



ROMANTICISM AND ANIMISM in Roy Fisher's *A Furnace*

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Roy Fisher's debt to a cosmopolitan modernism has been evident from the start of his career. Cocteau, Kafka, Russian Formalism, Surrealism, Cubism, and, most importantly, the poetry of William Carlos Williams, the Objectivists and the Black Mountain School have all been cited as influences both by Fisher and his critics. This list contains no English poet. Nevertheless, Fisher's place in an English poetic tradition has been the subject of debate. In Thomas Hardy and British Poetry Donald Davie wrote that Fisher's temperament is "like Larkin's profoundly Hardy-esque" [154]. Others, not least Fisher himself, have disagreed with this analysis which, though often interesting and insightful, has as much to do with the temper of Davie's book as Fisher's writing.¹

More recently, critics have seen Fisher as belonging to a rather different tradition.² Neil Corcoran, whilst acknowledging parallels with Williams, Olson and Dorn, detects lines in *City* that seem "English Romantic in origin" [171]. He goes on to observe that this tendency makes Fisher—like [Christopher] Middleton—a more peculiar combination of the local and the "other" of literary Modernism than some of his own declarations of scope, which emphasise the "effect of indeterminacy" in his work, would tend to suggest. It is not entirely surprising to find him, in the preface to *A Furnace* (1986), acknowledging both a formal and thematic indebtedness to John Cowper Powys, that extraordinary late-Romantic exotic, and nature mystic. Although Fisher's later work differs from his earlier in being more overtly and persistently concerned with local histories as well as topographies, I think it is possible to sense, throughout, a bizarre and individuating combination of an English provincial realism, a formal and philosophical neo-Modernism and a will towards a kind of contemporary sublime. This is well said, although Fisher, in a candid review of one of his own collections of verse, is less circumspect about his Romantic allegiances, declaring "I think he's a Romantic, gutted and kippered by two centuries' hard knocks" [31].

Roy Fisher's 1986 poem *A Furnace* is, quite consciously, in the tradition of the British Modernist long poem, of David Jones's *The*

¹ Roy Fisher has commented: "I wasn't aware that he'd exactly written about *my* work in that book" [Fisher & Sheppard 8].

² Michael O'Neill, for example, has written of terrain that seems "post-Romantic rather than post-modernist" [226].

Anathemata and Basil Bunting's *Briggflatts*. It is also a work whose engagement with English Romanticism is, for all its unusualness, conscious and pronounced. Fisher's "Preface" to *A Furnace* acknowledges it to be "an homage, from a temperament very different from his, to the profound, heterodox and consistent vision of John Cowper Powys" [vii]. John Cowper Powys (1872-1963), as well as being the writer of novels and romances, was also an essayist and a philosopher, albeit an idiosyncratic one, and *A Furnace* draws extensively on Powys's fiction and non-fiction in order to attempt its own consistent vision.³

The form of *A Furnace* is partly inspired by the lost poem described in Powys's romance *Atlantis*. In that romance the ruler of the sunken city "was the author of a long poem about the beginning and end of everything, a poem which still remains the greatest oracle of man's destiny existing upon the earth." It is "landscape superimposed upon landscape rather than rhythm upon rhythm that is the method of its message" [336]. *A Furnace* in its turn explores various beginnings and endings by setting different landscapes against and upon each other as both collage and palimpsest so that they have "transparency in time, in state" [4]. Moreover, the poem is suffused with Powys's mysticism and metaphysics. It also uses Powys's peculiar version of late Romanticism in order to reconnect with and re-examine an English Romantic heritage.

As Fisher's remarks indicate, his Romanticism is not, and could hardly be, the same as that of two centuries ago. It is conditioned by historical and poetic changes. These historical changes are part of the subject matter of *A Furnace*, which realigns Fisher with Romanticism and its inheritors only after a careful examination of its reaction to and interconnection with the Industrial Revolution. Fisher's analysis can be sharp in its critical observation:

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
stronger, 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. [46]

The attractiveness of a pastoral is concomitant with the growth of its opposite. The city air refracts the sight of what might be portrayed as an unencumbered relationship with nature. The visions of city and countryside, industrialism and the pastoral are interconnected. Moreover, the animosity towards, or avoidance of, the city, found in much of the writings of the

³ For a general overview of Powys's influence on Fisher, see Ralph Pite, "Coming into their Own": Roy Fisher and John Cowper Powys."

Romantics, is scarcely a feature of Fisher's poetry which, from *City* (1960) onwards, though often critical of its manifestations, has taken both urban landscape and the heritage of nineteenth-century industrialism as a principal subject matter. Nevertheless, *A Furnace* may be justly regarded as a modern and modernist version of the Romantic nature poem. In the words of John H. Johnston: "The Subject of the Romantic nature poem ('Tintern Abbey,' for instance) is not so much nature itself as the emotional or spiritual relationship between man and nature, or between man and society" [87]. This too is Fisher's subject.

This raises a question of some importance, for Fisher's notion of Nature is a complex one which derives, in part, from John Cowper Powys. Whilst the young Wordsworth is an acknowledged influence on Fisher, and the sensibility of poems such as "Tintern Abbey," "On Westminster Bridge," *The Prelude*, "Intimations of Immortality" and "The Ruined Cottage" all have a distant but distinct influence on *A Furnace*, it is important to note a distinct difference with regard to the manner of the manifestation of their influence in Fisher's poem. One of John Cowper Powys's most intriguing pieces of literary criticism is his analysis of "Tintern Abbey." Powys acknowledges it to be "one of the finest poems in our language" [*Obstinate Cymric* 164]. Nonetheless, he objects to "the idea that I should be a nobler, grander, higher, sort of creature and one possessed of a loftier intelligence, if my sense-enjoyments introduced—even as "something deeply interfused"—the purely metaphysical notion of the universe being One and having One God as the soul of its soul" (1656). This quarrel with monotheism sets Powys and Fisher apart from Wordsworth and, in so far as he is a pantheist, from that other Wordsworthian modernist Basil Bunting. For, in *A Furnace*, the god in nature found in Wordsworth is a variety of the monotheism that gave rise to, and whose ideology enforced, the rise of industrialism. In this Fisher appears to draw on the sociological analysis of the Protestant origins of the industrial revolution current since Weber. He also engages in an analysis of the sublime and the way in which the sublime, the awe-inspiring, is a feature of an industrialized landscape. The urban sublime and the monstrous will it embodies are never endorsed but rather analysed by Fisher:

In the places,
 on their own account, not
 for anybody's comfort:
 gigantic peace.
 Iron walls
 tarred black, and discoloured,
 towering in the sunlight
 of a Sunday morning on
 Saltley Viaduct.
 Arcanum. Forbidden
 open space, marked out with
 tramlines in great curves among blue
 Rowley Rag paving bricks.
 Harsh reek in the air
 among the monstrous squat
 cylinders puts it
 beyond doubt. Not a place
 for stopping and spying.

The single human refuge
a roadside urinal, rectangular
roofless sarcophagus of tile and brick,
topped round with spikes and
open to the sky. [8]

The size and structure of these iron walls, like a mountain or a cathedral, dwarfs the human. The “only human refuge” is the urinal. The word “sarcophagus” is carefully chosen. Like a place for the dead, the urinal is fenced off as something inescapable yet embarrassingly human. Fisher’s language, like his subject matter, is poised between the public and the private. The definite article of the opening line of the passage implies a private and sacral significance, a recognition of the link between the observer and the presences in place. The phrase “the places” is repeated from the apparently autobiographical preceding passage:

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. [8]

The “way of being called” echoes “Calling,” the title of the section. It refers to the poetic vocation but also something rather more specific; to the callings of those places with particular presences. But such private reference works alongside a description of a space that is public but also forbidden private property. The passage comes from a section of the poem where it is the industrial sublime which dominates, though never without its own “orifices of question” [24]. Such depictions always have their frailties in Fisher, not least through the working of his syntax in which long subclauses stretch out the building and its attributes:

If only the night can be supposed
unnaturally tall, spectrally
empty, and ready to disgorge
hidden authorities,
summonses, clarifications;
if it can be accorded pomp
to stretch this Grecian office-block
further up into the darkness, lamplit
all the way from the closed shopfronts
and growing heavier; then
that weight of attribution
jolts the entire thing down, partway
through its foundations, one corner heaving
into this panelled basement
where by the bar
the light spreads roseate and dusty.
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. [20]

An office block is built on syntax, on the drawn out, perilous hypothetical that predominates in this section of the poem. The sublimity of the “dead weight of the old imperious / racket” rests on suppositions of pomp and towering darkness which its own foundations, whether literal or syntactical, can no longer hold [21]. Its authorities, like some sublime presence, remain hidden at night in the ghostly, empty building, yet this night is ready to disgorge its bureaucratic might. The classical style, that borrowed imperial style so often synonymous with the authoritative public architecture, was originally designed to house the gods. Now, like the failing empire and industry it once stood for, the weight of sublime attribution appears too much for the great impersonal building which seems to sag into a bar where drunken eyes appear to mimic its diminished status.

This passage has been used by Michael Hulse as evidence of what he sees as Fisher’s obsession with the Nietzschean power of the will: “The anti-democratic power-worshipper who considered Lincoln ‘abject’ and Napoleon ‘magnificent’ broods over much of Fisher” [25]. Hulse later seeks to qualify this by the more balanced observation that Fisher has sympathy for “the people dwarfed and terrified by the Piranesi universe they inhabit, but nonetheless is fascinated by the Will, manifestly and (apparently in spite of himself)” [26]. The first contention, of itself, should merely strike us as bizarre and unsubstantiated.⁴ However, Hulse’s later qualification and, in particular, his comments on this passage of *A Furnace* deserve more consideration: “The ‘weight of attribution’ rearing up into the darkness like a Goya colossus of the metaphysical imagination is a very curious yet succinct expression of Fisher’s concern with the relation of Will to given actuality” [26]. But the syntactical sense of “the weight of attribution” ties it to the first and second sub-clauses, its grandness being conditional, and as I have just suggested, having the effect of “jolting the entire thing down” to the human level. Similarly, Fisher chooses to write “If only the night can” rather than if only the night could, in order to avoid using what could be read as a subjunctive which would implicitly indicate desire and the exercise of the will that Hulse detects. What Fisher is delineating is the effort of himself as one of the people dwarfed to deal with an expression of an impersonal will linked to a monotheistic sublime which is rather different from the Nietzschean one Hulse diagnoses. Moreover, there is a distinction to be made between a “fascination with the will,” and the delineation of its manifestations.

At the level of the poem as a whole Hulse’s analysis is much less convincing. He prefers *City* to *A Furnace* and tends to write about phenomena in them as if the two were part of an identical enterprise. But *A Furnace* is a much more complex, structured poem than the earlier work. And unlike that poem, the formulation of the intimate in *A Furnace* is at least as strong as the sublime. The monstrous decay of the edifices and instruments of the industrial age, the impersonal grand authorities,

⁴ Unlike Hulse, I do not view these lines from “The Thing about Joe Sullivan” as an expression of a Nietzschean Will but rather a clear delineation of the perception of a particular artistic endeavour: “the rapid and perverse / tracks that ordinary feelings / make when they get driven / hard enough against time” [Quoted by Hulse 25].

characterize the odd-numbered sections of the poem but meet their reply in the even-numbered sections:

Massive in the sunlight, the old woman
dressed almost all in black, sitting out
on a low backyard wall,
rough hands splayed on her sacking apron
with a purseful of change in the pocket,
black headscarf tight across the brow, black
cardigan and rough skirt, thick stockings,
black shoes worn down;
this peasant
is English, city born; it's the last
quarter of the twentieth century
up an entryway
in Perry Barr, Birmingham, and there's
mint sprouting in an old
chimney pot. No imaginable
beginning to her epoch, and she's
ignored its end. [15]

"Massive in the sunlight" could be the opening to one of Fisher's descriptions of buildings. Indeed, the first line of this passage obliquely echoes the earlier "Iron walls / tarred black, and discoloured, / towering in the sunlight" [8]. But this is not a building but an old woman. Unlike the wreckage of the industrial revolution, she persists as if indifferent to time. She is one of Fisher's "timeless identities" [15]. There is the "mint sprouting in an old chimney pot" which speaks of the architecture of fire being once again taken over by nature. She is perceived as if she were an icon or a fetish; and this takes us towards Powys's particular version of Romanticism. That is, the office block, old woman, Saltley viaduct and the arcana that surround it are all manifested with an aura that conveys to the perceiver a particular significance whether of awe or enlightenment. They are manifestations of spirit, even if the spirit is only Fisher's own imagination. Fisher is explicit about this when he describes another old woman who offers a different personal significance:

Slow-dying woman,
her life was primordial and total,
the gaze-back of the ikon; her death
modern and nothing, a weekend in the Cold War. [26]

Whereas the previous description of an old woman had been an icon of natural, timeless continuity, here is an icon of death in life, the modern and the nothing taking over the "primordial and the total." *A Furnace* is a dialectical poem and, according to Fisher's "Preface":

the sequence of its movements is based on a form which enacts, for me, the equivocal nature of the ways in which time can be thought about. This is the ancient figure of the double spiral, whose line turns back on itself at the centre and leads out against its own incoming curve. After the "Introit" [...] the seven movements 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, aspect; the

exception is the forth section, which is at the centre and thus has the theme of stillness. [vii-viii]

Thus the industrial sublime of iron walls and buildings, from odd-numbered, forwardly-directed sections of *A Furnace*, is balanced by the intimate evocation of a timeless old woman persisting a cityscape being reclaimed by nature; as she in her turn is balanced by the displaced icon of an old woman, not timeless but dying in a weekend of the Cold War.

Just as Fisher's attempts at evoking the sublime have been subject to misinterpretation by Michael Hulse, his attempts at invoking the intimate via an entry into nature have been misrepresented by the poet and critic Andrew Crozier. According to Andrew Crozier: "To enter nature is to enter an economy of signs in which value is not equivalence" [26]. Quite what Crozier means by this is unclear. Economies, as generally understood, do not work like this. Economics, unlike, say, Thomist ethics, works upon the basis of equivalence. If something is incommensurable it has no exchange value. If a sign is like nothing else it cannot function in an economy. The trouble is a question of emphasis. Crozier's model is ultimately derived from structuralism and semiotics and would see the world composed as a system of signs which can be perceived and ordered in a manner analogous to language. Though Fisher is explicitly interested in the efficacy of the sign, there is no good reason to suppose either a structuralist or post-structuralist epistemology to be Fisher's model. Instead, it is the very self-sufficiency of the sign which is often questioned in *A Furnace* in a manner that is unequivocally in the Romantic and not the post-modern manner.

This is made clear when we recontextualise Crozier's judgment and refer it back to the text of *A Furnace*. What Crozier is explicitly referring to is the process of the entry into nature which is described in the second section of the poem, "The Return" :

but still, with hardly a change to it,
the other dream or intention: of encoding
something perennial
and entering Nature thereby. [12]

It is certainly a notion of great importance in *A Furnace*, but it signifies the exact opposite of what Crozier would like it to. Crozier writes that: "Entry into nature is the metaphoric territory equally of Renaissance magic and the streets of Fisher's childhood; it is also 'encoding / something perennial,' so that there can be no knowledge of transcendence outside that of signs. To enter nature is to enter an economy of signs in which value is not equivalence" [32]. But it isn't. To encode "something perennial" implies that something was perennial prior to the process of encoding. The process of encoding would be a recording of transcendence previously outside the order of signs; but writing in *A Furnace* is not transcendence, only a witness to it.

Those sympathetic to Crozier's position might be tempted to think that this formulation of the "entry into nature" at least allows enough ambiguity to accept the possibility of Crozier's interpretation. However, refutation of Crozier's position is made undeniable later in the same passage of *A Furnace* when Fisher returns to the theme:

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 wars;
the sunlight, old and still,
heavy on dry garden soil,
and nameless mouths,
events without histories, voices,
animist, polytheist, metaphoric,
coming through;
the sense of another world
not past, but primordial,
everything in it
simultaneous, and moving
every way but forward. [14]

It is hard to see how "nameless mouths" can be a sign in the semiotic sense that Crozier employs or how the animist particularity of "the sunlight, old and still, / heavy on dry garden soil" can square with Crozier's post-structuralist sensibilities. Rather, as one would expect, "Nature" in Fisher's poem is as it is defined by John Cowper Powys who writes:

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... [*Obstinate Cymric* 178]

The experiences of nature that Fisher describes are his own counterparts to Powys's own epiphanic sense of the presences to be discovered in nature, as here in his *Autobiography*:

As I write these lines now, there comes back to me... one scene after another from those lonely roads. Even as I try to seize upon them they dissolve and melt away; but in their vanishing they leave a lovely residue, a mysterious satisfaction, that seems to well up from the inner being of old posts, old heaps of stones, old haystacks thatched with straw. From glimpses of white roads, appearing and disappearing in the twilight, these feelings spring; from wayside ditches, desolate ponds, solitary trees, windmills caught against the sky! What I would like to emphasise just here is that the pleasure I got from these things of my solitary walks did not present itself to me as an aesthetic pleasure, nor did it call up in my mind the idea of beauty. What gave me these sensations seemed to be some mysterious "rapport" between myself and these things. It was like a sudden recognition of some obscure link, some remote identity, between myself and these objects. [169]

These are Powys's moments of entry into nature. Fisher supplies his own but the two may be taken as of a kind. The entry into nature, then, supposes a *rapport* with the natural world that overcomes the gulf between the perceiver and the perceived object and between the sign and that which is signified. In his masque for the "entry into nature," Fisher recalls

“Hofmannstahl’s / Lord Chandos” [13]. Hofmannstahl’s fictionalized Lord Chandos recalls former times and how

in those happy, stimulating days, there flowed into me as though through never-congested conduits the realization of form—that deep, true, inner form which can be sensed only beyond the domain of rhetorical tricks: that form of which one can no longer say that it organizes subject matter, for it penetrates it, dissolves it, creating at once both dream and reality, an interplay of eternal forces, something as marvelous as music or algebra. This was my most treasured plan. [131]

This vision of the dissolving of the boundaries between the work of literature and the world, between form and subject matter, is similar to Fisher’s own “dream or intention.” But Hofmannstahl’s Lord Chandos writes from the perspective of someone who has now lost all hope of such a *rapprochement*. The sense of dislocation suffered by Lord Chandos is also in Fisher’s poem, and is that which predominates in the forwardly directed sections of the double spiral where the “other dream or intention” is set against “persuading the world’s / layers apart with means that perpetually alter and annex, / and show by day what they can” [12]. These words echo a passage in the preceding, odd-numbered, section of *A Furnace* where, driving fast “so as to be repeatedly elsewhere,” Fisher sees “festive little bulbs” flailing in the wind [7]. These lights have presumably been hung out as signs of cheer, yet this is not their effect:

The sign they make as I pass
is ineluctable
disquiet. Askew. The sign, once there,
bobbing in the world,
rides over intention, something
let through in error. [8]

This, as opposed to the “other dream or intention,” is a case of the sign and its effects outstripping their author, of having their own disquieting life. The prospect of “entering” nature holds out the possibility, even if it is only a dream, of a union between sign, intention and the natural world. Here, however, is evidence of its opposite. Objects have been relieved of such bonds giving rise to “ineluctable / disquiet.” Objects are removed from their histories, or from those events beyond the written record which Fisher wishes to recall. In an interview with the magazine *Staple* Roy Fisher states:

If landscapes preoccupy me enough for me to want to flog away and do a Zola on them, they must be functioning for me, as they were for him, as fetishes: they are juju, they do hold magical powers of evocation. Because they are really things which were a sensory vocabulary of being alive for me before I was articulate. [43]⁵

The icon is primarily an entity of the forward movement of the double spiral which functions as the image of “the town gods” [22]. It is less the iconic that tends to characterize the returning movement of the poem than the image divorced from authority, the voice of nature, the nature fetish and landscape

⁵ Fisher’s use of the term “fetish” is rather loose, but is nevertheless useful in this discussion and will be used throughout this essay to designate place or objects with “magical powers of evocation.”

as fetish and the “true gods” as opposed to the “town gods” and those “by tyrannies given images” [42]. Fetishes, like gods, are explicitly Powysian and they may enable one to have intimations of those gods. The Powysian fetish has a dual function. It facilitates interaction with the dead; it also allows the perception of a pluralistic multiverse and the notion of timeless extra-human entities to emerge.

Powys’s *Autobiography* contains numerous examples of this first function of the fetish and the fetishized landscape, as here at the close of the book:

When, on that great flight of steps at Rome leading up from the Piazza del Spagna to the Pincian Hill, I suddenly got an ecstasy of mysterious exultation, in which I said to myself, “Let me pass and perish, as long as this magical stream of life, so noble in its heroic continuity, still goes on!” What I really did was to sink my own solitary personality in the innumerable personalities of all the men and women who for generations had come up and own those historic steps. But this feeling has come over me, though in a less degree, in much humbler places. It has come over me in narrow lanes opening out suddenly upon the ancient peace of secluded hamlets... it has come to me as I followed the cliff-path from Brighton to Rottingdean, or the road from Cambridge to Shelford, or paused with Llewelyn by the time-worn “Stocks” under the century-polished elm-boles of Tintinhull, or followed some clover-scented cattle-track between Bognor and William Blake’s Felpham. [651]

These fetishes, associated with prior human identities, allow the solitary ego to be submerged amongst the numberless dead. The imaginative action is almost identical to that romantic-nationalist urge which uses not the fetish but the ethnic or racial group to facilitate such a submergence of the ego into a wider identity. Yet it is too personal, too specific to be so regarded.

Such is the process which allows Fisher intuitive knowledge of the continuance of the dead living in the mind of the perceiving subject. This offers a resistance to the acceptance “that the dead have gone away to God through / portals sculpted in brass to deter” and to those authorities which would “as if it were a military installation / specialize and classify and hide / the life of the dead” [17]. It provides an alternative to the name on microfiche in the Public Search Office where such identities are:

recorded by authority
to be miniaturized; to be traceable
however small; to be material;
to have status in the record;
to have the rest,
the unwritten,
even more easily scrapped. [16]

It allows that which is unwritten to be guessed at and recovered. One can see the working of this process in Fisher’s description of Kentish Road:

They come anyway
to the trench,
the dead in their surprise,
taking whatever form they can
to push across. They’ve no news.

They infest the brickwork. Kentish Road
 almost as soon as it's run up
 out in the field, gets propelled
 to the trench, the soot still fresh on it,
 and the first few dozen faces
 take the impress, promiscuously
 with door and window arches;
 Birmingham voices in the entryways
 lay the law down. My surprise
 stares into the walls. [18-19]

"The trench" could refer to a builder's trench or, more grandly, to the division between living and dead. However, when the word is repeated, a particular historical sense preponderates—that of the trenches of the Great War—where the trench is also a line between the dead and the living, and where the "field" is the field of battle rather than that on which the houses were built. The perception it enables is the crossing of "the trench" by the dead who, like "the true gods" in "The Many" [2], have "no news." It is both building and a material trace of those who made it.⁶ The miniaturized dead may be perceived as inseparable from the medium via which they are communed with and from the act of perception that so enlivens them. In this the dead are Homeric for: "The dead seem all alive in the human Hades of Homer, yet cannot well speak, prophesie, or know the living, except they drink blood, wherein is the life of man" [Browne 34]. This Powysian communing with the traces of the past allows for an intuitive understanding. It allows for the dead to "push across" the trench [18] and to be perceived through the architecture of Kentish Road just as other endurances may be depicted in masque by the vanishing of "a gentleman / in black" [12-13] who has

become inseparable
 from all other things, no longer
 capable of being imagined
 apart from them, nor yet of being
 forgotten in his identity. [13]

The imagined figure is inseparable from that which gives rise to him. In all this positive fetishism, in the entry into nature, there is a certain longing to allow the pre-linguistic wonder in objects and their presences somehow to enter the world of language and of the sign without being "miniaturised," to write the unwritten and somehow encode the perennial "nameless mouths, / events without histories, voices, / animist, metaphoric coming through" [14] that may be detected in an epiphanic communion with a natural fetish such as: "the sunlight, old and still, / heavy on garden soil" [14]. Such is the view that is endorsed in Fisher's interview with *Staple* magazine, when he speaks of "a sensory vocabulary of being alive... before I was articulate" [43]. When Powys writes of "The Laurel Axe," the inspiration for the title of a Geoffrey Hill poem, he recalls this primal fetish of his early childhood:

⁶ Clair Wills plausibly maintains, that there is here a "shadowy evocation" of Odysseus journey to the brink of the underworld in book XI of the *Odyssey* [263].

To get back that laurel axe from that garden spinney at Shirley would now be to get back the full magic power of that timeless fetish-worship by the strength of which the quaintest, most ordinary object—a tree-stump, a pile of stones, a pool by the roadside, an ancient chimney-stack—can become an Ark of the Covenant, evocative of the music of the spheres! [*Autobiography* 3]

This mixture of anthropology and Wordsworthian romanticism is expressed in a longing for the primitive nature of childhood. Fisher and Powys are essentially in the tradition of Rousseau. The vision of primitive man and child is in accord with some pre-lapsarian state. Both Fisher and Powys are fascinated by the intimations of this in the young Wordsworth.⁷ The “primal sympathy” which Wordsworth detected was one principally felt in childhood. Fisher in his interviews and Powys in his *Autobiography* also admit the connection, but elsewhere they are considerably more interested in its continuing existence and significance in adult life: there is no real break between child and savage and man and civilization.⁸

The “entry into nature” via fetishism supposes a means of escaping the symbolic order, of escaping time and the confines of the twentieth century, its codes and identities, to confront the dead through a private experience of the self transcending the ego. Actually to encode such a process in language must, by its very nature, be almost impossible and, at least initially, it is depicted cautiously by Fisher as a “dream or intention” [12]. It is Powys again who suggests how this process of encoding might be achieved specifically through poetry. In the “Preface” to *A Furnace*, Fisher writes:

I am indebted to his [John Cowper Powys’s] writings for such understanding as I have of the idea that the making of all kinds of identities is a primary impulse which the universe itself has; and that those identities and that impulse can be acknowledged only by some form or other of poetic imagination. [7]

The key to Powysian vision is via the poetic imagination. In *Atlantis* an Ithacan fly, who speaks (of course) in Dorset dialect, has this to say on the matter:

“Don’t ‘ee forget, dear Pyraust,” he added, “how when we began our study of the alphabet of matter we learnt how much more important the sensations that certain words convey to us are than the precise nature of the words used or the number of syllables they contain.”

“Above all, my dear girl, don’t forget what the Olive-Shoot always tells us, how in the science of language it is a combination of assonance and alliteration that conveys the idea; and thus it is only in poetry that the real secret of what is happening is revealed.” [155]

Fisher’s verse does use both the techniques mentioned by the moth. It is reasonable to presume that Fisher also is working on the principle that it is the sensation that words convey that also conveys the private intuitions of

⁷ Fisher notes this interest in capturing the insights of the “young Wordsworth” in the audio tape “City Poems.”

⁸ Clair Wills writes of “fetishes” with reference to Freud, while noting that Fisher’s idea of the fetish differs from Freud’s. However, it is far less confusing to see Fisher’s and John Cowper Powys’s thoughts on the fetish as deriving from anthropology and as having little in common with psychoanalysis.

the fetish worshipper, thus fulfilling the “dream or intention” of the author. This theory allows for the sensations of words as combined in poetry to communicate the sensations of the private relationship of ego with matter that dissolves their latter separation, which in turn may bring about a renewed and meaningful connection between signifier and signified.

This theory of poetry lies close to what, in the terms of Julia Kristeva, would be described as the recovery of “the semiotic” and, more particularly, the “chora.” According to Kristeva: “The chora is a modality of significance in which the linguistic sign is not yet articulated as the absence of an object and as the distinction between real and symbolic” [26]. Kristeva is interested in features of avant-garde poetics and a free play of the sign that are markedly different from those features of poetry extolled by Powys and, by implication, Fisher. Yet both do see poetry as a way of transcending a materialistic society by escaping the conventional “symbolic” order. However, though the intuitions that Fisher and Powys write of date back to childhood, neither is particularly preoccupied with any psychoanalytical explanation of their fetishism, nor are they merely interested in generating *jouissance*.

The poetic expression of “what is really happening” may, as we have seen, facilitate meaningful conversation with the dead. The point is put by one of the characters in Powys’s *A Glastonbury Romance*:

Can’t you feel, Ned, as we stand here that this place is magical? What’s Poetry if it isn’t something that has to fight for the unseen against the seen, for the dead against the living, for the mysterious against the obvious? Poetry always takes sides. It’s the only Lost Cause we’ve got left! It fights for the... for the.... for the Impossible. [529]

This exploration of the fight for the impossible “dream or intention,” lays the foundation for the Powysian metaphysics of “The Many,” the sixth section of Fisher’s poem and its exposition of Fisher’s own “true gods” [42], and the forward moving synthesis of “On Fennel Stalks,” the section which closes the poem.⁹ Here Fisher achieves a remarkably coherent interweaving of intuition, with wider discourses and world-views resulting in something akin to personal religion made out of “a pragmatic skein of connections” whose “true gods” include “evidences that dart into the particle accelerator / unaccountably” [43].¹⁰

In *A Furnace*, Fisher, like Powys, espouses a visionary poetics that would allow an animist retrieval of the past and a *rapprochement* between poetry and the natural world. He also acknowledges this to be, in the modern world, a displaced, marginal calling, a “lost cause” and places this vision in constant dialectic with depictions of the world that resist such processes and with devices drawn from aesthetic traditions far removed from Powys’s Romanticism. The resultant poem complicates conventional

⁹ For a full investigation of Powys’s influence on *A Furnace* and a detailed exploration of the structure and themes of the poem see: William George Wootten, “The Aesthetics of History in the Modern English Long Poem: David Jones’s *The Anathemata*, Basil Bunting’s *Briggflatts*, Geoffrey Hill’s *Mercian Hymns* and Roy Fisher’s *A Furnace*,” Ph.D. thesis, University of Durham, 1998.

¹⁰ For a good discussion of Roy Fisher’s interest in post-Newtonian physics, see John Kerrigan, “Roy Fisher on Location” [Kerrigan 16-47].

notions of progress, not least those of literary history, for it shows how a form of Romanticism may come after and alongside modernism and post-modernism as well as before it. Whilst the idiosyncratic nature of Fisher's enterprise in *A Furnace* can hardly be denied, it has resulted in work more daring and more accomplished than Fisher's more straightforwardly avant-garde pieces. Whether such a venture may be regarded as having a wider significance, or itself being merely an example of a "lost cause," deserves some debate. For, even if *A Furnace's* cause is lost, its achievement suggests that some lost causes may be quite as important as triumphant ones.

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