishes the feminine as other even if the relationship between the protagonists is liminal and, in their lassitude, static. For Eric Mottram, that liminality makes these poems, ‘… desperate […] re-estimating married life, perhaps …’, where ‘Fisher returns to a constant theme: the possible insanity of allowing an hallucinatory vision of ordinary things and daily relationships to happen at all: the poet’s sacrifice is uncertain of outcome’. Mottram’s ‘uncertainty of outcome’ may be mapped onto our previous sense of the uncanny, where the ‘hallucinatory’ is allowed into ‘ordinary things and daily relationships’. That ‘hallucinatory’ works with latencies foregrounding them and showing how ontologies are unstable and uncanny. Here, in turn, what is ineffable in these relationships is radically established in this unique group of poems.

Elsewhere, however, the sense of empirical instability can throw Fisher’s portrayal of women rather askew, such that there is a failure in Fisher’s poetic empathy with women, and the noesis partial and moralising. In City, Fisher writes:

You can lie women in your bed
With glass and mortar in their hair.
Pocket the key, and draw the curtains,
They’ll not care. (City p.7)

Does the narrator really know that? And where we have seen that Fisher’s male might excrete in the city and, in that abjection, be part of the making of the city, these women are held within the destruction not only of the city but also the abnegation of themselves, uncaring. Also in City, in a passage that Fisher has also chosen not to reprint, he describes meeting ‘a tall, elderly woman’, who is:

dingily dressed, and her complexion was livid, a dirty vegetable colour that I had never seen in flesh before. […] Her neck, from the throat of the jacket to the ear, was encased in a support of plastic or leather, ridged like tubing of an enormous gas-mask, and of a subdued, rubbed, yellowish grey. (City p.11)

He comments that:

To me she was horrible and fascinating but not sick in the sense that she exacted my concern. Had we met, had we then possessed any common language, I would willingly have talked to her of war, of food, of children, of death. I would not have wished to hear of the movements of her disease. (City p.12)

To the narrator, this woman does not excite his concern but ‘only’ his interest; thus, he keeps her distant and objectified, possibly incapable of possessing the same language. The language exists in a Bakhtinian ‘between’, as a counter in an argument that the narrator seems willing to entertain only in the terms of a solipsistic concern for his own health.

In a passage from ‘The Red and the Black’ from 1979, Fisher’s depiction of the female body is equally objectifying:

Don’t think I’m being patronising.
The women’s wiry hairs

are real enough, moist in the dark,
shifting on painted benches

among the graves, lipping and tugging
at the finger’s ends. The day

you’re patronising to a woman’s cunt
you’re faded, you’re a kidney

dropped in the gutter, you’re a dried bag. That’s the faith of it, at least. (LSI pp. 252-53)

Fisher’s lines cannot simply be ironised as part of the destabilised self we have examined above. The mono-syllabic ‘anglo-saxon’ epithet occurs thumpingly at the end of the line drawing attention to itself not only in terms of information prominence but also its being at the end of the longest line of the extract. The generalising ‘you’ in the fourth and fifth stanza of this extract
seems too vehement to be easily ironised, and if there is an irony intended here, then the point of Fisher's admonitions against being patronising fall down completely. Interestingly, again, the male attitude is part of the abject, ‘dropped in the gutter’. Yet the women are seated amongst the dead.

Elsewhere in Fisher, the older female can become an archetype, living both in and out of time, which we will discuss in more detail in the next chapter. However, because they are archetypal these women have authority even amidst the models of authority thrown up by civic authorities; their authority comes from their ontological boundedness, their otherness within the expectations of society. They are the creators and users of Certeauvian ‘tactics’ against the strategies of civic authority.

In the later sequence, *The Dow Low Drop*, from 2000, the portrayal of the maternal absorbs the topical urban instabilities and latencies to produce not only society but the fabric and infrastructure of it:

Brought out of herself
the seemingly straight line, the right angle,
the working in metals, the grenade,
the brick. For all to consider. And
the rest of it, each year a fresh haul.
She provides. Herself in every part
immanent, her light in all of it:
a world of Town Halls with no fathers. (*LSI* p.26)

The fecundity of the Mother (capitalised) produces, through a peculiar parturition, not only the hard substances of the town itself, but also munitions, the grenade. Thus the feminine incarnated in the Mother appears not only to bring about the hardened, desensitized matter of the place, where, as we have seen the abject finds its location. The Mother not only produces the means for that society to go to war with itself, ‘the grenade’; but also the means to rebuild, ‘the bricks’. In addition, this birthing is exposed, fresh and immanent. In this, the maternal is a focus for the latencies of the urban, because the female principle with its capitalised S, ‘provides’. She is also immanent ‘in every part’. This latter contains a typically Fisher syntactical sleight of hand; as the ‘She’ is ‘Herself in every part’, i.e., all of Her is female. But also ‘She’ is immanent in all of the city; ‘She’ is all-pervading. This latter understanding is underscored by Fisher's continuation of the line as ‘her light in all of it’. But, here again, Fisher opens that out with the proform ‘it’. Where the ‘it’ may be the whole of the city, Fisher moves it almost damningly into the Town Halls that have no progenitive equivalent, i.e., the fathers. The feminine maternal, here, is
exposed as ‘what it is’ to Fisher, immanent in the latencies of the city. Finally, this is a bastardising process that is also parthenogenic. Thus the ‘civic’ is rendered ‘impotent’ from its parthenogenic conception further affecting the way individuals come to identity in the city. So, the Town Halls have no fathers, although they may hold males that are impotent!

This chapter has discussed Fisher’s relationship with the urban, the abject and woman. It has tried to establish that what this thesis has called Fisher’s noetic reach, and which, at the start of this chapter was defined as ‘a radical perception of that world, which will offer a more radical kind of knowledge.’ What is radical is the way that Fisher works with the urban, the abject and the woman, in ways which address what Fisher perceives to be the essences of these items to empathise with the instabilities he finds there. In discussing the urban, we have seen that occlusions may occur within and around the social group that Fisher depicts. These occlusions may occur as a result of the civic process of record, or through the social forces, e.g. shame, that a social group may throw up itself. In either case, instabilities result and a sense of life is lost which Fisher the artist reaches towards to resurrect and reconstruct even for those who are not aware of the loss. In the abject, instabilities that Fisher finds are not quite the ones of revulsion that Kristeva portrays. However, the instabilities of the abject are at the centre not only of the substance and fabric of the urban, but also at the centre of a Certeauvian irruption against the false ‘culture-packages’ that are imposed from above, by those with their mansions on the edges of hell. Finally, we have seen how Fisher sees womanhood, and particularly motherhood, at the centre of the latencies of the city. This has not only involved the parturition of what the city might be, but also what it might mean; even if that vision of womanhood might seem to post-feminist eyes partial and objectifying.
Chapter Four: Mysticism and Fisher: *A Furnace*

Fisher states that the structure and design of *A Furnace* presents ‘the equivocal nature of the ways that time can be thought about’ (*A Furnace* p.vii). He also comments that the nature of movement in the poem is suggested by the double spiral,

[… the seven movements [of *A Furnace*] proceed as if by a section taken through the core of such a spiral, with the odd-numbered ones thematically touched by one direction of the spiral’s progress, and the even-numbered so touched by its other, returning, progress. (*A Furnace* p.viii)

Thus the poem is explicit about the dimensionality of time, with Fisher using the musical term ‘movement’ to describe the sections of the poem, and reinforcing this with the word ‘proceed’. This proceeding of movement is both in and through time, and movement in and out of life itself, as we shall see below. In addition, there is a sense that movement itself might be porous, signalled by the design of the double spiral on the cover of the first Oxford edition of *A Furnace*. The double spiral is pictured in white against a deep-blue background and appears much like a child would draw a line with chalk on a paving slab; the spiral line is not solid and uniform but rumpled and broken. Thus the line of movement is not only thinner than the spaces it enfolds but is clearly porous to them, indicating further the ‘equivocal nature of the ways that time can be thought about’.

In *A Furnace*, part of Fisher’s noetic reach is towards an understanding of the relationship between time and movement. In the previous chapter, ‘noetic reach’ was defined as the authorizing consciousness of the poems’ reaching towards the empirical realities of the subject matter of the poems in ways which see a radical engagement with those realities, a feeling towards a cosmology, in Fisher’s own words. However, this cosmology is not systematic or totalizing as that radical noesis acknowledges the unstable nature both of the ‘entailed world’ and the instabilities of the perceptions that engage with it. In response to those instabilities, this chapter will examine *A Furnace* linearly to show how each section refracts on the next. In that way it will follow Fisher’s own comment that he ‘didn’t want it to be a cut-up, I didn’t want it to be a bag of bits. I did want it to have a certain amount of forward progression’.²¹⁵ At the same time, the chapter will also attempt to draw attention to common themes throughout the poem.

²¹⁵ R. Fisher, *Interviews through Time* p.96
Fisher’s reaching towards time and movement may pose difficulties for our understanding of the formal, spiral pattern of the poem. Crozier is dismissive of the ‘explanatory power’ that the ‘graphic suggestion’ of the double spiral might have. He suggests that the double spiral is a metaphor whose purpose is limited to suggesting how signs might be ‘produced and transformed’.\(^{216}\) Since some might see such a function as part of the illocutionary force of poetry, Crozier’s adumbration of the metaphor as somehow limiting seems to undermine the notion of the poem itself. In addition, Crozier’s whole approach to the poem emphasizes the signs which it offers of such matters as, time, identity and the city. Indeed, not only does he comment ‘I have stressed the primacy of the sign’,\(^ {217}\) he also grafts onto the formal explanation of *A Furnace*, the notion that onto the double spiral can be mapped the idea of the labyrinth. Crozier describes the pattern of *A Furnace* as ‘a labyrinthine enclosure’.\(^ {218}\) Such a metaphor suggests a teleology of challenging mental difficulties at the end of which there is little hope of emergence, but he also suggests that the theme of the poem is ‘timeless identities entering nature’\(^ {219}\), whereby the movement is from out to in. At the same time, Crozier vigorously eschews the notion that such a teleology is mystical, stating unequivocally that the poem does not ‘arrive, finally, at a heterodox mysticism’ which seems to ‘annul the natural fact of death’\(^ {220}\). Such paradoxes might be ameliorated by a closer examination of Crozier’s metaphor of the labyrinth.

Brown in *God and Enchantment of Place* contrasts the ‘older’ term ‘labyrinth’ with the newer term ‘maze’ and suggests,

Unlike mazes, labyrinths do not admit of the possibility of failure, provided walkers persist in their chosen course. Additionally, the goal always remains visible, no matter how often the circuitous path throws one back near to where one began. Labyrinths can thus be said to encapsulate the divine promise that, provided faith in God’s future is maintained, grace will ensure the pilgrims do indeed arrive at the goal they seek.\(^ {221}\)

Brown’s interest in labyrinths is occasioned by the marking of labyrinths on the floors of European cathedrals, such as Chartres and Auxerre. Brown suggests that these labyrinths are representations of pilgrimage, where pilgrims can make sacramental journeys that, through infirmity or circumstance, they would not otherwise make.\(^ {222}\) Fisher’s double spiral may not constitute a religious pilgrimage. However, the very dynamic of its movement, although

\(^{217}\) ibid.
\(^{218}\) ibid.
\(^{219}\) A. Crozier, ‘Signs of Identity’ p.32
\(^{220}\) ibid.
\(^{222}\) D. Brown, *God and Enchantment of Place* p.234
countervailing and returning, is a movement from ‘Introit’ (the first word of \textit{A Furnace}) to ‘seraphic’ (the last word of the poem). For Peter Porter, this dynamic is a ‘duality […] of brute fact and luminous imagination’.\textsuperscript{223} Fisher suggests that the poem’s dynamic is tempered by its orientation - as of a ‘section taken through the core’; thus the poet’s view is panoptic in a modernist and Joycean manner, the goal in view to the poem’s creator, but also in view to the serious reader and secular pilgrim accompanying Fisher’s journey, mitigating the failure that the maze might occasion.

What is the nature of movement within the labyrinthine double spiral? This thesis suggests that a part of the answer to that question must reflect on the nature of movement within a perceived mysticism. As we have seen, recent writers on mysticism have tended to eschew an experiential model of mysticism, to replace it with a teleological theology; a writing that has a noetic and epistemological reach through experience into an apophasis. As we noted above, Cupitt in \textit{Mysticism after Modernity} claims that, for the medieval mystics, the experiential content of mysticism is actually the experience of writing. That view is supported by McGinn’s suggestion that ‘modern’ experiential mysticism is to some extent a product of Romanticism whereby the writer writing in a transport towards a sublime finds herself borne on the impulse towards unity, subordination to the other, etc.\textsuperscript{224} What such writing needs is the creation, or suggestion, of movement away from and towards.

Such movement is likely to be suggested by a range of metaphors. In \textit{The Darkness of God}, Denys Turner, who also espouses an ‘anti-experiential’ model of mysticism, discusses a range of metaphors associated with the mystical; ‘interiority’, ‘ascent’, ‘light and darkness’ and ‘oneness with God’. Turner wishes to use these metaphors in ways which turn against their standard use contained in descriptions of a modern ‘experientialism’. Such experiential needs, Turner states, are not part of the mysticism of the great medieval writers on mysticism, St John of the Cross, Meister Eckhart, or the author of \textit{The Cloud of Unknowing}.\textsuperscript{225}

Northrop Frye has also discussed the place of the metaphor of ascent in narrative. In his Norton lectures of 1975, he suggested that there were ‘four primary narrative movements in literature […] first, the descent from a higher world; second, the descent to a lower world; third,
the ascent from a lower world; and, fourth, the ascent to a higher world. What such understandings offer here is, perhaps, ways to compare the dynamics such metaphors contain, with the rather more mixed dynamics which are part of *A Furnace*, partly, perhaps the dynamic tension contained in Porter’s sense of the poem containing ‘brute fact and luminous imagination’ and the noetic reach such tension might enable. But, partly also, a sense that movement in *A Furnace* is never ‘simply’ up or down.

*A Furnace* begins with the section called ‘Introit’. This opening movement is different in that it is not part of the numbered sections of the rest of the poem and Fisher gives this movement a particular date, 12th November, 1958. Different too, in that it is not an evocation of the Muse in the way that we get from Homer or Milton, but it does evoke something similar to a secular afflatus. The speaker of the poem is sitting on the top-deck of a bus looking out over the ‘townships’ of Birmingham. In this position, he perceives himself as ‘the knifeblade, the light-divider’ in late autumn sunshine; in, in the phrase of Fisher’s which this thesis has used to define Fisher’s noetic reach, ‘the sort of mood which feels for a cosmology in whatever presents itself’.

Fisher often associates this sort of mood with the reception of light. In this passage these metaphors of and around light move the trajectory of the poem; as we shall see, light in Fisher emerges like nature with intentions, with agency. In *Then Hallucinations: City II*, Fisher associates his ecstasy with ‘a rag of light blowing through the things I know’ (*City II* p.6). In the ‘polytheism without gods’ passage noted above, the speaker wants ‘to believe that I live in a single world’ but ‘The light keeps on separating the world like a table knife: it sweeps across what I can see and suggests what I do not’ (*City II* p.8). Fisher situates the metaphor of knifeblade with the metaphor of light, and with the opening out of ‘whatever’ glances towards some metaphysical basis of the world. The knife cuts the world at the place where Fisher is, and offers that realism against metaphor. Light permits sight and when it emerges from a source it offers warmth as well. But Fisher does not pin that source down, other than its being daylight. In addition, here, at the opening of *A Furnace*, light ‘crossing from the left’ (*LSI* p.51) has the caprice, the agency, both to separate the world and also to suggest what the speaker does not. The light not only has volitions and seeming intentions, but its afflatus offers a noetic illumination of the ineffable that the speaker cannot perceive unaided. At the same time, the

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227 R. Fisher, *City Poems: a cassette recording*
speaker feels ‘as if I was made/ to be the knifeblade, the light-divider’ (LI ibid.). It seems that not only does light have agency to separate but that such an agency exists within the speaker; the agency to enable noesis is confirmed.

Here, the light ‘is without/rarity, it is an oil,/amber and clear that binds in/this alone and suggests/no other. It is a pressing/medium, steady to a purpose’ (LI p.51). This light is binding, and holds in, not only itself but also the person perceiving it. In this way it is exclusive, almost unique; a medium that offers a pressure and, with its agency and volition, also a teleology, reinforced in the line break created between adjective ‘pressing’, with its feminine ending, and noun ‘medium’ that begins with a long vowel and is stress-initial. That a ‘purpose’ of the light is to make the narrator feel for a cosmology, places the speaker at the cutting-edge of the experience of both light-dividing but also of passivity in the movement from the metaphor of light to the metaphor of mind,

    Whatever approaches my passive taking-in,
then surrounds me and goes by
will have itself understood only
phase upon phase
by separate involuntary
strokes of my mind, dark
swings of a fan-blade
that keeps a time of its own,
made up from the long
discrete moments
of the stages of the street,
each bred off the last as if by causality. (LI p.52)

As has been noted above, this section begins with characteristically de-lexicalised items228 such as, ‘whatever’, and, a little further on in the poem ‘Something’, as in ‘Something’s decided/to narrate/in more dimensions than I can know/’ (LI p.53). The ‘whatever’ then has attenuated reference as the elided subject of the verbs, ‘approaches’, ‘surrounds’ and ‘goes’. The passage also contains pro-forms such as ‘itself’. Andrew Crozier comments that Fisher frequently uses deixis at this point in A Furnace, but also ‘suppress[es] substantive reference’ in his poetry as a whole, and that this releases the poetry from ‘the epistemic boundaries of deixis’,229 to feel towards what has hitherto been inexpressible. These semantic sleights of hand have the effect of

228 ‘…vocabulary items that are not thematically bound and which have a low degree of lexicalization. By lexicalisation here, we mean a word that may have a highly concrete and particularized meaning’ in J. Morley and I. Pople, Words for Ideas (Newbury, Berks: Express, 2004).p.4
229 A. Crozier, ‘Signs of Identity’ p.30
etiolating the meaning below the surface of the sentence; a semi-vacuum into which the mind is drawn by its separate and involuntary strokes. Fisher plays this against a kind of rhythmic mantra - the ‘involuntary strokes of my mind, dark/swings’ - which emanates from the mind to calm the mind. The rhythm is provided by the streets along which the bus travels; almost a true juggernaut. And the enabled, epistemological and noetic quest of the mind rises in rhythmic pulses to meet the ‘giving out of the world on a slow/pulse, on a metered contraction/that the senses enquire towards/but may not themselves/intercept’ (LSI ibid.). The rhythm of the strokes is mimetically reinforced by the enjambement of the pairs of lexical monosyllables: ‘dark/swings’ and ‘slow/pulse’ with their inherent stress. Fisher is surrounded and carried on a kind of secular afflatus that ‘keeps him moving’ into the labyrinthine double spiral. However, as with many sections from A Furnace, there is a dying fall to the movement of the section, which ends with ‘the shallowing of the road and the pulse’s falling away’ and the image of the trolley lines ‘chattering and humming as if from somewhere else’ (LSI p.45).

The title of the second section of A Furnace, ‘Calling’, might also imply a continued movement from far to near. Yet, as with much of Fisher’s poetry, the grammar of the word ‘Calling’, is immediately sheared from referents that would give it direction, time or mood. With no subject or object, the natural transitivity of the verb is withdrawn so that the reader does not know who is calling to whom. If the word is a noun, with the sense of vocation, then that vocation would need to be divulged, possibly in the section it names. As with City, Fisher refuses to offer the noun with a definite or indefinite article, so that the calling is not one of many as in ‘A Calling’, or particularized in the case of ‘The Calling’. In the terms of the investigation into Fisher’s putative mysticism, we do not know if this is the vocational call to unity from something greater than the person, or thing that is called, as the collocated preposition, as in ‘a calling from/to/by/into, etc’, is also carefully occluded, as is the volitional agency that might call.

The sum of these occlusions, however, allows Fisher, on the one hand, to create a nakedness that might seem vulnerable and unstable. On the other hand, such nakedness also allows Fisher to present the locus of this section, whether we call it the self or the authorizing consciousness, as availing itself of opportunities that arise. Within these alternatives the noetic reach can move towards what is inaccessible, possibly ineffable. That ambivalence is maintained in the opening lines of the section, itself,

Waiting in blood. Get out of the pit.
That is the sign for parting. Already
the world could be leaving us. (LSI p.54)
That these lines offer a range of interpretations is emphasized by the grammar: the ‘waiting’ could be a gerund or a participle, the former requiring a possessive adjective such as ‘my’ or ‘his’ or ‘her’, that the phrase rejects; the latter requiring a subject and auxiliary, such as ‘I am’ or ‘She is’, or ‘It is’. Thus ‘waiting’ rejects the fixity that it demands, and here, too, nature surrounds, and needs to be exited. The imperative, ‘Get out’ implies a ‘you’ that is understood, but the reader cannot know where that ‘you’ is located or to whom it refers. The deictic ‘that’ at the beginning of the next line is equally enigmatic, its deixis pointing to a referent that is entirely absent and unrecoverable from the context; whatever cohesion ‘that’ points towards is further subverted by ‘that’ being a ‘sign’ only. And finally, the pronoun ‘us’ might be a collusive inclusion of the reader or refer, again, to person or persons unknown. At the same time, however, the consciousness at the centre of these three lines knows that a call has come; it has perceived that something has reached out to it and that its noetic ‘antennae’ have received a stimulus to reach out, in turn, towards. The stripping away of the conventional grammatical superstructure of these lines is mimetic of how that central consciousness is more ‘directly aware of the ultimacy of the experience’. There is a direct, naked perception of stimuli.

Fisher creates other delays in that ascent from the disturbing, abject pit, in which blood seems a kind of amniotic fluid, to the quiescence of the October sunset on the slope of Gradbach Hill which ends the section. Movement is interrupted by images of emotional disquiet and disturbance. Firstly, of a stained-glass window in which the images of saints ‘scream and stare and whistle’ whilst piercing their setting in the frame ‘with acids’ (*LSI* p.54). Then a wall of philadelphus, which, even though its name implies brotherly love, ‘writhes’ in lamplight and is ‘awkward/in the floods of expression’, and then is cut down ‘for harbouring insurrection and ghosts’ (*LSI* p.55). Secondly, whilst driving at night ‘so as to be repeatedly elsewhere’, the narrator sees a string of ‘festive little bulbs’ which also offer a sign, but this time that sign is one of ‘ineluctable/disquiet. Askew. The sign, once there,/ bobbing in the world,/ rides over intention, something/ let through in error’ (*LSI* p.56). This is the first reference to nature’s ‘riding over intention’ something he associates later in the poem with nature riding over the intentions of authority in Section two of *A Furnace*. Here, the bulbs might be ‘festive’, part of some celebration but for the narrator, already fleeing from something unnamed, they serve only to jar his nerves further. Both these singular objects of the gaze, the philadelphus and the little

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230 Fisher, himself, comments that he got these phrases from throwing the *I Ching*; see J. Kerrigan, ‘Come to think of it, the imagination’ p.114. and above Chapter 3.

231 B. M. Matilal, ‘Mysticism and Ineffability’ p.143
bulbs, are above the narrator, but his reach towards them and the knowledge they bring reinforces a disjunction from a world of which to which he is only too nakedly raw. The philadelphus and the festive bulbs call, but irrationally and horribly.

Also ‘riding over intention’ in the ‘Calling’ section, are further disjunctions between the post-industrial urban and the natural, often encoded in relation to the pagan or animist. For Wootten, this is because Fisher is, to some extent, a pantheistic post-Romantic whose Romanticism exists in opposition to the monotheistic Romanticisms of, particularly, Wordsworth and Coleridge. In addition, Wootten sees Fisher as engaging in ‘an analysis of the sublime and the way in which the sublime, the awe-inspiring, is a feature of an industrialized landscape’.232 That landscape is viewed in an upwards and outwards gaze that views the sublime in a series of monuments to that industrialization. This gaze at the monumental, Fisher acknowledges, is towards objects which have been left by ‘a race of departed Gods or Titans’.233 Thus, there is a sense of the urban sublime in this working of buildings and landscape. But these monumental objects, and the sublime encoded in them, are themselves open to irruption from forces beyond their control,

In the places,
 on their own account, not
 for anybody’s comfort:
 gigantic peace.
 [...] 
 Arcanum. Forbidden
 open space, marked out with
 tramlines in great curves among blue
 Rowley Rag paving bricks.
 [...] 
 The single human refuge
 a roadside urinal, rectangular
 roofless sarcophagus of tile and brick,
 topped around with spikes and
 open to the sky.
 [...] 
 The few moments in the year when the quadruped
 rears on its hind legs to mount,
 foreparts and head
disconnected, hooves dangling,
 the horned head visibly not itself,
 but something. (LSI p.57)

It is obvious here that the relation between urban and the natural is not the growth of buddleia from abandoned chimneys, or the kestrel raising its young in the rafters of empty mills. The de-

232 W. Wootten, ‘Romanticism and Animism in Roy Fisher’s A Furnace’ p.81
233 R. Fisher, City Poems: a cassette recording
lexicalised text-noun ‘places’ accretes into its vacancy, the huge press-shops and warehouses of industrial Birmingham, and further pulls into those places the, possibly, capitalist solipsisms that these places have ‘on their own account’. Their purpose, their teleology, is now their own. And yet, within that solipsistic teleology, these emptied buildings have a massive peace.

If there is peace here, it is combined with an admixture of the forbidden and the arcane in tension with awe, terror, and the liminal of the abject; the ascended and the industrial sublime is held apart from the lowering and abject. As such, Fisher explicitly acknowledges the mystical in this landscape in ways which might seem a little overwrought, as if he is ‘telling’ rather than ‘showing’ with a landscape that Fisher labels rather all-embracingly as ‘Arcanum’. He glosses this, on the *City* cassette, as a similar spiritual awe to that felt by the young Wordsworth amidst the landscape of his youth. In the ‘Arcanum’, Fisher finds an industrial sublime that inspires both awe and terror and might also be seen as a gesture towards the ineffability of the post-industrial, which Fisher embeds in the physical detail of the exact type of paving brick that holds the tramlines. Beside that detail of human vulnerability, it is not ironic that the only place for the human is the roadside urinal. Fisher’s comfort with the abject extends to the sense that this urinal is a refuge; yet it is also sarcophagus, within which a sense of the abject is pushed further, ‘embarrassingly human’ as Wootten labels it. It is perhaps this urban awe and the sense of the sublime, that stops the authorities proceeding with demolition, or as Fisher puts it in *City*, ‘They are too frightened of it to pull it down’ (*LSI* p.36).

Fisher’s sublime is embodied and embodying in opposition to a Blakean immaterial, but anti-industrial, sublime; the Blake who states ‘[A] a fig for all corporeal’. Appropriately then, from within Fisher’s industrial sublime, the horned god appears. Its appearance is limited to a few moments in the year and we are given no further details as to when that moment might be, or why that moment would be generated. We also have little or no sense of what the Beast actually mounts. What happens, however, is climactic in every sense. The generative, pagan ritual is both occasioned and also preserved, somehow, in the semantic and empirical detumescence of ‘visibly not itself;/ but something;’ line-end freighted and emphatic. As Fisher himself says, ‘you have the repeatable link – man, beast, god. You have art, too’. Wills states that such moments show evidence of the uncanny and the gothic, even the horrific, in *A Furnace*; a ‘gothic’ that Fisher’s

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234 ibid.
235 W. Wootten, ‘Romanticism and Animism in Roy Fisher’s *A Furnace*’ p.82
237 R. Fisher, “*Come to Think of It, the Imagination*": Roy Fisher in Conversation with John Kerrigan’ in eds. P. Robinson and R. Sheppard, *News for the Ear*
introduction to the poem explicitly disavows. Fisher is able to yoke the pagan erotic, and ‘the repeatable link’ with the sense that Art can hold these things up for scrutiny and thus distance them from their own origins.

Fisher further distances the poem from the origins of these experiences by undermining his own presence within the texture of the poem. This undermining is of a piece with the distancing from the self that Fisher espouses elsewhere in his writing. Except that here, this distancing occurs at the end of a trajectory from the raw vulnerability of the beginning of the section through to the awe that the post industrial landscape provokes. In the middle of ‘Calling’, the following lines occur:

Sudden and grotesque
callings. Grown man
without right learning; by nobody
guided to the places; not knowing
what might speak; having eased awkwardly
into the way of being called. (LSI p.56)

If this is the authorizing consciousness of the poem that is being called, we might have to settle for naming this ‘grown man’ as ‘Roy Fisher’ here. While the ‘grown man’, maintains the independence of the subject as ‘by nobody/guided to the places’, the placing of the definite article before ‘places’ might suggest that these places are particular places that need to be reached. And the grammar of that final verb phrase suggests that the ‘grown man’ has gone out of his way to be the recipient of the call, even if that has been an awkward process. The refrain ‘grotesque callings’ is repeated in the ‘Authorities’ third section of A Furnace in where Fisher castigates those in pursuit of a knowledge which takes the form of ‘private obsessions’. Such obsessions belong to those who are ‘having to be/ each his own charlatan’ (LSI p.67). This is immediately followed in the text, by ‘Grotesquely called,/ grotesquely going in, fools/ persisting in their own folly’ (LSI pp. 67-68). Fisher follows this with a list of who such fools might be: teachers, priests’ sons, Symbolist poets. Yet each of these has a calling, a vocation even if Fisher needs to distance them in their grotesque callings by describing them as fools and charlatans. Their ontologies place them where they too have noetic reach, and where they perceive even when their perceptions and interpretations are deluded, or neurotically vulnerable.

In the next section, ‘The Return’, A Furnace charts the irruptions of the uncanny that bring Nature and Identity with their respective agencies, back into a world from which they might

238 C. Wills, ‘A Furnace and the Life of the Dead’ in eds. J. Kerrigan and P. Robinson The Thing about Roy Fisher
239 See also Wootten, ‘Romanticism and Animism in Roy Fisher’s A Furnace’ Cercles 2005, Vol.12 p. 82 Crozier also sees the charlatan figure as ‘self-reference’, ‘Signs of identity’ p.27
appear to have been excluded, or to have left of their own volition. What returns here is the sense of identity that might have easily been subsumed and lost within the urban. On the one hand, this identity is an identity belonging to the dead, which the dead not only have on their own terms but which are also given them by the living. On the other hand, this identity is one which nature has in and of itself and which will not be subsumed within the urban, post-industrialised and liable to demolition and change as that urban is. As the horned god rises for copulation amidst the debris of the city, so Nature and Death will also irrupt to make their presences felt, and exercise their agency. In *A Furnace*, Fisher’s reach towards these can be typically sardonic,

> The signs of it passably offensive in a cat or a herring, in a man are made out unthinkably appalling. (*LSI* p.63)

But not so unthinkable that Fisher does not think it; as indeed, he thinks about such matter in his most recent volume, *Standard Midland*, in which corpses are moved around by the living in memorial until the processes of putrefaction and liquefaction have been and gone, *‘From the grave-clothes/ they fall in gobbets as dog-food/ falls from the can’* (*SM* p.12, Fisher’s italics). Thus, the noetic reach in Fisher is towards a liminal place where death, time, nature and culture interact.

Both literary and personal, ancestral examples actively explore the boundaries of life and death here; firstly literary figures such as Dr John Dee, Poe’s M. Valdemar, and the figure of Lord Chandos, from Hugo von Hoffmanstahl’s eponymous letter to Lord Bacon. Dr John Dee, one time Warden of Manchester Cathedral, was a known necromancer for whom immortality was an active quest, and who may have been the model for the Faustus legend.²⁴⁰ Poe’s M. Valdemar was, as Fisher explains in a note in *A Furnace*, hypnotized upon the point of death and hung on that point for several months. Lord Chandos is possibly a more interesting figure from Fisher’s point of view. In the letter he writes, he declares that art and writing is no longer possible, since he has lost the vitality of existence granted to him by his experience of epiphanies. For this figure, in a way that prefigures Cuppitt’s mysticism of writing, the death of what is valued in life is equated with the death of language. Thus the failure of the self is equated with language’s

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²⁴⁰ see L. Michael, *The Angel Stone* (London: Puffin, 2006) and P. Ackroyd, *The House of Doctor Dee* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1993); thus Dee is a real figure but has been placed within the literary canon.
hubristic attempt to have more power than it is meant to have, and its failed attempts to explain ideas and truths above its capabilities.\textsuperscript{241}

Such a figure might indicate two important ideas to Fisher. The first is to confirm the sense in Fisher of the liminal nature of his poetics; that language both reifies experience and is reified by it, and that this process is both constitutive of and undermining of the Self (see above, Chapter 1). The second idea is that within language in this poem, Fisher is able to sustain the life of the dead and not simply by memorialising it. As Wills puts it, ‘The poem is animated by a sense of the responsibility to keep things unburied – to articulate their presence without denying their absence’.\textsuperscript{242} What Fisher also does here is to reclaim the dead from their place in a faith-based notion of the after-life, that ‘thunderous humbug’ that he adduces elsewhere.\textsuperscript{243} In this way Fisher gives them back their ‘timeless identities’, a phrase Fisher uses twice in this part of the poem. These timeless identities ‘ride in the timeless flux’ (\textit{LSI} p.59), which is Heraclitean and mystical, and not directly teleological as in the Judeo-Christian tradition.

In ‘The Return’ Fisher suggests that such timelessness may require external agency,

\begin{quote}
\begin{verbatim}
where to convert
one term to its antithesis
requires that there be devised
an agent with authority –

and they’re in. That’s it. Who
shall own death? Spoken for,
and Lazarus the test case. Only Almighty
God could work that trick. (\textit{LSI} ibid.)
\end{verbatim}
\end{quote}

This passage is filled with Fisher’s typical sleight of hand with syntax and grammar. The verbal grouping here, and it would be hard to describe it as a ‘sentence’, begins with yet another de-lexicalised item ‘where’ followed by the infinitive ‘to convert’ taking an object and a complement, ‘one term to its antithesis’ which act together as the grammatical subject of the first finite verb ‘requires’. After that, Fisher uses the passive whose impersonality is reinforced by the extraposed dummy subject of ‘there’, alongside the studied archaism of the subjunctive ‘be’. Thus the depersonalized ‘requirement’ is replicated mimetically in the ruptured grammar and syntax over four lines. Those four lines are followed by the line break, as if to pause for effect. Then, the


\textsuperscript{242} C. Wills, ‘\textit{A Furnace} and the Life of the Dead’ p.258

\textsuperscript{243} In his interview with John Kerrigan, Fisher calls this ‘historical Christianity’s major hijack operation’ J. Kerrigan, ‘Come to think of it, the imagination’ p.108
line break is followed by ‘and they’re in’, which mimics the racing commentator who shouts ‘and they’re off’ at the start of the 3.40 at Punchestown. It is almost as if the absent ‘I’ is forcing the pace of these passive-voiced sentences.

Fisher suggests that the Newtonian action and reaction between life and death implies agency, and with agency comes opportunity. That opportunity is taken by ‘them’, but who ‘they’ are, is carefully occluded by the further trumping of ‘That’s it’, which swivels from the plural ‘they’ to the singular ‘that’. Such a change pushes the deixis away with ‘that’ instead of ‘this’, in turn followed by the attributive equivalence of ‘it’. But we are little wiser as to what ‘that’ might be; is it the taking of the opportunity to move between life and death? At this point in the poem we haven’t met the characters who inhabit the limbo that I have discussed above.

The emphatic ‘That’s it.’ is followed by ‘Who/shall own death?’ The line breaks and roves over between ‘who’ and ‘shall’, and ‘who’ is again emphasized by its placement at the line end. This almost turns the question into a statement, where the question ‘who’ becomes the active but again de-lexicalised subject. The convolution of all this has been pointing to further ellipsis in ‘Spoken for,/ and Lazarus the test case.’ The implication, here, seems to be that it is death that is ‘spoken for’. Death is not only ‘owned’ by Almighty God, with its own ironic split over the line of ‘Almighty’ and ‘God’, but ‘spoken for’ in the colloquial sense of being ‘engaged to’ God, with the nudging tone of louche uncles at beery wedding receptions. Thus God has agency but only the authority granted by the Christian tradition for which suicide is anathema. The taking of life in the act of suicide condemns the suicide to eternal damnation for placing his or her agency above that of God.

Fisher also notes how language excludes as it includes. He uses A Furnace to record in his own text the ‘timeless identities’ of his ancestors William Fisher and Ann Mason, recording dates and occupations (LSI p.62). At the same time, and in the same section of A Furnace he notes how the ‘ghost’s grown children’ must use the Public Record office to establish their own identities; identities which have been miniaturized by authority in places such as these. And yet, what is ‘unthinkably appalling’ is central to Fisher’s vision of death, in order ‘to have the rest,/the unwritten,/even more easily scrapped’ (LSI p.62). The responsibility to keep things unburied is repeated by Fisher in the poem ‘They Come Home’ in his exhortation to, ‘by no means separate
the dead/from anything’ (LSI p.189). And Fisher has commented to Peter Robinson that this poem had ‘sat for a while before A Furnace was published in its ‘Core’ section.\(^ {244}\)

Fisher sums up these complex and ambivalent attitudes to death in A Furnace with,

that you are dead
turns in the dark of your spiral,
comes close in the first hours after birth,
recedes and recurs often. Nobody
need sell you a death. (Fisher, ibid : 64)

Elsewhere, Fisher describes A Furnace as ‘a piece of frustrated ancestor worship’.\(^ {245}\) In A Furnace, itself, it is a celebration of ‘the life of the dead’ (LSI p.63). What Fisher seems to be saying here is that the celebration of the ‘life of the dead’ is also a way of celebrating the life of the living; that part of this vitality is an acknowledgement that ‘in the midst of life we are in death’.\(^ {246}\) At the same time, neither should take precedence over the other, except in the necessary, and physical, absence of the dead. If death is ineffable, then it is part of a necessary reach of knowledge to see what it too has to offer the living. In this Fisher aligns himself with the literary figures discussed above, with a noetic reach that is the very opposite of morbid. Fisher does not quite thump the table in the face of death in the way that Donne does, but Donne establishes the elegy as a poem of loss of presence but not final absence. Fisher does not present us with books full of elegies, but his last two books, the Collected and Standard Midland are both dedicated to the dead; heartbreakingly perhaps, to his son, Ben, and his two wives, but also to the poet Gael Turnbull.

In the midst of all this, Fisher places the timeless figure of an old woman dressed in black, ‘this peasant/ is English, city born […] No imaginable beginning to her epoch, and she’s ignored its end’(LSI p.62). The question might be asked why Fisher has chosen the woman to ‘become’ timeless, and also to be English. As we have suggested above, the woman is the marked condition in Fisher’s work. In The White Goddess, Graves comments that the Female Principle - has three faces: the crone, the virgin and the mother.\(^ {247}\) Here the crone appears to symbolize an atavistic female principle. Cixous, in ‘The Laugh of the Medusa’ offers a list of binary oppositions of male and female. One of these is the opposition of male ‘culture’, with female ‘nature’.\(^ {248}\) Thus the peasant woman in black sitting amidst the urban, signifies an atavistic and

\(^{244}\) R. Fisher, Interviews through time p.111
\(^{245}\) ibid.
natural whole that a male figure might not have done. Had this been a male figure, perhaps we
would have been tempted to particularize him by speculating about his labour history. And
Fisher gives us such a figure with the William Fisher whom we noted above, and whom Fisher
associates with Achilles; another figure with a narrative, a teleology that the atavistic woman in
black does not, perhaps cannot, have. Unlike William Fisher, who lives via the public record
office and the memories of his descendents, the atavism of the peasant woman represents an
archetypal transcendence of death, and also represents a Nature which eschews the confines of
the Whig history and culture which Birmingham otherwise represents.

If the peasant woman in black does not have a teleology, what does her atavism represent? The
next, ‘Authorities’, section of A Furnace charts some of the ways in which the Certeauvian tactics
of nature push back against the strategies of Authority. If, as I have suggested, the woman
represents Nature, it is a ‘nature’ that re-emerges in industrial and post-industrial Birmingham;

…but still, with hardly a change to it,
the other dream or intention: of encoding
something perennial
and entering Nature thereby. (LSI p.60)

But still through that place
to enter Nature; it was possible,
it was imperative.

Something always
coming out, back against the flow
against the drive to be in,
close to the radio,
the school, the government’s ways;

the sunlight, old and still
heavy on dry garden soil. (LSI p.61)

With ‘intention’ and ‘imperative’ written into this description, Fisher’s noesis explicitly embraces
a Romantic Expressivist notion of Nature. Taylor paraphrases that notion so: ‘a great current of
life running through everything, and emerging also in the impulses we feel within’ and ‘the self-
realization of the subject, completing and defining itself in the process of self-realization’. As
we have seen above, what is important here is Fisher’s siding with the volitional aspects of these
natural processes. But Fisher, also, intends to enter Nature; it is imperative to do so. For
Wootten, Nature in A Furnace, with its uppercase authority, equates to the definition given of it
by John Cowper Powys, whose presence hangs over the poem, and who is its dedicatee;

249 C. Taylor, Sources of the Self p.416
…by ‘Nature’ I do not mean ‘the country’ or a scene composed of fields and woods, and mountains and lakes. I mean all those inanimate elements whose presence can be felt in any crowded city as much as in any rural solitude – whenever she finds an intelligence artless and humble enough to listen.  

Fisher might nod towards this rather ill-defined view of Nature as ‘inanimate entities’, but, I suggest, Fisher has a more partial, animate and particularized sense of nature. In Fisher, the Certeauvian tactics of nature push back against the Authorities, against ‘the radio, the school, the government’s ways’; the media, education and bureaucracy. As he puts it later, and even more vehemently, in A Furnace,

And again  
and repeatedly thrown  
to break down the devil  
his spirit, his grammar school,  
wherein the brain  
submits to be cloven, up,  
sideways and down  
in all its pathways. (LSI p.63)

What Powys appeals to in the artless and humble intelligence that deliberately listens is, perhaps, that sense of the technique of epiphanic revelation that Fisher acknowledges in his own writing. This is to recognize an epiphanic rapport with Nature that pushes aside any sense of the rural or the bucolic. At the same time, the natural and, sometimes, its concomitant, the rural, is part of the chthonic that rises irresistibly in the urban; as we noted at the beginning of this thesis, the demolition following the war allowed Fisher to see the palimpsest of the original landscape, the urban ‘skull beneath the skin’. By getting back to what was also an ‘imperative’ and an ‘intention’, Fisher reaches out for the noesis available in epiphany, consciously acknowledging the volitional nature of his teleology. And by bringing it onto the surface of the discourse, he, thus, acknowledges his Romantic allegiance; as Taylor puts it, again, ‘our access to [nature] essentially turns on our own powers of express self-definition, the artistic imagination…’ Wootten also associates Fisher’s poem with the Romantic nature poem whose subject is not so much nature as man’s relation to nature, and also man’s relations to society. Here is a post-modern acknowledgement of ever-present artifice, with the writer as artisan.

That artifice is also acknowledged throughout ‘Authorities’ by the repeated use of conditional clauses:

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250 J. C. Powys in W. Wootten, ‘Romanticism and Animism’ p.86  
251 R. Fisher, Interviews through Time p.131  
252 C. Taylor, Sources of the Self p.416  
253 W. Wootten, ‘Romanticism and Animism’ p.86
‘If only the night can be supposed…’
‘if it can be accorded pomp…’
‘If all that, then this,…’
‘If not, then not.’
‘If this were art…’

and later in the suppressed condition that is contained in the section that runs between, ‘in the civilization of novels, … it would be …’ that might be paraphrased as ‘If this were the civilization of novels, it would be …’(LSI pp 65-67). Such positioning of the condition on the surface of the text might be understood as modern apophasis. If Fisher rejects a deistic theology which the medieval mystics undermined through negativity, Fisher’s contemporary understanding of that is to reject the ineluctable and inevitable authority of tradition and civic authority, by hedging it around by conditions. At the same time, this conditionality applies to his own venture as a writer. If the writer is the authorizing consciousness, Fisher seems to be saying, then his own noesis is doubly suspect, doubly paradoxical; firstly, in the imagination which creates, and secondly, in its own hypotheticality. Fisher is the author of both the conditional clause and the main clause that follows it. As he says definitively,

‘If all that, then this,

ceiling sagged, drunk eyes
doing the things they do,
stands to be one of the several
cysts of the knowledge, distributed
unevenly through the middle of the mass;
if not, then not. (LSI p.65)

For the mystic, knowledge is uneven and never inevitable. For Fisher to end his line with the lexical monosyllable of ‘mass’ with its inherent stress, plays on this idea of knowledge of both the material and the religious. At the same time, a mass outside nature, in those two senses, is a construct of man, as is the mass in the Christian tradition. Therefore, what is reached toward in noesis is something that may be understood by science, partially or otherwise, and that understanding may help towards the human construction of further masses. In turn, this understanding may perceive the odd and inexplicable ‘ceiling sagged’, and be perceived with defective equipment, ‘drunk eyes’. What is reached for in the Christian mass is a memorial of the sacrifice of Christ on the cross, but as two millennia of persecution has shown, there is much mystery in the interpretation of the eucharist, and the ‘real presence’ of Christ in the communion

elements, bread and wine. And this all takes place within the parentheses of Fisher’s conditionality. Fisher, like the medieval mystics, seems to say that, if this is knowledge of presence in either the nature of the material universe or of the Godhead, then even the writing of it is provisional. Such writing is subject to the most stringent of conditions and the most stringent of skepticisms, where religion is, as he puts it in ‘The Return’, ‘that thunderous/humbug’ (LSI p.64).

The qualities of a mystic are further hedged and ironized as follows:

in the civilization of novels,
the fields racked hard
to shake people off into suburbs
quiescent with masterless men
in their generation, it would be
pacifist mystics, self-chosen,
who would be driven by private
obsessions to go looking
among slurries and night-holes
for what might be accidentally
there, though not instituted; having to be
each his own charlatan. (LSI p.67)

Here the notional title of ‘mystic’ is carefully balanced and/or subverted with the phrase ‘each his own charlatan’, whereby these figures are self-appointed with a ‘private’ belief. The kind of Fisher self we have discussed above in this thesis, creates an autonomy which, through self-choosing, might gesture towards the shamanistic preoccupations of Ted Hughes. Alternatively, Fisher may choose an altogether more contemporary notion that each person is her, or his, own guru; who may own, in a self-defining ‘spirituality’, half-digested notions of Buddhism, Hinduism, Christianity and Islam, with the odd dash of Gurdjieff thrown in.

The mystic’s Certeauvian tactics take place in ‘looking among the slurries and night-holes’, and we have already noted in Fisher’s willingness to interact with the abject. Although it might be suggested that the only place to go from slurry is up, the mystic here does not choose to move above, but among. In addition, although the constituents of night might be the night skies, the stars and the moon, we might understand ‘night-holes’ better if we recognized the phrase as resonating, in part, with ‘night-haunts’, the places for ‘night-owls’. In doing so, we might then remember Fisher’s allegiance to jazz and the accidentals of improvisation and combination that

255 And which is open to what Fisher calls his own ‘honest doubt’ R. Fisher Interview in Time p.104
occur in that world. The mystic’s tactics eschew the planned, the foreseen, the ‘instituted’ and thus embrace the improvisatory accidental, with its emphatic line-final placing.

If the rather metaphysical entities of death, nature and ‘timeless identity’ re-emerge to subvert authority, where does this leave the populace, on ‘my streets’ (*LSI* p.61)? Fisher makes his class politics clear in this section. The people have been shaken off the enclosed land into a ‘Brummagen conjuration’ in which it is ‘hard to be’ (*LSI* p.65). They may, in that deeply ambivalent phrase, be ‘masterless men’, either independent or rudderless. Teachers teach a Whig history that they do not understand, and of which they are quite clearly not part. And, if a Whig view of history is one of continual progress, then its antithesis ‘the history of the class struggle’ (ibid.) is even less relevant to those who live in this city. The poet-mystic might well feel that time, nature and death conquer authority but the populace lives in a nexus of paradoxes that Fisher understands as becoming deeply internalized.

Such paradoxes may lead to the populace to an automatic dissembling which is itself destabilising. Their inner worlds are bounded by a shame which, as we have noted, is most often part of the women’s lives and ‘women’s initiatives’ (*LSI* p.68), but which is colluded with by the men. As we have also seen above, some of these people are ‘wrecked’ with ‘solitary trajectories’ whose Certeauvian tactics are part of their station in life. Such conditions lead to the deracination of the ‘barren couple’, who appear towards the end of this section, and whom the narrator describes as his neighbours for his first years. The man is ‘desperate, irascible’, the woman ‘tottering *in extremis* for years’, and their dog a ‘dung-coloured whirl of hatred’ (*LSI* p.69). The woman’s death is ‘modern and nothing, a weekend in the Cold War’ and the man’s ‘widowhood was modern and quiet, his death art’ (*LSI* p.69-70). Such writing hardly betrays sympathy for these people but the clear-eyed exactitude of Fisher’s descriptions of people in his poems suggests that art has more than one kind of empathy. As he says of these people, with yet more conditionality, ‘Had the three of them been art, it would all have been beaten pewter’, or ‘the grey sculpture-gibbet of an *endos paroissal*, exemplary figures of misery’ (*LSI* p.70). These people may be exemplary in their misery in the deracinating, post-industrial Birmingham of the fifties and sixties, but the artist accords them identities. They may have been beaten in pewter or part of a French depiction of hell, but Fisher memorializes them in one of the great poems of our time.

Fisher engages with the deracination of his family and their antecedents within a ‘big city [that] believed it had a brain’ because of ‘Joe Chamberlain’s sense of the corporate’ (*LSI* p.70).
requires Fisher to erect a more secular, humanist framework upon which to hang his epistemologies; epistemologies which are part of the Heraclitean flux that greets the reader in the central section of *A Furnace*, ‘Core’. Much is made of the influence of Heraclitus on T.S. Eliot’s poetry, particularly in *Four Quartets*; he does after all preface ‘Burnt Norton’ and, thus, all of the *Four Quartets*, with epigraphs from Heraclitus.\(^{256}\) Heraclitus’ writing prefigures much of the mystic’s preoccupation with the paradoxicality of both mystical experience and the nature of the Godhead, and the concomitant difficulties that occur when writing about such paradoxes. As a Christian, Eliot writes with more than half an eye to both a literary and a theological structure and tradition; a tradition of writing about and within a particular teleology. Another of Eliot’s earliest commentators, James Johnson Sweeney has traced Eliot’s indebtedness to St John of the Cross.\(^{257}\) As we have seen, Fisher rejects such totalizing teleologies as ‘thunderous humbug.’ Fisher’s secular, humanistic framework is never anything other than provisional. His notions of ‘frustrated ancestor worship’ are set in opposition to the totalizing he perceives in Joe Chamberlain’s corporate Birmingham partly because Fisher’s empathy and noetic reach are into an unstable world and lives which can only ever be provisional. As we have also seen, Fisher is willing to explicitly espouse an ‘honest doubt’ that allows him to be a relativist of a typically post-modern hue, which might respond to Eliot’s modernist authority and monotheism. His class position and espousals show him just how easily ideologies come and go, and how individuals are subsumed within such ideologies and have to create their own patterns of behaviour within those terms.

Perhaps it is this sense of the individual pattern that leads Fisher in ‘Core’ to adopt the conversational, slangy tone which he uses to describe the construction of the double spiral at the centre of the poem,

> We’re carving the double spiral
> into this stone; don’t
> complicate or deflect us.
> We know what we’re at.
>
> We’re letting the sun perceive
> we’ve got the hang of it.
>
> Write sky-laws into the rocks; draw
> the laws of light into it and through it. (*LSY* pp. 71-71)


\(^{257}\) J. J. Sweeney, ‘“East Coker”: a reading’ in ed. B. Bergonzi, *T. S. Eliot Four Quartets*
This first person plural seems to push the reader away from collusion with the verbs it fronts. That centrifugal ‘we’ is further confirmed by the use of the negative imperative ‘don’t’ with its ‘you understood’ function; the ‘we’ is pitted against a ‘you understood’ who may well be the reader. In addition, the rather teenage-defiant, ‘We know what we’re at’ with its rather dated phraseology, puts the ‘we’ at odds with the world in which it is sited. It is a tone the patrician Eliot would have avoided other than using it to ventriloquise, as in *The Waste Land*, and which Fisher is just as capable of doing as we have just seen. This is, perhaps, the problem. This tone seems an act of ventriloquism but the question remains a ventriloquism of what? If the ‘we’ refers to the class with which Fisher identifies, then is it class that is carving the rather arcane mystical symbol into the stone? Why is such a class, which we have seen is subdued by its own internal contradictions, of which shame is one, writing the sky-laws into the rock? Is this some kind of indigenous religiosity of a pagan kind? Such questions seem unanswerable by the tone of the passage. And it is interesting how quickly Fisher passes on from that tone into the more familiar, ‘draw/the laws of light into it and through it.’

Such dilemmas seem ill-set against the calm and control of so much else of ‘Core’ where a,

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<th>Chamber with no echo</th>
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<tr>
<td>sits at the core, its place</td>
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<tr>
<td>plotted by every force. Within</td>
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<td>a dead fall.</td>
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<th>Grave-goods that have motion</th>
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<tr>
<td>have it on their own account,</td>
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<tr>
<td>respond to nothing.</td>
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<tr>
<td>The chamber whose location knots</td>
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<tr>
<td>an entire symmetry</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>uses none. <em>(LSI</em> p.71)</td>
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Here, the sense of the de-lexicalized ‘place’, is located by the forces that contextualize it. The things that are within it, the ‘grave-goods’, seem to defy Newtonian physics and the law of inertia, by having their motion ‘on their own account’, a phrase that we’ve noted above. Even though these items appear to be still, their place in the Heraclitean flux means that they have motion in and of themselves. In that way, the central section IV of *A Furnace*, is strikingly parallel to ‘Burnt Norton’, ‘At the still point of the turning world. Neither flesh nor fleshless’,258 and ‘Only by the form, the pattern,/ Can words or music reach / The stillness, as a Chinese jar still/ Moves perpetually in its stillness’259

259 op. cit. p.194
The Core also contains death in the midst of life exemplified by in the figure of the great American saxophonist, Coleman Hawkins, who is described in the ‘Core’ section of *A Furnace* as,

declining solids, genially
breaking apart, brown man
with papery skin
almost as grey as his
beard and long hair,
the look of a hundred winters
down on his shrunken shoulders
that shake with a mysterious
mutter and chuckle across the mouthpiece,
private, bright-eyed, hung
light in his jacket, shuffling
on wrecked legs,
the old
bellow, the tight leathery sound
shredded, dispersed,

the form of a great force
heard a monstrously amplified
column of breath, with
scribbles of music across it. (*LSI* pp.72-73)

Coleman Hawkins is obviously a figure in Fisher’s pantheon of jazz musicians. He commemorates Hawkins, again, later in one of his most majestic poems, ‘A Working Devil for the Birthday of Coleman Hawkins’ from 1992. In his cassette recording, ‘City Poems’, Fisher comments that the declining Hawkins lived on a diet ‘of Remy Martin and the occasional bowl of minestrone which he never finished’.  

In the later poem, Fisher paints a picture of Hawkins and his music as coterminous with and imbued with the landscape and working life that he has become. Within this, place and person are ‘helpless with self’ and ‘heavy self’ and, again, ‘Not every self can help itself’ (*LSI* pp.243-44). Thus, Hawkins is a person who through sheer presence and technical mastery was larger than his Art. Against this is placed a sense of the selfhood of the man, Hawkins. In both these ways, presence and technique, Hawkins exists beyond his life in an ontological purity that transcends both his decline and dying, and the extinguishing of his artistry in death. Hawkins also transcends death through the living presence of his art in the many recordings of his playing that ‘live on’ after his physical death. It is quite clear from Fisher’s depiction of Hawkins in *A Furnace*, that this is a man who is physically declining, and for whom Fisher feels pity; Fisher’s description is rich with pathos. And yet, this is someone of whom Fisher is quite clearly in awe;
Hawkins’ is ‘a great force’, whose sound is ‘monstrous’, built upon its own aflatus ‘breath’, but who still retains the qualities that Fairweather notes of Hawkins’s time with Fletcher Henderson, ‘the Attila of jazz saxophone, ruthlessly cutting down opposition rash enough to challenge him.’  

And Fisher says in his interview with John Tranter, 

‘I could understand the way of thinking of people who didn’t want to play the same thing twice ever, and who had for me – and I still admire it very much in musicians – a mixture of good old-fashioned, not too worldly-wise sense of Romantic creativity. You know, tonight may be the night, this number may be the number when I astonish myself, I may hit it this time’.  

What is important for this account is that Fisher places Hawkins at the ‘Core’ of A Furnace. If the ‘Furnace’ represents the ‘Heraclitean fire’ that stokes ‘the making of all kinds of identities [that] is a primary impulse that the cosmos itself has’ (A Furnace p.vii), then Hawkins has forged the very strongest identity through a mastery of his Art, that has allowed him to continue to explore and experiment with an utmost creativity. In this mastery, Hawkins transcends the developments of his own art, his time and his own seemingly self-inflicted physical decline, and having ceased to ‘astonish’ the self that he is, he is able to ‘hit it’ every time he plays. Hawkins mimics the literary transcendences of John Dee, M. Valdemar and Lord Chandos, and yet is a ‘real’ person, who unlike these figures has the agency to will himself beyond death, with more consistency and, perhaps, more success. In contrast to ‘lesser’ musicians, Hawkins has ceased to ‘astonish’ himself to the extent that he is his own ‘agent with authority’ (LSI p.63). At the same time, Hawkins continues to astonish Fisher.  

The direction of movement in ‘Core’ is from in to out. There is an assumed upwards movement from the inner and underground core, with its grave goods, via the figure of Coleman Hawkins who is akin to the ‘deus mortuus’ suspended in place, on his own account. The final two parts of ‘Core’ depict firstly an ossuary, in which and from which the bones protrude into the air, and then finally an ambiguously described row of ovens in a wall; ambiguous because they seem to be part of a cairn ‘powerfully charged/ with the persons of certain/ translated energies’ (LSI p.74). Although Fisher tells us that these are ovens in a tilery, it seems impossible to read about these ovens with their ‘buried radiance … constantly active’ (LSI ibid.) without thinking of the ovens of the holocaust. Fisher’s noesis here is that their radiance and the whole energy of the cairn seem to result from their relation to human death. Fisher’s careful use of the word ‘persons’ to describe not humans but energies, actively personifies these energies and their  

262 J. Tranter, ‘John Tranter interviews Roy Fisher’
relation to the dead. Fisher ends this section by stating that the ovens are ‘constantly active; of fearsomely/ uncertain mood and/ inescapable location’(*LSI* p.74). In this they transmute the theme of the poem through their embodiment of both the fact of death and the energies of its ineluctable presence; death’s agency is ever present.

Such ineluctable energies reoccur in the next section of the poem, ‘Colossus’. Here, however, these energies are associated with humankind’s all-to-frequent need to overreach itself. In this section of the poem, various huge, massy items are either contemplated or raised from the bottom of the sea: the remains of the German Grand Fleet scuppered at Scapa Flow, the construction and destruction of the steel works at Consett, or Adolphe Saxe’s plans for an impossibly huge musical instrument built to dominate the skyline of Paris. The over-reaching urban occurs in a Blakean image of the ‘mansions of manufacturers’ built ‘upwind’ of the factories of the industrial revolution, like something out of the paintings of John Martin, or Philip James de Loutherbourg.\(^{263}\) In these moments, industrialization and the reclaiming of its by-products as scrap seem to be a gothic parody of the natural cycle of growth and decay. Fisher suggests that the translation of such energies ‘comes implacably out’ from the inner radiance of the Core to the ‘infernal images’ of the industrial revolution, which occur when humankind over-reaches itself.

The result of this overreaching has, for Fisher, occurred not only in Birmingham Sparkbrook and Birmingham Castle Vale but also in Chicago and London; cities filled with ‘a cold blackness of hell’ (*LSI* p.76). In this ‘hell’, ‘puritan materialism dissolves its matter’ into a ‘glassy metaphysical void’ (*LSI* p.76). Then ‘something will be supposed/to inhabit it, though it is not earth, sky or sea’ (*LSI* p.77). Fisher then suggests that ‘mercurial nature … flies with an eye to sitting/down somewhere and being serious’ (ibid.). Here, Fisher reaches towards something ineffable that results from man’s inability to let nature back in. And, as has been noted above, this is not simply the buddleia’s reclaiming of the abandoned goods yard. At these moments, the mystic and the prophet combine in Fisher’s work to combine the socio-political identifications he has made earlier in the poem with much larger and more gothic gestures, towards that ineffability. Here the Heraclitean flux and the turning of the spiral back and out upon itself, combine to show humans at their most futile, or, as he puts it ‘curdled’, and ‘spastic’, with the section’s final,

Haunted look of stalled energy, of rights  
Impatiently or contemptuously surrendered. (*LSI* p.77)

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\(^{263}\) see Martin’s ‘Pandemonium’ in the City Art Gallery, Birmingham, and de Loutherbourg’s ‘Coalbrookedale by Night’ in the Science Museum in London.
As is so often the case in Fisher’s writing, that ineffability is gestured towards in his stripping back of the grammar. Fisher occludes the subject from the verbal element, and isolates the complement of the clause, in this case ‘Haunted look’ and ‘surrendered’. In doing so, he refuses to allow either the ‘metaphysical void’ or ‘mercurial nature’ to lay absolute claim to the rights that have been surrendered. Thus, he refuses to let the flux settle.

Such a view of ambition leading to ‘stalled energy’ is present in other gods in Fisher’s Pantheon of irony, which contrasts to Fisher’s version of the Almighty, and to the capricious polytheism of City. These gods are become plural and thus a polytheism, but they inhabit and are confined by the urban, and are, thus, without agency,

The town gods are parodic.
innocent. They’ve not
created anything. Denizens.
[…]
icons designed to stare out
at the ikon-watchers. (LSI p.66)

Unlike Coleman Hawkins or Almighty God, these gods are their own charlatans, are parodies of the forces that animate Hawkins or God, and exist without the animation of the afflatus that propels Fisher into the double-spiral. At the same time, in their lack of agency they are innocent. Unlike Hawkins, again, and unlike the figure of Joseph Chamberlain, who ‘created’ Birmingham, they have become mere statuary, inhabitants of a city that has fixed them into an eternally reciprocal gaze. They have become icons but their iconic status, along with the deeds that led to that status, has become so etiolated that all that is left is gaze. They have become town gods in the way that kitchen gods become familiars that watch over the family but without even the comfort that such familiarity brings.

In ‘The Many’, the penultimate section of A Furnace, nature reasserts itself. Fisher starts the section with a description of the rising and falling of the many cultures and civilizations have been present in the history of the city of Triers. Amidst those risings and fallings, nature reasserts itself and is then beaten back by new civilizations with new citizens. Fisher ends this sub-section by noting that,

I see such things worked rapidly,
in my lifetime; hard for the body to believe in. (LSI p.78)
Again, Fisher clips the grammar here; he elides the expected ‘out’ after ‘worked’ so that there is the sense of working as in needlework or embroidery. In addition, ‘worked’ is passive here so that it is automatically intransitive. Thus another of Fisher’s centripetal focuses is enacted. Such things are worked within the risings and fallings of the city, in a way which emphasizes the speed that he remarks on. And in the next sentence, Fisher carefully omits the owner of the body. Is it his body, or some metaphor for the organic nature of the changes he has just outlined? Fisher also uses the definite, rather than the indefinite article, so that it is not ‘hard for a body to believe in’, which would have suggested the colloquial meaning of ‘a body’ as ‘a person’. Thus the body is allowed to ‘believe’ in these ‘things’; the noetic paradox being that the body ‘believes’, or intuits these things rather than experiencing them.

The rapidity of such workings is immediately followed by another of Fisher’s unique passages of ‘fast writing’. By this, I mean passages where shows the world and its entailments moving or working at speed, as in this passage. ‘Mercurial nature’, again, is described as moving fast ‘laterally in broken directions, shallow’ (LSI p.78). In such passages, Fisher apostrophizes an essence of nature in a way that again emphasizes its sentient being with a life and agency of its own. Here, mercurial nature has ‘flight’, ‘dives’ and ‘plunges’; words that draws nature close to the god whom the term ‘mercurial’ analogizes.

It would be very easy to adduce such passages as evidence of Fisher’s mysticism, of the way in which he is able to embody a huge metaphysical notion such as ‘nature’ and turn it into something with physical characteristics that is still metaphysical. Such writing addresses paradox in ways which characterize the definitions of mysticism that have been cited above. Throughout A Furnace, nature is an entity that ‘rides over intention’, that rides back through the interstices that are left in the carapace of post-industrial life. Fisher’s ‘Nature’ is a chthonic irruption through the skin of ‘civilisation’, that has an essence of its own that even the word ‘chthonic’ does not fully convey. In passages such as these, Fisher almost offers Nature the last word, i.e., agency, an offer more fully explored in the final section of A Furnace.

Such a version of this civilization occurs in the next section where ‘some god … churche[s] over’ (LSI p.79) a site of pagan worship at Knowlton in Dorset. This ‘some god’ is Christian as Fisher’s note to the text acknowledges (Furnace p.39). Thus ‘thunderous humbug’ has intervened again. It is interesting, then, that the Christian god is ‘Some god, isolated/by a miscalculation, cut off/from his fellows, hauled in/across the green’ (LSI p.79). In time, this god is
‘…forsaken,’ and eventually, ‘They ate him,/and drank him,/and put his little out and left’. Although this is not ‘Almighty God’ who owns the trick of resurrection but one god of a polytheistic pantheon, in describing this god, Fisher mimics and ironises the Christian Eucharist. Finally, though, the ‘they’ who have hauled the god across the bank and then eaten and drunk him, put out his light and leave him; the god has had his uses and then is abandoned. In this Feuerbachian manner, gods are created for the use of the humans rather than the other way round.

Other symbols of nature and its irruptive and revivifying power are fire, and the water that drains through the landscape of the rest of this section. Often the landscape soil the water drains through is peat, ‘soft, firm//stuff that could be fire’. Above, the fire, the soil, and the water is air; here, the sky that the moorlands hang in ‘swags from’ (LSI p.79). Fisher depicts such a process in regular tercets that are rather unusual in Fisher’s writing. This visual rhythm might mimic the eons of draining water and landscape formation that the poem describes here. The end point of this process is fire for, ‘Under//the evening, the hoof-strike flashes’ (LSI p.80). Fisher carries fire in the rest of the section in, predominately, couplets, where fire is harnessed by humans, ‘boys’ who swing ‘fire-cans … bodged with holes’ or ‘fire-pots’ (LSI p.81). The fire-pots may be the vents from lime kiln ovens which ‘scatter’ the moorland landscape. In these places, humans set up activities that mimic the Heraclitean furnace that Fisher directs the poem towards.

Such human manipulation leading to effacement of the manipulated is returned to in the very next section where Fisher returns, almost abruptly, to the gods who populated the earlier sections of the poem. Here, Fisher offers his own negative theology by defining ‘god’ as ‘those of whom there is never news;’ (LSI p.81 Fisher’s italics). He contextualizes this by suggesting that such gods do have animacy and volition of their own, but that they are ‘repressed’, ‘by tyrannies given images; given/finish, given work; and in due time//discarded among the debris of that into/private existences, into common use’(ibid.). The repeated use of passives here suggests that humans manipulate these gods. And this leads ‘to the giving up of all/portrayable identity’ (LSI p.81-82). Thus, the gods are effectively effaced by human activity, in ways which remind the reader of the effacing of Fisher’s relatives within the recording systems of authorities. This effacement leads to the dispersion of these gods into such traces as: among lichens, ‘palace-voids’, ‘patches of serene light in the skulls of/charlatans making tea in swamp cottages’ (LSI p.82). However, like nature, such gods may ‘come back out at us/ through the annexation-

frames/ of a world that thought itself a single colony’ (ibid). Thus, although Fisher is deeply suspicious of the ‘thunderous humbug’ of organized religion, he seems oddly fond of the gods themselves and their connection to the irruptive forces of nature.

Fisher continues to evoke the activities of these gods at the beginning of the final, ‘On Fennel Stalks’ section of A Furnace:

They have no choice but to appear.

We knew they existed, but not what they’d be like;
this visitation is the form that whatever

has been expected but not imaged takes for the minutes it occupies now.
[…]
Creatures of the Last Days, coming to muster.

Apocalypse lies within time; as these beings may or may not so lie; if they do, their demeanour could equally match the beginning of all things. […]

Self-generated, and living perfect to themselves in some other dimension, (LW I p.83)

In fact, Fisher is describing clouds, but the terms of reference and the language make these clouds rather more than vapour condensing in the upper atmosphere. And I would suggest here that the section from the final section of A Furnace ‘On Fennel Stalks’, marks a shift, for Fisher, from an ersatz transcendentalism in the person of Almighty God, or the parodic gods of the civic pantheon. This shift is also away from the artistic transcendentalism of Coleman Hawkins and the other musicians in Fisher’s jazz pantheon such as, Joe Sullivan, Mary Lou Williams or Richard Twadzik.

Fisher moves decisively away from the human in the final section of A Furnace. However, Fisher does not move away from, to put it simplistically, the human ‘scale’ of things. Fisher is able to view the massing clouds as a visitation, but a visitation where the visitors ‘can take on only the shapes/the terms of materialization impose’. By using ‘materialization’ without a definite article, Fisher refuses to localize ‘the materialization’ in its moment, but points towards a larger more
generalized process. He also seems to nod towards that brand of atheism known as materialism, whereby ‘the constitution of the world may take the form of either declaring all entities to be material or of affirming matter to be the basic reality which is the source of the non-material.’

Fisher points towards this in passages below the one already quoted. He comments that the materialism of the clouds seems to be,

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Cargo-cult
reversed. There have always been
saucers put out for us
by the gods. We’re called
for what we carry.
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In barbarous times
all such callings
come through as rank parodies,

refracted by whatever murk
hangs in the air;
even the long pure
sweep of the English pastoral
that stretched its heart-curve
strong and more remarkably wide

merely to by-pass
the obstruction caused by a burst
god, the spillage
staining the economic imperative
from end to end with divinity. (L.S.I p.84)
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Here ‘we’ are the duped, our own charlatans, taken in by the baggage of the Puritan work ethic that we have imposed on ourselves. It might be argued that Fisher ‘protests too much’, that, firstly, the god of capitalism is always likely to be Mammon, as both Milton and Blake well knew, rather than the God of the Francis of Assisi evoked by Margaret Thatcher. Secondly, as we have seen, Fisher’s poems are often constituted in reactive dialogue with ‘divinity’ and would be greatly impoverished without it. The comment ‘We’re called/for what we carry’, suggests a sense of a deistic baggage emerging from our own invention which is elaborated by such as Feuerbach, and more recently, Peter L. Berger. Yet, Fisher’s passive formulae ‘put out for us’ and ‘We’re called’ imply that it is the gods, again, who have agency.

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267 L. Feuerbach, The Essence of Christianity
In addition, Fisher again plays against the idea of his own art and refers beautifully to the
tradition of English pastoral poetry; another form that emerged in reaction to industrialization.
A form which, yet, as Fisher emphasizes, can hold that reaction with a purity which an idealizing
Fisher might imagine as truly coming from the heart. Here we see Fisher’s emphases held in the
rove-over of lexical monosyllables across a line-break, ‘pure/sweep’ and ‘burst/god’.

Towards the end of this final part of *A Furnace*, Fisher debates the influence of self-generated
‘mythos’ upon human activity. Here ‘mythos’ is both ‘child of action, mother of action’; a kind
of ‘secretion’ that in its metaphysical agency creates cultures (*LSI* p.84). At this point, Fisher is
moving from the kind of involuntary awe with which he greets and watches the build up of
clouds, to a sense that larger cultural developments from such awe are at best ambivalent, and at
worst flawed. If culture is the result of mythos, it may result in the ‘action’ that creates pastoral
poetry, or may generate clashes between cultures that lead to violence and war. A next step
would be to castigate mythos as a generator of dissonance in societies; in the same way that, by
analogy, ‘religion’ is blamed for so much.

Fisher somewhat side-steps this by next drawing a scene where he pictures a poet ‘puzzling half a
life/at the statues in the town park and those/particular shin-high railings there;’ (*LSI* p.85). The
poet both celebrates and puzzles away at the kinds of parodic town-gods, Fisher has noted
above. Mythos has thrown up the statues in the park, but the poet is almost indebted to that
mythos for his subject matter and, possibly, career of ‘fame and disgrace’ (*LSI* ibid). If mythos
generates artistic action, it might be of the Hawkins-esque self-transcendence, or it might be
something far more quaint, local and reactive, ‘between/province and metropolis,/art and art,
fantasy/ and amenity’ (*LSI* ibid). Here, the artist is part of criticism too, caught between ‘art and
art’, and, in a phrase that seems to offer a downward bathetic glance, between ‘fantasy and
amenity’.

Fisher hands the last word in all this to nature. Fisher appears to end *A Furnace* with a passage of
cool, naked description, of snails in the Ampurias district of Spain feeding upon wild fennel
growing at the roadside.

The snails ascend
the thin clear light,
taking their spirals higher;
in the dusk
luminous white, clustered
like seed-pods of some other plant;
quietly
rasping their way round
together, and upward;
tight and seraphic. (*LSI* p. 85)

There are, perhaps, two ways of looking at this passage. The first is to notice the way that Fisher points to the spiral patterns on the snails' shells. In that the shells are generated by the snails themselves, their making of the spirals resembles Fisher's own making of the spiral pattern of *A Furnace*. This identification with the snails is, I would suggest, typical of Fisher's sardonic, wry sense of humour, a visual pun. The other thing that reinforces that sense of the snails as representative of the poet as creator and artificer is the use of the metaphor in the fifth line from the end, where the snails are 'like seed-pods of some other plant'. That throwaway sense of the seeding of 'some other plant' might be seen as another nod towards the post-modern sense of form 'making' content. It might also be a nod towards the generative tradition that poetry builds upon, lives within and re-invigorates in its turn.

The second sense of this ending lies in Fisher's cool, unemphatic description that presents the snails as epiphanic. For Taylor, this kind of epiphany 'is our achieving contact with something, where this contact either fosters and/or constitutes a spiritually significant fulfillment or wholeness.' Later, Taylor explains 'The very nature of epiphanic art can make it difficult to say just what is being celebrated: the deep recesses beyond or below the subject, or the subject’s uncanny powers.' The snails are sacramental within Fisher’s cosmology because they simply get on with it; they are celebrated because they eat the fennel and ascend. They have it ‘on their own account’ and thus attain a kind of perfection. It is clear, however, that there is a point beyond which they cannot ascend. The fennel stalks are not some kind of snail-y equivalent to Jack’s Bean Stalk that takes the climber beyond the world.

Fisher finishes the poem in the European context of Ampurias. This is not the first time that Fisher has referred to Europe, as Paris, Trier, and burial sites around Brittany have also occurred in the poem. But it is interesting to see how Fisher starts the poem with a very particularized Brummagen ‘Introit’ and then locates the final ‘seraphic’ in Celto-hibernian Spain. What the Spanish snails do not offer, of course, is a sense of human volition or love, which pushes human-kind to worship, art and genocide. They are not the horned-god who mounts when the

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269 C. Taylor, *Sources of the Self* p.425
270 C. Taylor, *Sources of the Self* p.429
blood commands and they are not the necromancer or the Almighty who contains or distains an eschatology. They are not the poet on his bus as the light plays upon him and the housing estates he travels among; or the poet who plays with or departs from form to seek noesis. They are not the few people who populate this poem, corralled into their Certeauvian relationship with the urban and the language created by the urban. The snails are the poet’s vision at the end of A Furnace. Their telos is clear, and they operate towards their telos. They simply are; and in that ontological finitude, they are sacramental and whole.
Chapter 5: Conclusion

The word ‘mystical’ is used by Fisher’s reviewers in a rather commonplace manner; a manner which might be defined as suggesting something ‘other worldly’ or ‘mysterious’. This kind of ‘mysticism’ emerges from the way the ‘real world’ is used by Fisher. Reviewers see that Fisher is very close to an empiricist vision. In one of the earliest British reviews, Peter Porter comments that, Fisher ‘usually looks for mystery in these house and street scenes, but he neither solicits it nor fakes it’.271 Porter is suggesting that Fisher deliberately looks for the mysterious amidst the urban, but does not impose it upon the city. That city is at once a city of the mind, and also a ‘real’ city. In what I have described as Fisher’s ‘noetic reach’ there is a profound empathy for the city and its inhabitants. In addition, that ‘real’ world may come to Fisher and Fisher’s readers in a wide variety of ways. As we’ve seen that has included views of ossuaries in northern France, the human by-products that constitute much of the city, the rhythms of the city, and much else. It has been the concatenation of these things that makes Fisher’s writing so striking and so powerful.

In using the term ‘mysticism’, these readers and critics are not, interestingly, suggesting that Fisher’s writing is difficult. That difficulty is remarked upon elsewhere in reviews, so that critics may establish a boundary between Fisher’s difficulty and the mysticism they find in his writing. Sean O’Brien, for example, comments that Fisher ‘has the artfulness to support the radicalism of his aesthetics and the complicated landscape of his work’.272 In this, Fisher is a highly skilled maker, who has espoused a radical approach to writing which has resulted in the empirical world becoming ‘complicated’; although it is clear here, that O’Brien is not using the word ‘landscape’ simply to mean the physical landscape ‘entailed in reality’. Such complication or ‘difficulty’, I would suggest, makes his writing interesting to the avant-garde or linguistically-innovative wing of poetry in English. So it is interesting to note that Crozier and Longville chose ‘Wonders of Obligation’ as one of Fisher’s poems for their A Various Art anthology of linguistically-innovative poets. I have suggested above that ‘Wonders of Obligation’ crystallises, for me, a number of important thematic concerns in Fisher’s poetry. Its surface mixture of tussle with the ‘world entailed in reality’, with class politics, with its evocation of nature and nature’s experiences, its promotion and undermining of the authorising consciousness in first-person

statements and descriptions of childhood provide a heady mixture of content and language that appealed to the anthologists of *A Various Art*.

This accumulation of surface, linguistic concerns and underlying themes combines to create a discourse that may be labelled ‘mystical’. This thesis has suggested that Fisher’s poems conform to some commonly perceived parameters of mystical writing: the writing seeks to engage with the ineffable; this engagement with the ineffable is an attempt to gain knowledge, a noesis, which contains levels of paradox of which the writer is often aware. In addition, Fisher’s engagement with the ineffable is notated in the language that he uses, particularly in de-lexicalised nouns which seem to reach beyond the surface of the language. This reach has been characterised as a ‘noetic reach’ because Fisher appears to be reaching towards a kind of knowledge which is a radical knowledge of aspects of the empirical world. However, as we have also seen, both the other and the self in Fisher’s writing can be destabilised such that knowledge/noesis is destabilised too. Where the empirical world is the urban, that urban is as much of mind as it is of a city ‘entailed in reality’. The dissertation suggests, however, that claims for an undermining post-modern fragmentation in Fisher’s poetry might be somewhat overstated. This is borne out in Fisher’s comment that:

> From time to time I’m impelled to small sceptical perambulations - which I don’t, incidentally, see as acts of commitment to post-modernism: there’s still such a thing as ‘honest doubt’.  

At the same time, Fisher is more than willing, albeit sometimes extra-textually, to suggest that Roy Fisher and the authorising consciousness of the poems are one and the same. Thus from this point, Fisher’s noetic reach stretches through the entailed reality towards such as Nature, Death and Gods.

As we have seen Fisher characterises Nature as an irruptive, sometimes chthonic force that undermines the civilised values of authority. This is part of the manner in which Fisher does not solicit or fake the mystery he finds in the urban; because that mystic force of nature is both present for Fisher and available to him. At the same time, the irruptive force offers a place through which it is possible to ‘enter Nature’ (*LSI* p.61). Nature comes back against the flow at the same time as an imperative pushes through it. This sense of ‘the pass-and-return valve

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273 R. Fisher, *Interviews through Time* p.56  
274 R. Fisher, *Interviews through Time* p.104
between worlds’ (LSI p.64) seems coterminous in Fisher’s writing with his idea of death. In this, Fisher triangulates between the force of nature that is death, Nature itself, as personified in the snails that ascend at the end of *A Furnace*, and a sense of ‘reality’. This latter reality can encompass a range of things that are often encoded within the urban. These latter range from the atavism of the peasant woman, to Joe Chamberlain’s idea of the city, via the huge, abandoned spaces of the post-industrial city, and Coleridge’s chamber pot. This not only sets him aside from sociological commentators on the urban, for example, Simmel who famously suggested, as early as 1905, that urban life is a perpetual psychodrama, that ‘the metropolitan type of individuality consists in the intensification of nervous stimulation which results from the swift and uninterrupted change of outer and inner stimuli.’

Fisher’s urban reality is also more complicated and nuanced than for Mike Davis for whom the city is a perpetual abjection. This is, perhaps, Fisher’s unique gift among contemporary poets. Fisher has seen that these ideas may be triangulated together to reach beyond each individually. But that triangulation is towards something that is ineffable, and which Fisher is willing to accept as uncertain.

In this uncertainty, Fisher places the ‘gods’; these are cheerfully pluralized and often satirized but constantly present in the spectrum of his poetry. And, although Fisher is willing to send up these gods, and to have more than an ‘honest doubt’ towards them, it is noticeable that Fisher returns to these entities again and again. Whilst Fisher is openly hostile towards ‘historical Christianity’s major hijack operation’, he is willing to show that spirituality has enabled a range of cultural artefacts from the *enclos paroissial* with its ‘exemplary figures of misery hobbled/to a god bent on confusion’ (LSI p.70), to the churches that have colonised previously pagan sites of worship. And although, again, these cultural artefacts are generally portrayed negatively, we might ask why Fisher so enjoys adducing these products of the religious impulse.

What this all seems to point to is a contemporary apophasis. Fisher’s refusal to settle for easy stabilities in the ‘real’ world, either of self or other, his reaching out towards a noesis which in its very reach denies its own teleology, his engagement with the abject and the liminal; all these notions establish platform for apophasis. And where Fisher rejects contemporary religion as ‘thunderous humbug’, it is quite clear that Fisher has no intention of pointing towards an alternative to organised religion which might have its own structures and teleology. At the same

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277 J. Kerrigan, ‘“Come to think of it, the imagination” ’ p. 108
time, I would suggest, Fisher does not reject the spiritual, or the ‘other’, however we might define these things. In his interview with Valentina Polukhina, Fisher comments on Peter Porter’s use of the word ‘mystical’ about his work. Fisher states that the times he finds himself in ‘have no vocabulary and no forms for finding what [Porter] might call the mystical. I would simply call it the truth.’ Fisher’s gaze is fully engaged with the real world. What he does not settle for is any sense of the fixity of that world, or even truth, either in his gaze or in fact. It is this which constitutes his apophasis, and makes him the unique and powerful voice he is in contemporary English language poetry.

Kissing Gate

A couple stand without kissing:
one folded in a dark duffle coat,
beside the gate, inside the drawn-to collar; the other sees the sun
braid trees, float, show fox prints
at the edge of the snow, and thinks,
‘I was a gate once.’ Beyond that:
mill chimneys by sloping moorside
that gesture to gable ends
of terraced houses, a town centre
that is settled on the earth.
For this relief, much thanks

The magpies and the seagulls fly up here, and other, darker, fleeting birds that glide past roofs with railings, satellite dishes, clock towers above hotel conversions, the clouded background; down there, grass, a mulch of fallen leaf, people waiting. Behind me, my appointment.
The Lace Wing

The lace wing gifts its life away,
in and out of the lantern’s glance;
whole or burnt, there isn’t a trace
of substance, or fluid or blood.

Only the wing beat’s jagged crawl,
seen from the corner of the eye.
The glasses neither here nor there,
not taking it in, or even the carriage

on the typewriter skidding back
across the platen as we begin
that letter again, feeling
around for the final sentence.
**Berkhamstead**

We quickly passed through Berkhamstead and it was green, all of it: houses, trees, cars, herbaceous borders, allotments.

Everything except a pond that reflected sky, and Graham Greene’s father pausing beside a window.
A thousand twangling instruments

You might as well pray
for the cyclist to bend under
branches by the dull canal.
You might as well pray

for the bramble to slink back
away from the allotment path,
and the strawberries to compete;
for the boy to hold the kite

above the generous sea-taut rocks,
the water breaking its blacks and blues;
for easy imprecations, and
the grey moth that walks the page.
A week of running beside the canal.

On Monday, three yellow goslings and the gander’s tongue thrust out.
On Wednesday, three goslings, each with a dark Mohican streak, the gander’s tongue thrust out.

A face comes back from earlier times; freckled, round, brown eyes, and red, fair hair, nothing beyond the ordinary, that always seems relaxed.

The gait below it; slightly splayed and rolling.
On Thursday, suddenly the may was open everywhere, its small white clusters like the rowan or cow parsley; the florets twisted, flicking on the breeze. On Sunday, one upon the water, its head tucked back beneath its wing;

the other adult bird was resting by the bank, the water rippling its drowned head.
Of the goslings, nothing.
On the canal, warm dots of summer rain. Among
the grasses, Friesians walk from grass to grass. That face opens out upon itself; the bee’s feet touch the flower.
‘… as dedicated men’

This is what his face has become, exiled from prayer and the axle of prayer; as if many birds had flown through the room,

as if droplets of milk had gathered and gathered, then remade the cow, as a child might insist on only three kisses then turn to insist on three kisses more. And in that face was a husband once, the hands of marriage moving, proving the sands between them.
Handiwork of Light

1. At Church

Some were at church, others running the towpath,
avoiding fishing poles, bait boxes with scrawling maggots.
That time of evening, the sheep still feed, the cricket’s
at the end of play. Across the hillside,
under heavy August cloud, cars are turning
their side-lights on. Her father would have known

that time to move the flowers back inside the shop,
pull the shutters down, lock them in; infinite patience
for those things falling and those things waiting still to fall.

2. A lofty house

Set the suitcase down between puddles; knock
on the door. The chapel leans into silence; built
by subscription, among clay pits and brick fields,

an altar cloth of chalk dust, a warehouse,
a conclave for pigeons neatly fallen. Rooks are flying
fiercely back to roost, blue haze over August earth.

The clouds are lifting, and there’s a smell of covenant.
In the cut-hay evening, in the railway carriage,
everyone is talking, becoming wheels upon the tracks.
3. A View of Arnhem

The light is patterned, shaping round the fields,
or coming from the corner, an unmade sun
among boxes. On the garden side, you might
shutter off the windows for the lake is uncomfortable,
the water high, pouring and contained, there
among the formal trees, the stiff grass flattened
and open towards the cars and courtyard.
The hillsides move through one another
and little figures through the light and trees,
the river in sunlight. The sheep are walking
by the water wheel; behind the chain link
fencing, laurel, rhododendron, a tree that’s bitten
to the quick by lightening, where the dog looks
up at the man and the man looks down at the dog.
And there’ll be one winnowing and another
binding sheaves, and another sitting at lunch
because they’ll know, cramped as they are,
if someone turns or someone smiles.

4. The Kiss

August is still, the river, carnal, and cuts
the counties, standing water in unploughed fields.
In the headlights a cat chews carrion, its head
is working side to side, and as you spit a fingernail,
the floating memory of a kind of kiss; of how she went
for flowers in a foreign night, and, dark with
other language, window open for nectar moths,
the pumping heat, a disco rising, her returning
with the words, ‘how like you this?’

5. What the Car Park was Singing

The tennis court is sliding with the rain, moving,
taking the chain-link fence with it, away
from the pavement and the double yellow line,
carefully taking the tarmac and pulling its corners
slowly, away from the car park, pulling the white oblongs
of car spaces, out of kilter and towards.

But the word wants none of it, ‘IN’ needs to follow
the arrow along and around; the arrow with its
hazy reconfiguration that follows the man,

with his shadow in the rain, shining
on the tarmac, dancing with his cap slung
from his left hand, swung off under dark cloud

and the rain, once fallen, not yet falling on
the sliding tarmac. For he too turns between
the shifting oblongs towards, along the shining space,

and further away, another arrow, that points
to a white space almost unavailable, yet pushing
its way onto the car park, canting the eye towards ,
as it approaches the only car, the graffiti car, the car whose crazy white letters say ‘Sex’.
Set Elements for John Brown – Isamu Noguchi

I will return for the coat
  hanging above the hat.
I will return for the noose
  hanging above the coat.
But first, I will take the hat,
  and look hard at those three twigs,
the wood they are set in,
  and the horizon they will always be.
The ordered name

*The Community of the Resurrection, Mirfield*

I attempted to stay at the desk all day;
an old dog rattling through a young
dog's day. The season was heaping
the wet leaves there, and Benedict

still and unhoused, in clay, without
the wood cross that will carry his names:
*natus, professus, obitus*, clay.
His cross with its beaten tin roof. Its slow,
wet tales of a turning decay. Aubrietia, and
hostas; where Jack changed to Jack, and James
to Sylvanus, and David to Barnabus; as
the tyrant wind pulled the fuchsia each way.
Angels of Anarchy

All these things so swiftly
built, the sage panopticon
– Kilmainham, Pentonville,
the grey expanse of wall,
its shadows. And then,
‘Forget the left eye, see only
with the right,’ that seahorse
dead and dried; beneath
the cassock feathered feet,
since that might be the thing
that’s brought us here;
if you have that expression
in your mouth, I’ll use it too.
Effects

Like any number of stations
and the way they get anticipated,
a rag of cloud runs as fast

as the sun above the train
and then is lost; a tactile,
rough-hewn life with its filament

of reflection, a figure moving
from one pane to another,
tracking the setting sun.
Those who stand beside you: after Hatzopoulos

Two cypresses, the male on the right, the female on the left. A box tree always open to point to the sky. The path is at one with the people that walk it. Clouds come, birds flock to the hilltop cypresses that take the brunt of a shower, or burst a squall, and birds shelter the breeze on a branch. When the water ceases and stars reappear, the trees will start again to speak to the people that pass below.

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Seven answers

The sails of the windmill move
a long way behind you
under blue sky and cloud,
as you turn your head
and neck coquettishly,
the boundary of hair and skin
like the edge of pebble and sea.
Owl

Stubby Venus on stubby-fingered
wind; that flapped above
the childhood park, a rail
to somersault off over gravel.

Firm-winged familiar that winter
of 63, the sledge so slow over
the last snow, it sent in Father -
old nicotine fingers, wheezy-cackle

breath - among the cat-ice
and pine needles, worn earth,
root balls, worm death; we saw him glide
into the tree silhouette, and not emerge.
The Hierophant

‘What makes you give, what makes you relent and let go? - raised eyebrow, a forehead, a hairline -

or only eyes and a child’s rounded toes that’ll burrow up out of the wood and become

a wing, a flag, a damp world of curling paper?’ he kept repeating until we could hear him no longer.
Loaves and Fishes

You toppling fish, open-mouthed
and annoyed, and you buried fish;
dark gash of gill embrasure smudged
by crust you smear in turn, altogether
far too fresh. Just wait until the hands
descend, and then they start to sink
their teeth in you, all of them.
You’ll feel yourselves teem
and drag down the nets and they will
call for baskets to hold all your remains.
Disposable icon, the reply

Streams have been designed
to carry fallen leaves,
to tessellate the smooth
with ochre, speed the nutrient
to the plain. Canals, with them
it always has been sink or swim.
That day

That day,
   stuck as I was
       in the town,
watching my feet
   slide on the snow
       on the slope,
I came upon the thing
   that I was;
       a gull, speckled,
brown, juvenile,
   facing the closed door
       of the bingo hall,
turning
   occasionally,
       to glance
at the people
   walking past,
       as I was.
The Bleachers

You were running over snow,
snow over the playing field.
Your feet were kicking up

snow in arcs from your heels.
You did not see, how could you see
thin chains hung with snow

between thin white posts
until you were pulled from
beneath your self, your hair

splintering not so very far away
in the raw wind. What did
the others see from the edge,

those with small dogs tucked
under their chins with their scarves;
thinking of shop fronts, and grey skies

over winter beaches, grey skies
over bleachers, those skies
over concert halls, listening

to the end of the cadenza
to the gathering applause,
the applause ending?
The Shearer and the Lamb

He is brought as a sheep to the slaughter; and as a sheep before his shearsers is dumb, so he openeth not his mouth. *Isaiah 53:7*

1. [6 v 05]

Above the roof-tree is  
sky in torment where  
birds rage and angels,  
huddled against the storm,

wait for a gap in the clouds  
to hold their harmonies.  
Beneath our feet, an earthen  
floor is strewn with thyme.

Then the ocean-filled  
basement, scuffed waves,  
darkened yachts with riding  
lights, the taut leviathan.
2. [6 v 05]

Snow from Spring sky
rests and melts. Alder
pollarded along the ditch.
The ex-grammar-school boy
tamps his pipe with fat thumb.
His plot, his allotment
where last year a wasps’ nest
stalled in the redcurrant.

When its neophytes pulled
clear of the deft cells,
convolvulus struck it down
with seething skill.

3. [6 v 05]

That day was their first use
in the whole time since
his father’s death, eleven years
before; the mute swan

and the whooper, avocet
and teal, tufted duck and lapwing,
the pochard and the redshank;
pushed the eyepieces closer

and apart, that occluded,
needed to be refocused;
shoveller duck and egret,
marsh harrier, bunting.
4. [22 v 05]

Under the overhang,
in the smell of overhang,
cordoned off in the city,
a man in a raincoat

stands beside graffiti,
turns to let a small
white dog remake
itself with urban smell,

as the flatbed braking
beside the platform
sheds upon commuters
its electric musk.

5. [27 v 05]

Being of one essence
with the birds, walking
the corrugated roofs, above
the feedmill, in and through

the stench of it, watching
a supermarket bag emerge
from under a car, and wheeled
hods clatter the pavement, then

getting the lever folded
so the wheels collapse correctly
and lay beneath the coupling
on damp concrete floor.
6. [20 vi 05]

His father drove round
flat East Anglia surveying
lifts and chains; if he
hit a pheasant, he would

stop to pick it up or
lose it to the car behind.
So when a pigeon clapped
into the Hull express

emerging on the up-line,
the feathers slip-streamed,
settling silently apart,
he wasn’t much surprised. [ 

7. [30 vi 05]

Inside a drawer, a banana
blackens. In the empty room,
a house plant flicks,
adjusts its darkening leaves.

The driver waits. The hand-
brake is released. The car
lifts from the curb. So a trout,
in mild water, waits below

the slight spillway, waits
for spate to release
the drain, the spindrift,
brilliant, temporary, brash.
8. [2 vii 05]

Against a blue sky, a weather vane and red-tiled roof;
the smell of pruned cypress makes it feel more homely

and cast in the smell of wet summer, the smell of feed mill pulled deep into the lungs of a girl running for the bus and a man crossing the lines where the track curves beyond beech trees.

9. [ nd. ]

What could be made of Cavafy; who loved the church for its silver vessels, its light and icons, the conventions of liturgy; who loved the eparch’s son for the hair on his forearm and the wait that occasioned; the grey-lidded harbour rocking with autumn light and still untrodden?
There are limits, beckoning
but friable, and they’ve
learned not to enthral,
for there are several

persons here; one male,
three female, God,
and the unnamed lover
who has colitis. So,

it is easy to rise when
called, from the plastic
chairs, under strip lighting
towards the waiting face.

He bought himself some
red and white canvas,
cut a window in the front;
made a swazzle, practised

so it didn’t rasp his palate.
On his right hand
was Mr Punch, who named
the others: Judy, the crocodile,

a string of sausages. He
practised hanging the Beadle,
kept on repeating,
‘That’s the way to do it.’
12. [18 vii 05] to Fr. Stan Dye

A man as a locked bundle
of rods, a man’s joints
welded in bronze, eye
sockets where fingertips

search, cheek hollows stubbled
with swarf. Even then,
if the man won’t reply, the maker
can threaten to evict the voice,

stop it quickening into conduit,
and tip him over, into the forest
litter, among beech husks
and blackbirds turning leaves.

13. [4 xi 05]

The corner of a horse-field,
with open half-garages,
a magpie coming in, low
over the flat roofs. The smell

of pruned cypress made them
feel at home for a moment,
when they were in love:
when they emerged from

the weekend hotel with eyes
slightly glazed, and turned
along the High Street
for one final photograph.
14. [5 iii 06]

A pitched place, arrived at from below, it looks across the plain. In dust corners, between the adze and the chaff,

they debate abandonment;
finding in winter, a new here; in summer, a new there. So the meltemi

will soften the afternoon and dogs bark at sunset, where hens scratch the strange, anticipating earth.

15. [7 vi 06]

Turn him inside out and lay his muscles out upon his skin, turn him to face the other way.

Lay open the flaying fist, lay open the stream in spate, lay open his love and stream it

in another’s tears, for I saw her lying under him and the one occupying and completing the other.
The Aerial Orchids

**orchid** *n. 1* Any of numerous (freq. epiphytic) monocotyledonous plants of the family Orchidaceae, characterized by having one perianth segment (the labellum) differentiated from the rest and by commonly having only one anther, united with the style in a central body (the column), and often having brilliantly coloured or bizarrely shaped flowers – O.E.D.

a. **Overflying**

At night, the wings dip
over sprinkled light;
the golden bar lines
of Albania, Ouranopolis,
Turkey. Ribbon developments
that float among fishing boats,
their cormorant lamps.

By day, the lakes jam open
sand and rock, small craft
follow on their wake;
several miles of steeply
shaded valley, cloud smears,
sun-swirls on the sea.
And languages, their sudden
unheard scramble, neither
asleep nor yet awake.
b. The Aerial Orchids

Bobo, half Husky, half recumbent fleabag, guards little but moves between his owner’s concrete yard and his mistress’ lush shade, to lap among the lotuses. When the monks in tandem come for alms, Bobo dances in attendance, and when the barefoot donor kneels for blessing he jumps up; she has to swat him with her offering tray and ‘BOING!!’ and Bobo bounce back along the road. His colleague at the temple’s dusty, raw, abraded, a tubular vent hangs down behind his right front leg.

*

Beside each village garage, a hammock and a shrine. Each pond’s a purpose and a placard. This is tended country that drives the egret and the rain-grey oxen, hunched, all gathers and jowls. The village exhibition centre, dark with earthenware and natural dyes, is open and empty.
The aerial orchids clad the trees,
or rest in clefts of bough and trunk
beside the tree ferns
with their fat, flat leaves,
or hang from teak-embroidered eaves.
Dendrophilic, photosynthesizing
roots take air and light to mix
with rain and then create
an orchids’ mouths.

The farang and their local wives
shop at the Tesco; have given up
all that for this; round them hangs
an air of silence, and suspicion,
that other sibilance, satiation.
Perhaps they, too, have visited
the Cabbages and Condoms
restaurant – ‘Our food is guaranteed
not to cause pregnancy.’

Sometimes you’re on a plane forever;
she’ll let me walk the shore;
canoes, shipped outboards,
then we’ll sit beneath
the tamarind, sweet and sour.

Sometimes you’re in Chang Mai forever;
the diorama of an elephant duel –
half-sun spreading rays
among two rows of fish eggs -
a pair of fighting cocks in oils,
soothsayers at full tilt,
all sun and shadow.

Sometimes you’re in a bed forever;
dance is an art
of the hand –
each wrist a mast,
each finger a sail,
each sweep the wind
among the rice; and then
inside the ankle is all
the movement of the back.
How the eyes will fill and fill.

*  
And how could we be
without detritus chic:
shattered pavements,
drying fish, open pork
beside the bus stand?

*  
Mr Kamol takes us to Wat Pho, Temple of the Reclining Buddha; the gold leaf
blistered, the soles of the feet are mother of pearl, seven circles for the rivers of the Himalayas.

The temple fills with sounds of birds: each of one hundred copper baht - one
baht chimes each monk’s begging bowl, with special grace if each baht finds a bowl.

They talk between them. The Royal Barge display; we run amongst the traffic,
between the backs of riverside dark restaurants, a roofed-in market, pallets of shrink-wrapped cans.

A family jetty of beaten wood and piping, dishes crammed with drying fish, and four, small children eating from a bag of ice. Out on the water, oars in ceremonial strokes are dipped to chanting song. A ghostly cantor times their work; each man in his red, or blue, or yellow livery - shell suits, jockey caps. A gilded cockerel boat for the abbot, a gilded launch for the sister of the king.

The children have their picture taken, grandmother too, the father straddles water from wood to wood to gaff a chain.

The Gilded Cockerel slipped her moorings in the National Museum; prow, stem, stern all clipped together, will draw the river down to its magnificence, discharge the king beside the Temple of Dawn.

‘Don’t tell him truth.
I heard you tell your name. Why you tell your name?

Don’t tell him anything.
Tell him anything.
He probably poor man try to contact you.’

* 

How could we be without the standing water, standing stench, swirling plastic bags, sparrows vying on dining table vinyl in the National
museum café?

*

Around the ruined temple:
young buffalo roll in mud;
two turbaned women net
the pools among the grass
for bait; the drover
brings her herd and dog;
the poses of the Buddha:
suppressing mara,
repressing fear, standing,
reclining. An old monk
with his ragged stogy
smoked down to the
unfurling end joshes
me in words he knows
I will not know.

*

How could I be
but one more farang watching
oxen driven on and over
the railway line,
who then flew on, out
and over the Andaman Sea?

c. Khon Kaen:

Butterflies arrive alone and rest
their black and white wings
among the orchids and the star fruit.

Electrical storm above the compound,
gives no noise, no thunder,
asks no retribution for the day;

lit us separately, apart,
rolled us over and
together, watching the TV.

Dragonflies wait above the reeds,
then over mown grass, over
water buffalo, thin mynahs.

In a shed beside the railway
crossing, two monks
in saffron robes beside
green uniforms of soldiers,
and you buy yellow mangoes,
work your word in dialect.
William Blake at the Kardomah Café

‘... a blue sky spread over with wings and a wild moon...’

Raise your cups, gentlemen, raise them
over the boiled eggs and eggy soldiers.
Think of the hands as a platform,
the branching of thumb and palm,
the body, its muscular repose, ‘... the corn

is turned to thistle and the apples to poison.’
A fine water colour with lilac stuff
upon a female form and a fine mirror
held by a strong fist, and the mouth
& eyes, ‘O, O, O!’ One eye sleeping,

the other eye piercing & manufacturing:
‘In the midst of this, twenty eight cities
each with his bow breathing...’
The scales of the coiling dragon,
the man beneath the dragon, howling ‘O!’

next to his skeleton, beside his chains,
crouching there beside the sea, where
the sun shines and gulls fall, buckled
above the water; waves rising caught
in their own viscosity, viscous sun.

You kneel to lean at the edge
of the circle, spread your hands.
The steps rise up behind the tree.
The sheep flow in to graze
where blocks of stone are poised.
Man Facing North

I might have been
at the edge of vision,
a blurring star of birds;
two yellow wagtails
on the grey round top
of the canal-side wall.
From the white, grey,
and yellow of the mating star,
he flicks and settles
a foot away. The female
is shuddering, flickering,
her head turned
to the male as he (is it
really fear?) stands aloof
and moves away.

*

Instead, I am a baby bird;
unfledged, I stumble
with my mouth agape,
learning all my plumage.

Instead, I drift along
the road to you; the car
takes corners far too fast.
The Leeds train waits
at Walsden station, across
from Granma Pollard’s
Famous Chippy. The train,
beloved, that took us
both the other way.
When I pictured our children,
you took my face into your hands
and kissed me, kissed away
that sweet impossibility.

*

Beside the canal, geese walk
on the field, in a pairs:
with heads outstretched,
their place in mind,
or graze in pairs,
or fly above to scatter
tenor questions.
Three grey horses walk
a sheep path up the field.
What do geese and horses
own– who toil not
neither do they spin
– but walk with
purpose, as I drive
steeped in purpose?

*

Bright seed of light
that impregnates us, both,
this Sunday morning
when I leave your warmth,
the sexual nest, ‘The smell
of sex each time I move.’
And I unlock the door
on morning’s fire,
the spring blue sky,
its crystal silence;
the impregnated sky.
Egg-yolk yellow daffodil heads
wear hoods of snow’s white air.
I go to visit my occluded God;
my timing’s wrong,
his church is shut;
my office locked elsewhere
- with you, a ‘feather
on the breath of God’.
The Long Earth

The white-framed window, Scarlatti
on the harpsichord and somewhere,
it seems not inside or outside the room,
a pheasant calls to where a life,
sorting various columns of words
and breath, is discerning a vocation,
the wide sweep under lights of a mop
on the floor. The long earth testing
a trajectory from one village
to the next, for winter imagination
has few friends, little or no conversation.
The altar and choir lamps are lit but dully.
The cat’s independent ears take in both
sides, the invitation to walk among soaking
bushes, among the rain-streaked trees.
Confessions

'...for I have roamed in my memory, searching for you, O Lord, and I have not found you outside it.' St Augustine

It is spring a thrush
leaps to a last
winter berry
the robin moves

on short wings -
above a country road
above a dawdling hearse
a pair of rooks

twist and jostle -
then on the ninth day
of her illness
that soul was released

*

Beneath the night
the various kinds
of small appliance
and their instruction

booklets - a dual
carriageway between
red-brick houses
a rhododendron

drive and a cemetery
sparse upon the hill
side - that stray
as the heart inclines
*  
I can no longer  
watch the lurcher  
course the hare  
but cross a field  
and the sight of the chase  
enthrals or stick out  
the tongue and hope  
for a flake of snow  
- then enter  
the half dark  
kitchen and see  
your back  
*  
Step from the bus -  
a woman in a woollen  
hat walks from  
the cashpoint folds  
the money shifts  
the dog's lead  
from left hand to right -  
another the last  
guest from the teashop  
much older  
let out to lean  
heavily on her stick
Between the motorway edge and the dead ground lies water - between the railway tracks imprinted snow - is to see in one way and remember in another understand and store differently - an original under the lid of a petrol station photocopier

Etymologies: 'to think' from 'to herd' 'act' from 'agitate' - as where that house is an end of terrace in grey glazed brick above the pedestrian underpass with frost-written trees – recalled without cease at measured intervals
*  
But as it stands  
the need is sweet  
- and why the dog  
that's in the front  

seat faces forward  
down the street  
and why the parrot  
and its owner  

know without  
the means to weary  
where is  
the back of the cage  

or why one  
horse races  
and the other  
stands still  

on the wide field  
where horse  
and man meet  
- far exceeding  

the measure set  
by the need to use  
these things  
and their meaning
*  
Difficult not to gossip  
beside the newel  
so queues build  
on the steps above -  

not to have fair  
hair cut  
in a bob that sways  
with each step -  

not to walk  
right at the pigeon  
so it flaps  
straight into the air  

*  
The caravan smells  
of the gas ring  
outside a lapwing  
wheels above  

the gang mower -  
Chet Baker  
sings that voice  
light and broken  

- of all things  
gone over for counsel  
is no safe place  
except in you
* 
Remember losing 
and seeking and finding 
many things - 
a woman sleeps

her heartbeat
flickers on her neck -
by the harbour wall
a red-throated diver

low over calm
water and overhead
Canada geese
lament and lament

* 
They define
what they love
as the truth - slip
from the tracks down

the embankment
winter wet
grass and thistle
in clean chinos

and a red jumper
roll the body
crack and tear
freezing hands
Movement from the larger

to the smaller force

from concerto grosso

to the Mysteries of the Rosary -

for many wish

to deceive but none

wish to be deceived -

frost in the lee

of a hedge a church

fenced off

reachable

across two fields

*  

Let us see

the river run

the boats move

on the stream - when

she moved

we lost a village

when he died

we lost a beach -

the blessed life

which is none

other than

rejoicing in the truth
Winter

Winter is a sacrament:

- the bumble bee has hidden among the splinters,
- the crow, up there in the long forest, shakes off the rain,
- the pig stands in its fleece of steam,
- the pipistrelle nudges deeper into the tree cleft;

and He has looked in on it, and confidently stated,

- ‘That is my deposit’,
- the heart with its old-fashioned indigo.
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