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A review of

PLACE

by Allen Fisher

THE LAND OF LOST CONTENT

A book review by Andrew Jordan

PLACE Allen Fisher (Reality Street, 157 x 235mm/perfect bound, 418pp/£15)

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1 Where is PLACE from?

The opening sentence of the author's introduction is the first mark on the map of this parish. "The planning of PLACE was contemporary with the development of Fluxus in Britain in 1970."

Fluxus (from "to flow") was founded in 1962 by George Maciunas. Working around notions of perpetual process, Fluxus played with the expectations of audiences to upend their notions of what art was. They took the piss out of serious culture, exploring the aesthetics of propaganda and sabotage and the role of culture and artists in the maintenance of hierarchies and imperialism. Doubtless those who haven't croaked are all immensely rich now and I'm sure many of them are really radical professors of this or that, but in their day they liked to think of themselves as a threat to capitalism.

Fisher also name-checks situationist Raoul Vaneigem, who gets a mention in the first poem. These references are way markers. They indicate the presence of a tradition. Vaneigem is best known as the author of *The Revolution of Everyday Life*, the buddy volume to Guy Debord's *Society of the Spectacle*. Situationism, also based around utopian anti-art ideas, became metaphysical in the works of Debord and Vaneigem. The pros and cons of the ideology generated from within the Parisian section of the Situationist International are beyond the scope of the present work, but the importance of their writings to Allen Fisher's PLACE is clear.

Although it didn't influence my reading of PLACE, this quote from Vaneigem shaped the writing of this review: "There is no one who is not embarked upon a process of personal alchemy, yet so inattentive, so short-sighted are those who call their own passivity and resignation 'fate' that the magistry cannot operate in the light, cannot emerge from the atmosphere of putrefaction and death which characterises the daily grind of desires forced to deny themselves."¹

The "daily grind of desires forced to deny themselves" are the matter of Allen Fisher's PLACE. Within its process, Fisher seeks to resist without becoming depleted and to transform the city and the world beyond it. In this sense then, London is both the alembic and the alchemical symbol of the author himself. To him, the continuous process implied in the fluxian approach is also the alchemical process within which we are transformed in the face of power but not adapted by it.

2 Dissolution

The process of melting a solid body and producing free flowing material in liquid form.

PLACE is a complex construction and one partially abstracted from a wider process. That can be said of any collection of poems. Any piece of text is an abstraction drawing on more than one source. Sections of PLACE have previously been published over the 15 years that Fisher was involved in its process; although they crop up in the text, I have decided, on the whole, to ignore the titles of these separate publications. In terms of this text, I can see no point in adding to a complexity that would provide a distraction and little else. As it is, the author has divided PLACE (the book) into five sections and I am happy to make do with those.

In classical modernist fashion, PLACE draws on the whole of the past and the whole of the present. In terms of the past this relates to historical narratives themselves abstracted from events. The histories can be folksy or literary and there are allusions to writers and their works through the many texts of PLACE. Like the Thames, PLACE combines the liquid vitality of a landscape, including tributary streams. It is a knot of currents, messing and merging with each other. And then there are the actions of people and the divisions of landscape and the placed world they create:

the Sluice divides Bermondsey & Rotherhithe
from Camberwell & Deptford
as it once divided Surrey & Kent
it divides the police divisions
the old boroughs the parliamentary constituencies

page 44

The creation of separate bodies from facts on the ground, of ideas from objects and their arrangement, suggests God-like qualities to ownership. The pattern of drainage in the Thames basin washes through hegemony.

after the Sluice walked upstream
along a connecting stream to Neckinger
(the course between Bermondsey Abbey & Thames)
parts of the flow are artificial
to make matters worse
Kent says the stream near the Elephant temple
to be the Tigris
and this too partly artificial

took the bus south
I couldn't get to the matter of this

if our streams are becoming artificial

our old sources will dry

page 45

Now, it seems a bit daft to hope to find a stream in London that hasn't been altered in some way. The consternation expressed seems false and the critique implied within it is unconvincing. Nature, when appropriately described, invigorates structures of social and economic control; an altered watercourse is no more sinister than a pristine one. The method of writing appears to favour first impressions and that can lead to cock ups in terms of the alchemy.

3 Distillation

The process of isolating substances to be differentiated and crystallized into independent existence before they again conjoin.

Imperialism, as a matter of historical narrative and as a kind of ground, appears in many forms in PLACE. One historical narrative breaks in repeatedly. The Roman conquest of Britain in AD 43 provides evocative depth to the process and also creates odd juxtapositions. London was captured by the Romans. It became the capital of a province. Also in the past is another imperial London, the one at the centre of the British empire. Some kind of conceptual bridge links the pre-imperial 'Celtic' Britain with the post-imperial modern one. Thus there is a very strong Romantic aspect of PLACE. This sometimes results in idealism.

draw a straight line from Stangate, close to the end
of Westminster Bridge, as far as the beginning of the
Old Kent Road, you will understand the lie of the
causeway

across the marsh

page 10

The emergence of a neo-Platonic grid of pure geometrical lines within the physical and socio-political forms made by landscapes is reductive. But then all processes of abstraction are. The process of abstraction transforms the landscape into something that can be worked in other ways. This differentiated stuff still contains the same histories, or the essences of them, and provides a form of romance in itself and a way out of Romance, eventually, or potentially.

who are the dodmen the snails the surveyors
no longer with horns or dowsing wands
no longer tracing the earth in lung-mei & ley
stretching the globe
or as Manzoni encircling the earth
who are you now that would draw the St. Michael line

page 51

sublimation, either as a by-product (pollutant) or as a product, making imperial reality sublime (spectacular).

Those parts of PLACE relating to the Grampians, and others concerning a visit to the Lake District, echo earlier journeys made by Wordsworth and others, but in PLACE the world seems essentially urban. The Grampians are not the antithesis of the urban centre, but rather they exist at the edge of the urban sphere of influence. The sensibility is both urban and - although the suburbs barely get a mention - modern. The paganism described is one forged in the furnace at the heart of the City and exported along with the whole romantic product range into the sublime wilderness. This can lead to neo-pagan kitsch which is both a shabby and a marvellous thing.

The keeper can be Cernunnos, stag god in Perthshire;
holding or wearing caduceus or serpent with
torc or broken coin.
His girdle is incomplete
he searches for Brigantia.

“His days roll on in vilest bondage
“treading a perpetual round
“never striking out but beating former ground”

page 179 GRAMPIANS / 73

STANE, PLACE Book III / XLV-LXXXI

Reference to these sections brings to mind the structure of the book, and that requires comment due to its complexity. The book is divided into five parts, but each of these is abstracted from the original process. Some of the texts aren't in the original order and some are missing. The system of numbers and titles adds to a disorientation already created by the wide range of allusions, historical contexts and modes of writing. The process of reading PLACE gradually breaks down the subjectivity of the reader; that's my experience. It wasn't unpleasant and it had an air of nostalgia about it.

457 ad. Britons defeated at Crayford, 4000 dead.
London deserted, the tides eat the causeway.
London gone like Tadmor, Tyre and Carthage.

page 14

Antiquarianism - here we have Stukeley on a day out in mid 5th century London - is a drug that I still enjoy. But if the City is an alchemical symbol of the self of the author, which I came to think it was, then it continually loops us back into his myths about himself and he doesn't seem too interested in exploring those. Mysticism prevents this work and the City remains in an untransformed state. Again, I think the method - the elevation of process over content - becomes repressive. *Process is as Process does*. It felt like a cop out, a failure of responsibility rather than a radical strategy.

5 Putrefaction

The purification of substances through a moist disintegration.

As the original nature of elements are destroyed, the decayed aspects are cast off and a new nature is introduced.

Many literary personas occupy the ground of PLACE. There is Olson with his *open field* and within that field there are other writers (Shakespeare, Bunyan, Pope, Coleridge, Blake and others). There are also antiquarians, archaeologists, historians, novelists, journalists, philosophers, visionaries, scientists, despots, psychologists, naturalists and exponents of 'earth mysteries'. The range of "works used in these texts" is impressive.

PLACE is a number of things at once: a collection of jottings; a patchwork; a *Bayeux Tapestry* to cover all historical contexts and a *Guernica* for London and the home counties. It is anti-poetry and in a way it does *make poetry history*. There is a delight in collage. There are lists, quotes from prose works, notes to the self, odd punctuation (including a glyph similar to a comma that appears throughout the text and might indicate a peculiar pause). There are also letters, including one to Iain Sinclair "on the publication of his book "LUD HEAT" in 1975" and a note to Lambeth Council which opens with the statement: "It has come to my attention that a large unidentified flying object was seen today over Coldharbour Lane." So, Fisher confronts a depressing subject (repression and loss of vitality) with a range of tactics, one of which is humour.

Serious culture has its virtues and one of these must surely be that it is other than the everyday. But for Fisher, there is beauty enough in the fluid nature of the everyday, so long as it is allowed to move in its Olsonian open field (and not banged up in a covered culvert) and the Fluxus agenda provides the Good News in PLACE:

what is static let process invigorate
snow crystals shifting sap the
dream horizon defining moving
boundaries

page 281

Between the writing of these texts and their publication developments such as the internet, CCTV and digital satellite mapping have occurred. These things aren't mentioned in PLACE because they hadn't happened yet, but they are present in the context in which PLACE is read. I found myself considering their effect on contemporary reality. Back in the 1970s, so long as nobody was visible you could walk about without any sense of being observed. Even in a country as heavily strolled upon as the UK you could, even in a city, experience a kind of innocence in ordinary things.

lilac spray
breaks open nostrils
is moving
by smelling place it

frame it in perception
what then becomes without concealment
must be let to move

page 280

These days everything, including the wildlife, is suspect. *Think of bird flu and wild swans.* And we had privacy in the 1970s in a way that is unimaginable now. Here, and this effect is subtle, I found that the recounting of an everyday life from the recent past - even a self-consciously poetic everyday life - brought something to the surface. It's to do with how the social aspects of the self, the inner person, are now the commons that is being 'included' in the economy. There are, doubtless, many ways in which these subtle nuances of a shared social loss might be presented within poetic texts, but Fisher's process is one way and it has virtues that would be difficult to replicate in other kinds of text.

how can we trust each other
we don't even trust ourselves

page 207

Since the industrial revolution the individual has been increasingly besieged by its own subjectivity. It is an irony that in defending ourselves from imperialist incursion - in defending the imagined commons, the imagination - we retreat into subjectivity. We become more isolated and depleted. We are caught up in a process of:

alarm resistance exhaustion

page 183

We are missing each other's society and ever more busily working away at inner processes; as a New Age commentator might put it, we are 'unblocking our energies' (as if we are nothing but conceptual plumbing).

6 Calcination

When a substance is heated to just below its melting point, all moisture is lost, its carbonates decompose, and oxidizing corrosion occurs, leaving behind a calx or ash.

Over and again the author tells us that he is exhausted. The body is braced against incursion, the mind ready to respond; this is a definition of stress, unease, restlessness. So *being* itself becomes a disease.

I come to what if anything is still of value
separated from the health springs
mounds and accumulators

page 195

In Wordsworth's day a gentleman romantic resolved these things with a journey. He took himself out of the city and, with the city on the horizon behind him, he encountered the wilderness. There were still poor people, many of whom were maddened by exploitation, but the scenery behind them was Sublime and the human wreckage was rendered picturesque by its context. So, the poet was renewed and his vigour was expressed through his poetry. That which had oppressed the poet in the city could be expressed via the ego in a wilderness where both 'the past' and 'nature' were harnessed for their untapped vitality. In some senses Fisher is trying to pull the same stunt - his pagan mysticism keeps revving that engine - but nowhere in PLACE does he seem at ease with this idea.

my concern then not to invoke an imagined past
"The Golden Age" "the tribal return"
that is not even in our day dreams
but never was anywhere else

page 193 **Letter to Eric Mottram continued**

Despite this statement, he does invoke an imagined past, but with a discomfort that prevents exploration of this behaviour and its occult meaning. The links between practise and intention remain hidden.

These days the process of enclosure has largely been absorbed into the self, where it is hidden. There are vast tracts of unimproved virtual space within individual subjectivities and the enclosure process has been extended into these. The enclosure of feral aspects of individual psyches is already being modelled. The creation and enclosure of cyberspace shows how eventually we will have to dream on subscription. But for now the recalcitrant Romantic travels inwards because there's nowhere else to go that doesn't have a lifestyle tourism brand or a war on the go. Either way, everywhere is now 'included' in the economy and there'll doubtless be a New Deal for dreamers shortly.

Back then, Fisher mapped the edges of territories and experiences and, within his liminal *process-showing*, he crossed boundaries. He knows he is close to one on page 334: "I stand by the river / near the stone remnants of an entrance // maybe it is cold / and you approach me / tell me of the / mistake of my way / unaware I am my ghost / my shadow leaves without me..." The shadow is the self beyond repression, perhaps, portrayed as a spirit. The boundary is worked using the agency of ritual love:

Awoken Cernunnus saw
the Turret in a noose of light
his phallus in Brigantia's ring
when Dawn's left hand was in the sky

page 337 **GRAMPIANS cut-in / GAIT Place 41**

This bedding of the symbols of masculine and feminine fecundity all but finishes the book. BECOMING ends on page 338 with the lines, “what had begun / began again”.

7 Conjunction

The act of joining or reuniting fundamental substances
along alignments governed by inherent, natural affinities.

The next and final (fifth) section of PLACE - *UNPOLISHED MIRRORS* (first published on its own in 1981) - is a reworked version of the original Book II (one section of which - *Eros : Father : Pattern* (published in 1980) - remains between Book I and Book III): it takes the reader to the beginning, or the new beginning, of the book. In *UNPOLISHED MIRRORS* characters emerge from previously undifferentiated aspects of the author’s psyche (or the text’s substance) to deliver monologues. This was a welcome development. I had felt myself to have become immersed in a metaphysic and had become fractious as a result. I had felt myself to be in a kind of subjective white noise. *The static that must be moved*. I was glad to see it go.³

The first text in *UNPOLISHED MIRRORS* is delivered by ‘the artist’, it opens thus: “I am in the garden of a coming English revolution...” The second stanza of this short poem reinforces this: “I have come to increase my liberation...” (**The artist’s preface**, page 341) Then the on page 342 ‘the gardener’, in his preface, defines his work of mapping and liberating:

to make clear where the tracing can be leaped
to open
remove the gates to the city of love and death...

Next comes **The author’s preface** (page 343) in which objectives are set. He says: “of my objectives I do not wish to / be certain / except awareness of my wish / to transform my scream / to grasp the world / without gripping it...”

The gardener is some kind of shamanic historian. He has something of Adam about him, as if London is no mere celestial city, but the seat of Eden itself.

I am the gardener
come to plant the seeds of the Great English Revolution

page 345 **TO PLANT THE BERGAMOT**
The gardener’s monologue begins

And there is Doll, perhaps the archetypal Eve of old (Blakean) London. She appears amongst reports of the Thames freezing over, when London became a festive place where “ice-plates’ shift frictionless grace...” (page 349) She and the other archetypal figures each have their monologue. They do not converse, but do allude. Watling is a narrative road, a kind of Tory, and Wren is the Great Architect; in this Eden he plays God and Satan with the present city and with the dead of many ages. The main thing is that the process has changed. It could be that radical transformation is magically

occurring or just that the author decided to intervene. I suspect that the need to make a book rather than a process was behind the “change in priorities” that resulted in Book II being rewritten into UNPOLISHED MIRRORS.⁴

In UNPOLISHED MIRRORS the magistry have emerged into light and they have become operative. The stories that flood from these tributary personas are essentially the same stories as before, degradations, defeats, oppressions and endless resistance, but the atmosphere has changed. There are glimpses of the future PLACE, of further process, of “the dances of that without pain” (page 407).

There is much about this book that I enjoyed - for instance, on page 24 the increase in the numbers of the poor in Lambeth between 1800 and 1818 (and how that related to war and the tactic of naval blockade) is illustrated in eight neat lines - but I found the process pretentious and tiresome. I can't help but wonder if Allen Fisher ever regretted starting this project. Also, I wonder if he thinks it is over. It must be like having a long term illness that is, perhaps, in remission. It could even be the case that it never was London or capitalism that left him feeling drained, it could have been PLACE itself. That's a very unshamanic thing for me to suggest, but I find the thought irresistible.

notes

¹ Raoul Vaneigem, *The Revolution of Everyday Life* (1967), from **Preface to the first French paperback edition**. I have quoted from the English translation by Donald Nicholson-Smith, Rebel Press/Left Bank Books, 1994, page 13

² Alfred Watkins, *The Old Straight Track* (1925)

³ My frustrations with PLACE, particularly between pages 259 - 300, resulted in boredom, “without fully knowing the loss / after the landing is made” (page 267). I know this from my notes in which I treated my boredom as if it were a territory. I mapped it. It is possible that my boredom had more to do with me than the text I was reading, a lot can happen to a person in 407 pages. For a while I was reading my boredom rather than the book. During this time I did express frustrations that were generally felt, so the experience of boredom was - without irony - interesting. In my notes I wrote, “Fisher has made a book without actually writing one. Perhaps he should have just written a bloody book for readers to read rather than present a processual discourse that could not help but become lost up its own vastness.” There were other indications of my resistance. I had developed an ‘I don't believe it’ attitude towards PLACE, much like Fisher's own towards the dominant culture. It could be that this was exactly what he intended in which case he's a formidable culture-warrior. Stewart Home quotes Guy Debord as saying, “the most pertinent revolutionary experiments in culture have sought to break the spectator's psychological identification with the hero so as to draw him into activity by provoking his capacities to revolutionise his own life.” (from *The Assault on Culture*, Stewart Home, AK Press 1991, page 30). It is ironic that Debord was a cheerleader for the cult of individualism.

⁴ “During the process of composing Book III there was a change in priorities, from leaving the process and materials intact as a part of the composition, to new proposals that permitted a range of processes and a transformation of the initial materials.” (**Introduction**, PLACE, page 5) Whether before or after the priorities changed, the texts of PLACE always existed outside the category of poetry. In the same way, Vaneigem's ideas never were an ideology.