

Birmingham as “composite monster”: Roy Fisher’s *City* (1961)

Samuel Rogers

University of the West of England, Bristol

Keywords:

Birmingham, British Poetry Revival, *City*, Roy Fisher, Long Modernist Poem, Modernism, Poetry

Abstract:

Roy Fisher (1930–2017) was a major figure in British poetry, with a body of work which bridged the gap between mainstream and modernist writing. A significant artist of English urban space, Fisher’s work insistently returned to his exploration of Birmingham and the broader English landscape of the Midlands. While the city is a recurrent topic in Fisher’s writing, this discussion will single out his first significant publication, *City*, which appeared as a pamphlet in 1961 before being reworked substantially the following year. This sequence, or “long modernist poem”, gives sustained poetic attention to the alteration of Birmingham following the Second World War. The poem explores the experience of urban space, and the tensions between authoritative and ground-level perspectives. These concerns can be fruitfully compared with preservationist discourses in English geography. Fisher seeks to create a unified whole of his native city’s fragments, but his modernist poetics continually interrogates and complicates this aim.

Roy Fisher (1930–2017) was a major figure in British poetry, with a body of work which bridged the gap between mainstream and modernist writing. A significant artist of English urban space, Fisher’s work insistently returned to his exploration of Birmingham and the broader English landscape of the Midlands. While the city is a recurrent topic in Fisher’s writing, this discussion will single out his first significant publication, *City*, which appeared as a pamphlet in 1961 before being reworked substantially the following year. As Peter Barry recognizes, *City* is “unlike anything else in Fisher’s work” and “Fisher’s reader, therefore, is compelled to think of *City* as a large and anomalous ‘singleton’ within the *oeuvre*” (2000: 196). In many ways, the significance of *City* is not simply as the debut publication of an important poet, but also, as Robert Sheppard posits, “[a]s the earliest extended work of the British Poetry Revival” (2005: 81). The British Poetry Revival was a significant resurgence of modernist poetics in Britain, with its origins in the late 1950s and its offshoots in today’s field of Linguistically Innovative Poetry. Eric Mottram’s essay (repr. 1993), “The British Poetry Revival, 1960-1975”, is one of the earliest critical accounts of this field, which appears to have given the Revival its name. By analysing Fisher’s representation of urban space from the early 1960s, we can also begin to understand how the city figures in the broader experimental processes and techniques of the Revival.

Planner-Preservationist Contexts

Outside of its artistic contexts, Fisher’s *City* can partly be interpreted in terms of the preservationist movement in English geography, as discussed in depth by David Matless. Matless describes “a movement for the planning and preservation of landscape” and sees the first phase of this movement as emerging in the 1920s and 1930s (1998: 14). He characterizes

this movement as “an attempt to plan a landscape simultaneously modern and traditional” (25), and argues that it “sought to ally preservation and progress, tradition and modernity, city and country in order to define Englishness as orderly and modern” (14). Matless suggests that its transition into a second phase occurred as “the Second World War allowed the planner-preservationist Englishness [...] to achieve a position of considerable cultural and political power” (14, 15). This latter phase is clearly relevant when reading *City*. The poem’s dominant subject matter is Fisher’s native city of Birmingham, whose materials are being viewed in a specifically post-war context; underlining this, Barry commends the sequence as

the most powerful literary account we have of the almost nationwide experience in mid-century Britain of urban loss and destruction, a loss brought about by a combination of bombing during the Second World War, and wholesale “redevelopment”, “slum clearance”, and (as we might call it) “motorisation” in the 1950s and 60s. (2000: 197)

Because of *City*’s overt interest in exploring the effects of these cultural circumstances upon an urban environment, the sequence places itself directly into dialogue with the planner-preservationist movement: Matless argues that many changes to English space that occurred during the war were “articulated in terms of planner-preservationist Englishness”, whilst also allowing that discourse to gain momentum (1998: 173). Moreover, the sphere of post-war “reconstruction” (viewed by Matless as “a sensibility rather than a chronological category”) seems to have been a major factor in the development and expression of planner-preservationism’s second phase (201). If *City* represents “the most powerful literary account”

of the changes that took place in urban Britain, then clearly its relationship to the discourse surrounding those changes is of upmost interest.

The second point of contact between the planner-preservationist movement and Fisher's sequence is that both are modernist and, more specifically, both express a modernist understanding of environment and identity. This is clarified by Sheppard's view of Fisher's work as a whole:

In Fisher's work we recognize, not the contemporary social realist perspectives of Larkin, but the unknowable City of modernism: the fog-shrouded capital of T. S. Eliot, the musical geography of Bely's *Petersburg*, or the haunted Paris of Breton's *Nadja*. (2005: 78)

Meanwhile, Matless's discussion of the preservationist movement notes that "[t]erming this preservation 'modern' or 'modernist' [...] can signify rather more than a general subscription to 'progress'"; rather, he asserts that the movement for preservation "needs to be understood in relation to a particular form of modernism which was seeking to produce what might be termed a moral modernity" (1998: 50-51). Modernism is central to Matless's argument because it allows the urges of preservation and planning to be reconciled: "Preservationists subscribe to a modernism of orderly progress driven by planning" (51). Matless suggests that "this is hardly the modernity of flux and transition embraced by some forms of literary and artistic modernism" (51). Yet, his sense of "orderly progress driven by planning" does not seem entirely at odds with the modernism of Eliot or Ezra Pound, for instance, in which "flux and transition" continually shape and contextualize the poetry, but "orderly progress", too,

seems a formal principle and, at least potentially, a desired condition remaining narrowly beyond reach.

Modernism and Urban Space

By reading *City* in relation to the discourse Matless outlines, we can underline the geographical ideas at work in the poem, whilst also asking where Fisher's modernism stands in relation to the two extremes of order and flux. Like many practitioners of the modernist long poem, Fisher can be partly characterized as striving for unity and wholeness, in his modernist poetics and his specifically post-war exploration of urban space. In the above quote from Sheppard the comparison of Fisher and Eliot in relation to "the unknowable City" is useful. A similar connection is made by Gregson: in discussing the passage of *City* that begins, "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" (Fisher, 2005: 43), Gregson argues that "[t]his passage provides a key to the fragmentariness of 'City' just as the lines 'On Margate Sands / I can connect / Nothing with nothing' provide a key to the fragmentariness of 'The Waste Land'". Gregson then notes that Fisher "later distanced himself from [the passage] [...] because he no longer saw such fragmentariness as a source of discomfort" (1996: 173). As this implies, *City* itself *does* convey a sense of "encountering an uncomfortably fragmented world" (173) and, more specifically, an uncomfortably fragmented city. It is partly in this way that the sequence may be understood in the same tradition as *The Waste Land*, or even Pound's *Cantos*. Interestingly, the passage that provides a possible key to Pound's text states "I am not a demigod, / I cannot make it cohere" (1975: 796), whilst Fisher identifies "A polytheism without gods" in which "I cannot join together" (2005: 43). Despite their multitudinous differences, both texts belong to a modernism that

identifies new forms of “flux and transition” in the world and frustrates itself by attempting to resolve this perceived dilemma, partly by continually experimenting with the idea of “orderly progress” through innovations in poetic form. Matless is right to distinguish this literary modernism from the modernism of a discourse about English landscape and cities, and yet the similarities of the two are as important as their differences.

If *City* seeks partly to re-establish some sense of “a single world”, both the identified fragmentariness and the sought coherence relate directly to the alterations of late-twentieth century urban space discussed above. Highlighting the impact of the Second World War on perceptions of landscape, Matless argues that “[w]ar shook up the geography of England, unsettling people and their objects, transforming landscapes, moving things to where they weren’t before” (1998: 173). Crucially, it also led to the further alterations enacted by post-war reconstruction, not least because the bombing of cities “literally cleared a space for rebuilding” (187). Barry’s discussion of *City* stresses the importance of this latter transformation: he argues that “the ‘transformative’ change to which British post-war cities have been subjected [...] [is] quite different in its psychological effects from that of continual piecemeal development”, and stresses that “this sudden obliteration of the past was greater and more sweeping in Birmingham than in any other British city”. It is this “change-without-continuity” that Barry sees as “captured in *City*”, and this is key to both the sequence’s fragmentation and its apparent desire to somehow reunify the city (2000: 197).

The prose passages of *City* often verge on straight-forwardly realist depictions of the city, and it is these passages that most directly state the text’s interest in the architectural and psychological de(con)struction of urban space (for example, Fisher, 2005: 29, 32-33, 35-36). Yet, whilst those passages push towards some sense of a “whole” perception – with their geographical-historical approach to the city and their aerial perspective – this is undercut by the shifts in style, register, and form that surround them. Those shifts insist on the multiplying

of perspectives, working against a fixed, overall vision; this is integral to the sequence's impact, but does not necessarily suggest the playfully postmodern attitude to textuality embraced by parts of Fisher's later poetry. Rather, the stress on fragmentation becomes, as Gregson notes, a source of discomfort and the central tension or dilemma of the text.

Accordingly, where the text depicts the present city as fragmented or as incongruous with its past, it registers a shock at that lack of unity. For instance, the opening section finds that "a whole district of the tall narrow houses that spilled around what were a hundred years ago outlying factories has gone" (29). Its shock at this is registered in the ensuing image of "The streets [...] veering awkwardly towards one another through nothing", and the related description of "purposeless streets" (29). Here, the city's altered form is a source of discomfort, since awkwardness, nothingness, and purposelessness have replaced a previous state of organized unity; this is clarified by the image of "the city's invisible heart", which seeks to view the city precisely in terms of that lost coherence (29).

'A composite monster': Unifying the City

If the cultural circumstances of war and post-war development contextualize the stress on fragmentation and unfamiliarity in *City*, they also contextualize the processes of reunification with which its modernism addresses that perceived dilemma. Matless stresses that whilst war and reconstruction "shook up the geography of England", it also facilitated a reformulation of Englishness in which the "modern Englishness" of planner-preservationist discourse could "claim and exercise authority" (1998: 173). One way in which this occurred was through a re-evaluation of urban life in direct response to urban bombing and the subsequent need for rebuilding. Matless describes how "[t]he Blitz [...] underpinned reconstruction in its stress on collective experience [...] [and] allowed the mobilization of city life as communal" (187).

The urban space thus became “a civic whole”, but moreover “[t]he city as an organic whole rises out of the bombsites”, and “the city becomes a body to be cherished” (187). The way in which *City* expresses this view of the urban space can be observed if we take the prose sections of the sequence as cumulatively forming one potential narrative in the text. The prose passages cited above tend to focus on an overall, frequently aerial view of the city and its *hard infrastructure* of road networks and settlement patterns; and that over-arching perspective provides a way of re-imposing the mourned loss of coherence. As the sequence progresses, and such visions of the city as a whole structure are established, the prose sections begin to work towards a further reassembly that stresses not only the *soft infrastructure* of “the governing authority [...], the tasteful, the fashionable, the intolerant and the powerful” (Fisher, 2005: 37), but also a more organic focus on the body (for example, 37-38, 40-41, 42-43). What begins to emerge is an exploration of the body as a constructed entity, echoing Matless’s assertion that “the city becomes a body”: in depicting people as built assemblages, Fisher makes the body a kind of parallel for the city; but in, at the same time, interrogating the body as a coherent structure, he undermines the desire for a whole, unified city. This can be seen in, for instance, the section entitled “The Sun Hacks”:

a couple embraced, pressed close together and swaying a little. It was hard to see where the girl’s feet and legs were. The suspicion this aroused soon caused her hands, apparently joined behind her lover’s back, to become a small brown paper parcel under the arm of a stout engine driver. (37)

Outside the Grand Hotel, a long-boned carrot-haired girl with glasses, loping along, and with strips of bright colour, rich, silky green and blue, in her soft clothes. For a person made of such scraps she was beautiful. (38)

This is juxtaposed with a vision of the city itself in similar terms, so that the city becomes an enlarged version of the human body. Through this mutually explorative juxtaposition the text recalls Matless's argument by beginning to construct the city as an organic body that "rises out of the bombsites" (187), or out of the fragmentation of urban redevelopment:

In an afternoon of dazzling sunlight in the thronged streets I saw at first no individuals but a composite monster, its unfeeling surfaces matted with dust: a mass of necks, limbs without extremities, trunks without heads; unformed stirrings and shovings spilling across the street it had managed to get itself provided with.

Later, as the air cooled, flowing loosely about the buildings that stood starkly among the declining rays, the creature began to divide and multiply. At crossings I could see people made of straw, rags, cartons, the stuffing of burst cushions, kitchen refuse. (Fisher, 2005: 37-38)

This image of the city as a "composite monster" is evidently part of Fisher's wider tendency to organize the urban space into a singular whole – in this case a whole human-like unit, assembled from fragments, just like the "stout engine driver" or the "carrot-haired girl".

Where the sequence later views the city in fragments again, lacking the unity of a whole organism, it registers the shock of this discovery precisely in terms of the body: “The city at night has no eye, any more than it has by day, although you would expect to find one” (41).

By perceiving “no individuals but a composite”, Fisher does not naturalize one particular model of wholeness, but rather shows the processes of assembly involved, continually revealing his unified city to be one possible way of constructing the available fragments. In showing “people made of straw, rags, cartons” (or, indeed, a girl’s hands “[becoming] a small brown paper parcel”), Fisher makes visible the perceptual games involved in viewing any organism as a discrete whole; and this self-reflexivity clearly extends to his depictions of a city-organism. Moreover, the image of the re-unified city as a “monster”, constructed through the dismemberment of individuals (“limbs without extremities, trunks without heads”), is hardly a positive vision. The image may suggest how the abstracted position of power involved in a whole perception of urban space creates a desensitized authority (“unfeeling surfaces”) that threatens and subsumes the agency of individuals at the street level. This marks an important tension in the sequence, inherent in Fisher’s interrogation of an authoritative perspective and his poetry nonetheless relies on. By switching between omnipotent and non-authoritative perceptions of the city (or between aerial visions of unity and depictions of the ensuing wholeness as monstrous), the very structure of Fisher’s sequence makes his processes of organization self-aware and fundamentally provisional, without disclaiming their usefulness or necessity.

Public and Private Cities

Within the poem’s depiction of the city, related tensions are those between the domestic and the public, and between the body and the city. Indeed, the sequence’s connecting of the city

to the human body is linked to its interrogation of interior spaces: if the former device provides a way of depicting the city as whole, clearly the latter device is a key requisite to that depiction. Part of the section entitled “Starting to Make a Tree” demonstrates how Fisher’s blurring of the division between interior and exterior is motivated by a desire to open private spaces of the city and merge them with public spaces like streets (40-41). Most strikingly, the poem asserts that the city “could be broken like asphalt, and the men and women rolled out like sleeping maggots” (41). The words “broken like asphalt” view the whole city in terms of the materials of its public spaces, whilst also lending an air of gritty social realism; the image that follows then impacts twofold, by expressing the wish to open up the architecture of the domestic space, but also by treating that space with a contrastingly surreal defamiliarization, depicting the act of sleeping in the home as uncomfortably larval.

The focus on bringing hidden spaces into the public organism of the city is not limited to the domesticity of the home, as other hidden areas are also revealed to be eerie and alien. For example: “The city asleep. In it there are shadows that are sulphurous, tanks of black bile. The glitter on the roadways is the deceptive ore that shines on coal” (40). As the sinister “shadows” and “tanks of black bile” are related to the exterior, more familiar “roadways”, the suggestion is that the visible city depends upon hidden and strange spaces. Only by exposing these spaces (alongside the interiors of human dwellings) can the poem fulfil its desire to view the city as a whole. Again, all of this is connected to Fisher’s interest in the body, as the following passage suggests:

There are lamplit streets where the full darkness is only in the deep drains and in the closed eyesockets and shut throats of the old as they lie asleep; their breath moves red tunnel-lights.

The main roads hold their white-green lights with difficulty. (41)

Like the city, the body has a familiar, external surface dependent upon internal, hidden spaces: the comparison between the city's "deep drains" and the eyes and throats of human bodies suggests this. If *City*'s defamiliarizing processes make parts of the city seem alien, they may be comparable to planner-preservationists' categorizing view of landscape, in which (as Matless puts it) unwelcome elements "were not only seen as loud and impertinent but as alien" (48). This might, in turn, tie together Matless's concepts of "moral landscape" and "moral modernity" to a shared process of judgemental ordering (1998: 47, 51). Yet, it is worth noting that the project of shaping and ordering undertaken in *City* deploys alienness in order to *break down* divisions within an urban whole (rather than erecting them). Furthermore, we have seen that Fisher continually interrogates and undermines any subject positions of authority from which essentialized judgements about the urban space might be made.

In the passage quoted above, the contrast between the public city and the hidden depths of "drains" and "throats" is created partly through a comparison of light and dark: the "lamplit streets", the "red tunnel-lights", and the "white-green lights" of the "main road" are shadowed by a "full darkness", indicative of the kinds of annexed areas which *City* brings into view. In "Starting to Make a Tree", a prose passage that further describes the city at night involves a similar stress on light: "the ceilings drop lower everywhere; each light is partial, and proper only to its place. There is no longer any general light, only particular lights that overlap" (Fisher, 2005: 41). Like the contrast between lit surface and dark depths, this image registers a difficulty in thinking of the city as one unified body. Opposing the "general

light” of the public daytime with the “partial”, “particular lights” of private domestic worlds at night, it views the city as a series of discrete centres, rather than a logically organized whole. Meanwhile, if “ceilings drop lower” they further seal the domestic interior from the public city, and this is precisely what the “watery ceiling” of an earlier section resists (30). These ideas about light contextualize the passage which, in Gregson’s view, “provides a key to the fragmentariness of ‘City’” (1996: 173). It occurs in a section of “The Wind at Night” that has its speaker “[w]alking through the suburb”, looking through the windows of houses, and thus confronting the tension between the “general” city and the “particular lights” of its homes. The speaker then highlights that tension, stating, “I want to believe I live in a single world”, but that “The light keeps separating the world like a table knife” (Fisher, 2005: 43). In this section, we can think of Fisher’s speaker as occupying the position of a privileged observer, using the fixed frame of a window to help reach a particular perception of wholeness.

In a more traditional and lyrical poetic, the framing device of the window is used to control and demarcate an internal space, separate from the city or the landscape. For example, Philip Larkin’s windows strengthen the position of the speaker by creating a “contrast between the almost static, more or less silent, interior and the moving, usually noisy, exterior” (Hassan, 1988: 110). Interestingly, Fisher’s speaker is aligned precisely with that moving exterior, in the public space of the street. Fisher’s viewing of the window from the other direction signals that *City* attempts to depict its urban subject through adopting more all-encompassing, mobile, and non-isolated perspectives, whilst insisting on the connection between interior spaces and broader, public areas. Moreover, it signals that this particular view of the city is not enforced through an organization of the environment into naturalized signification. Whilst a hermetic isolation of speakers in a controlled environment facilitates that process, Fisher insistently occupies a more unstable, public terrain (on the outside of the

window), in which an awareness of diverse, multiple perspectives becomes a working process of the sequence. Accordingly, in the section in question, the viewpoint is deliberately unstable and problematic: an interior space is viewed “as it might be floating in the dark, as if the twinkling point of a distant street-lamp had blown in closer, swelling a softening to a foggy oval” (42-43). In a way, this is much like the earlier passage, “It could be broken like asphalt, and the men and women rolled out like sleeping maggots” (41): both put the interior space in terms of the street and emphasize a defamiliarization of the domestic through a contrast in register. Yet, in the “street-lamp” passage, it becomes clearer how the surreal treatment of the domestic space upsets the possibility of a securely positioned subject: the passage is delivered precisely in such unstable terms, with the view of an interior scene becoming a “distant street-lamp [...] blown in closer”. This strange unsettling of perspective is augmented by references to imagination and dream, which suggest unclear perception or mediation, undercutting any sense of a straightforward, realist depiction. As Gregson notes, there is in Fisher’s poetry “a deliberate ambiguity about whether what is presented is the product of direct observation or of one mental activity or another – remembering, imagining, or dreaming” (1996: 174-75). Furthermore, this section of *City* suggests the voyeuristic element of the speaker’s acts of viewing: “I can be afraid that the egg of light through which I see these bodies might present itself as a keyhole. Yet I can find no sadism in the way I see them now” (Fisher: 2005, 43). In the sense that the speaker “can call up a series of such glimpses”, and “can see order” in the lives of others, the position being written is that of a privileged observer capable of detached contemplation. Yet, the text’s self-awareness of the voyeurism of that position undercuts the speaker’s stability and – combined with the surreal defamiliarization – serves to resist realist naturalization.

Conclusion

As we have seen in this discussion of Fisher's *City*, the modernist techniques of the British Poetry Revival offer a rich set of opportunities for depicting urban space, amongst many other materials. In some ways, Fisher's exploration of Birmingham resembles the authoritative, somewhat conservative outlook of the planner-preservationist movement in English geography. However, the form of the long modernist poem or sequence, and particularly Fisher's techniques of disjuncture and uncertainty, prevent any one view of the city from being the final one. As so many cities do in literary texts, Birmingham appears here not as a finished structure, but as a process in which the workings of the poem participate. As Fisher would later write in the opening lines of "Texts for a Film" (1988),

Birmingham's what I think with.

It's not made for that sort of job,

but it's what they gave me. (Fisher, 2005: 285)

References

Barry, Peter (2000). *Contemporary British Poetry and the City*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.

Fisher, Roy (2005). *City*. Reprinted in *The Long and the Short of It: Poems 1955-2005*. Tarsset: Bloodaxe: 27-44.

Gregson, Ian (1996). *Contemporary Poetry and Postmodernism: Dialogue and Estrangement*. Basingstoke: Macmillan.

Hassan, Salem K. (1988). *Philip Larkin and his Contemporaries: An Air of Authenticity*. Basingstoke: Macmillan.

Matless, David (1998). *Landscape and Englishness*. London: Reaktion Books.

Mottram, Eric (1993). "The British Poetry Revival, 1960-1975". Reprinted in Peter Barry and Robert Hampson (Eds.). *New British Poetries: The Scope of the Possible*. Manchester: Manchester University Press: 15-50.

Pound, Ezra. *The Cantos of Ezra Pound*. London: Faber and Faber.

Sheppard, Robert (2005). *The Poetry of Saying: British Poetry and its Discontents, 1950-2000*. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press.