The Good Postmodernist: an interview with Ellis Sharp

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Ellis Sharp is the author of sixteen novels (including two works of autofiction – *Lamees Najim* (2015a) and the lockdown journal *Twenty-Twenty*), seven collections of short fiction and a collection of reviews and critical essays drawn from a now defunct blog, *The Sharp Side*. His fiction is predominantly anti-realist and experimental in form, playing with established narrative traditions and genres, and using devices favoured by a diverse range of modernist and post-modernist writers.

Sharp grew up in Sussex and Hampshire, the son of a father who served in the British army around the world, including the Middle East. His godfather was a wealthy foxhunter. After leaving grammar school he joined the civil service, working for the Department of Employment.

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SCG (2021) argues that 'the novelist can explore ideas and realities in a vibrant, imaginative and exciting manner', and notes that 'Ellis Sharp pushes the boundaries of what readers have come to expect from literature.' This boundary pushing can be problematic though, with Macdonald Daly suggesting that '[s]ome experimental writers really do seem to write as if there is nothing but language and puritanically purge their work of many available affective and narrative elements.' (Daly 2015) Ellis Sharp, however, is acknowledged as an exception to this. Daly states that he has always considered Sharp's strength as a writer of fiction to derive from his unerring ability to deploy experimental techniques (in some cases inventing them) while never forgetting that fiction is not primarily read as a manual in post-structural linguistics. (Daly 2015)

However, Sharp's fiction remains provocative, not simply because it is 'experimental' but because of its critical and political content. Daly closes his article about 'The Fictions of Ellis Sharp' by declaring that

It is not the kind of writing that is calculated to endear Ellis Sharp to the wider audience that, nonetheless, the future will bring him. Those who believe that postmodernist fiction disavows serious purposes or is politically inept will want to urgently read him. Those whose experience of overtly political fiction is of stylistically despondent realism will find him a revelation. And those who want to laugh with more hope than despair should give Sharp a try. He is the funniest advertisement the politics of postmodernism has had for years and looks set to go on being so. (Daly 1998: 152)

Daly is not the only person to have reviewed and written about Sharp's work. *The Modern Novel* website contains reviews of several of Sharp's books, noting that although *Quin Again* (Sharp 2015b) 'is a strange novel/collection of stories' it is also 'a thoroughly original piece of work and one that shows the chaos, the insanity and the grimness of life'. The reviewer concludes by suggesting that 'Sharp is not going to make it easy for his readers but he is going to give us another excellent book to read and think about.' (unknown author n.d. b)

This idea of difficulty, which is at odds with my own experience of reading Sharp's books, was also raised on the same site in a (presumably) earlier review of *Unbelievable Things* (Sharp 2000) with the suggestion that 'Post-modernist novels, you either love them or hate them. I can see why some readers might find this novel difficult.' (unknown author n.d. a) He then counters this with their own take on the book:

Sharp not only addresses serious issues, not only subverts the novel form and makes us think very clearly about what it is and what it means and why it might be no longer relevant to the contemporary world and not only keeps us both laughing and wondering throughout, he tells a good story or, rather, several stories.' (unknown author n.d. a)

Sharp's delight in language as a medium for playful experiment, as well as his commitment to new ways to explore ideas and narratives, along with a critical consideration of his own and other work has kept me engaged with his wide-ranging and formally innovative books. I believe his work deserves more attention and am glad to be able to publish this interview with the author.

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 (XX): Nicholas Lezard (2012) suggests that in your work you can 'smuggle in both avant-gardism and political awareness to great, and sometimes greatly comic effect', whilst in an interview in *The Short Review* you suggest that your 'readers will likely be people who enjoy satire and have an interest in left politics, avant-garde literature and movies'. (Rosko 2015) That's quite a heady combination isn't it?

Elliot Sharp (ES): It might be. Although I’d have thought there was a large swathe of the population which regularly watches movies, is politically on the left and enjoys satire – or at least comedy. The missing link is avant-garde literature. British readers still prefer realist fiction. Most of the new novels you see on display in shops like Waterstones are deeply conventional in form and language. The Victorian novel and storytelling – a twisty plot, suspense, drama – and rounded characters reign supreme. I’m always surprised that no one ever talks about the baleful influence of literary agents in all this. Publishers gave up on their slush piles decades ago and handed the job over to agencies. They operate as the gatekeepers of literary culture. And of course all they are really looking for is the next bestseller. I’ve met several literary agents over the years. They have zero interest in serious, difficult literature. They are often surprisingly ignorant of classic fiction. Their priorities are strictly and exclusively commercial. They want a bestseller. But of course there’s a lot of churn. The magic formula is hard to find. And there’s a huge amount of imitation. Bestsellers shape the formula of the moment. And nowadays of course we have the creative writing industry in higher education, with increasing involvement of talent-spotting agents. Some agencies like Curtis Brown even run their own how-to-write-a-novel courses.

And of course commercially approved writers need to have a USP (unique selling proposition) – something ethnic or sexually distinctive, perhaps – and be preferably photogenic, as well as fluent and confident. The successful published author is expected to do book signings, interviews, appear in magazine profiles, maybe appear on TV, as well as public readings and answer questions at literary festivals. In the end it becomes all about product, brand and marketing. It’s a long, long way from literature as an engagement with form and a struggle to express a new perception of the existing world. But no one wants to say so, do they? I can’t remember seeing anything anywhere about the poisonous influence of literary agencies. That’s because these days writers dream of commercial success. But of course the writing that survives is usually written against the grain of the commercial and the fashionable. It’s instructive to compare the writing careers of contemporaries like Henry James, Marie Corelli and Joseph Conrad. Corelli was the success, with the sales and the massive readership. Today few have even heard of her and nobody reads her. But agents and publishers today are looking for the modern Corellis, not the Conrads or the Jameses.

XX: Can you talk about your use of intertextuality? Where does alluding to another text (be that film or novel or an actual event or person) become a lazy kind of shorthand rather than something which adds to your text? I'm thinking of *Alice in Wonderland* (Carroll 1865) and Nic Roeg's *Don't Look Now* (1973) in relation to *Alice In Venice* (Sharp 2022a), especially because I missed the Alice reference when I reviewed it. (XXX 2023)

# ES: As I answer your questions I’m listening to the recent Lana Del Rey album, *Did You Know That There's a Tunnel Under Ocean Blvd* (2023). On it she references Ella Fitzgerald, the Beatles, the Red Hot Chilli Peppers, the folksong ‘Froggie Came-a Courtin’, John Denver and ‘Rocky Mountain High’ (1972), the Eagles and ‘Hotel California’ (1976), Harry Nilsson and ‘Don’t Forget Me’ (1974), the films *Paris, Texas* (Wenders 1984) and *Carlito’s Way* (De Palma 1993), and Angelina Jolie, in addition to her own 2019 song ‘Venice Bitch’. Is that lazy shorthand or does it add to the texture of the album? Perhaps it depends on the listener. It works for me. It seems to me she’s signalling her awareness of what’s gone before and choosing to incorporate it into her effects/meanings. For example, I was previously unaware of the Nilsson song she cites. Now it forms part of my appreciation of the Del Rey album. It’s there as an echo. The Nilsson citation supplies extra resonance/depth.

Regarding *Alice in Venice* (Sharp 2022a), the Lewis Carroll echo isn’t much more than that – a faint, teasing indicator that what follows isn’t going to be realism. It doesn’t matter at all if the reader doesn’t spot the allusion. But it seems valid as an analogy in so far as Venice, as a city, is both a wonderland and a warren. But even that echo is a kind of echo in so far as Robert Coover – a writer who inspired me at the start of my writing career – wrote a novel called *Pinocchio in Venice* (1991).

In one sense *Alice in Venice* (Sharp 2022a) is unique in my oeuvre in that it rests upon and requires an interest in another creative work, in this case Roeg’s *Don’t Look Now* (1973). I reached a point when I wanted to write a Venice novel and I was aware that novels set in Venice are practically a genre in themselves. I was acutely aware of the weight of that tradition. Now one way of writing a Venice novel is to produce a narrative full of elegant evocations of the city’s unique atmosphere and then set against its background a drama involving a number of rounded characters, with a plot and a resolution. To do this conventionally involves ignoring all the other novels and stories which have already done this. As a good postmodernist I wanted to do something different.

I’ve only been to Venice once and I very much doubt if I will ever go again. When I went I had no intention of writing a Venice novel. I only went there to visit the locations used in Nicolas Roeg’s film. For me it’s one of the greatest movies ever made. In Venice I had zero interest in visiting St Mark’s, or visiting art galleries or churches. As I like staring at writers’ homes and graves I checked out where Ezra Pound lived and his grave, although I wasn’t at the time very interested in Pound. His work has never affected me the way T.S. Eliot’s work has. I took a couple of hundred photos of that visit, which occurred during a very misty November. It was only several years later that it occurred to me that I could base a novella with embedded photographs on that experience. I decided to focus on the Roeg tour. I could have written an alternative narrative – autofiction – based on that experience. I wasn’t alone and one or two of the photographs I used surreptitiously show that. But I decided against autofiction, as I wanted something richer, with other dimensions than the purely personal. I preferred to focus on a fictional character and then overlay it with sampled dialogue. So I suppose in that sense this use of intertextuality was a distancing device – an attempt at a different kind of fictionality.

XX: A very literal form of intertextuality is collage or mash-up, which incorporates other texts. Daly suggests that your work 'could almost be said to be hypertext in its inclusion of conventionally divergent discourses, and the transilience with which it switches between them.' (Daly 1998: 142-143) and in several different places lists some of your source material. Although he uses the term 'transformative appropriation' (Daly 1998: 147) in relation to your work, he is also of the opinion that your stories 'store up cultural references, as desperately as guests at a dinner party rein in their flatulence.' (Daly 1998: 143) Can you talk about how you use collage and cutup in your work, and what it brings to it?

ES: Daly’s analysis was published 25 years ago and refers to my earliest writing. My later work, I think, is rather different. My first novel, *The Dump* (Sharp 1998), is more or less all collage – sentences wrenched from a diverse range of sources, often newspapers and magazines. News reports. Adverts. But also fiction and non-fiction books. The title has two meanings. The landscape of the book is a rubbish tip, so it has a literal meaning. But the narrative is also a dumping ground of already existing text, mashed up. What holds it all together is the voice of the narrator, wandering through trash. That voice is peevish and satirical. I suppose this assemblage of material it could be a kind of metaphor for writing. Everything has already been written: novelists recycle old forms and themes.

The existing novel tradition is vast and every novelist is working in some kind of tradition, whether they are conscious of it or not. My texts, of course, foreground the knowledge of what has gone before. But *The Dump* (1998) was very much a one-off. After it I became interested in a different kind of collage – switching identities. Karl Marx and the obsessive chronicler of paranormal events, Charles Fort, for example, in the story ‘Tinctures, Stains, Relics’ in *The Aleppo Button* (1991: 84-97). The juxtaposition of revolutionary socialism and the paranormal in a unified theory. Surreal comedy. And in ‘One Morning Twenty-Nine Carp were Caught’ in *To Wanstonia* (1996: 62-70) I switch the identities of Lenin and Chekhov and then retell their stories. Another comic text. But fast forward to *Alice in Venice* (Sharp 2022a) and there’s a different kind of collage/cut up technique at work. A variety of texts are sampled, quite surreptitiously, to create a story which is constantly shifting and dying out, then recovering. The mists of Venice are mirrored by the insubstantiality of the plot.

XX: I'm very interested in some of the textual devices you use in *Walthamstow Central* (Sharp 2007). For instance, when time starts slipping you use a kind of stutter in the language of your sentences, with words repeating; and, of course, the book is out of order chronologically or sequentially, which I think *Alice In Venice* (Sharp 2022a) also is. How do you decide upon using these kinds of effects?

ES: By instinct, I suppose. I don’t think about these things in advance. At a local level – that of the sentence – there are moments when it seems right to stretch or somehow break up what’s happening. That might be through the repetition of individual words, or phrases. It might be snapping off the narrative flow mid-sentence and then leaving either a void, or picking it up again in the next sentence. Stuttering is a good way of putting it. But there’s also *vibration*. This kind of device partly originates in my distaste for the kind of novel you see raved about in the review pages of the corporate media. Irrespective of the subject matter, when you examine the prose it’s all highly processed, like junk food. Stuttering resists smooth flow. It calls attention to itself. It expresses a struggle to articulate a meaning.

XX: Are your fictional worlds hyper-real, fantastical or incoherent ones?

ES: I hope never incoherent. My earlier writings are fantastical and surreal. Lately I’m more interested in the hyper-real – or at least the not-straightforwardly-real. Although of course realism is in its own way hyper-real in so far as it is essentially bogus. No conversation was ever like the dialogue in a novel.

XX: Your characters are often very self-aware of themselves as characters. In *Walthamstow Central* (Sharp 2007) they start demanding alternative plots and relationships. Why do you constantly want to remind readers that they are reading fiction? Is it fair to ask readers to so much work when they read your books? John Herdman, reviewing *Unbelievable Things* (Sharp 2000) suggests that your book's 'freedom from the conventions of linear, naturalistic narration gives a wide-ranging and erudite mind the scope to do all kinds of unexpected things, which delight the sympathetic reader.' (Herdman n.d.) What about the unsympathetic ones?

ES: Every writer inevitably has unsympathetic readers. Most writers who matter have a strength and a weakness. Bad critics seize on the weakness. Nabokov ruined Dostoevsky for me for years by noting his vagueness in describing the interior of rooms or the clothes that his characters wear. He convicted him of inattention. But although Nabokov’s fiction attends to these things in the end it’s the older Russian whose writing seems more important. Someone who likes Ian McEwan’s fiction plainly isn’t going to like the work of Ellis Sharp. I don’t worry about that. I don’t write with an imaginary reader in mind.

As for stressing the fictionality of fiction… That’s simply part of engaging with the tired conventions of modern narrative. Corporate fiction is smooth, fluent, flowing towards a conclusion designed to satisfy the reader. I prefer to disrupt, reflect, mock, enquire about alternatives. It’s the same with cinema. Linear movies can be very entertaining but I feel it’s directors like Nicolas Roeg who get closer to the complexities of human experience, by fracturing narrative. Godard, too, of course. But that kind of innovation is much harder for a director, who is subject to all kinds of constraints, not least financial ones. Whereas writers really do have the freedom to write what they want.

XX: I find your books very playful. Part of that is because of the way you are able to get away with the use of odd, sometimes even irrelevant, terms, often derived from specialist language, that you somehow manage to slip past the reader, almost as they realise you are basically appropriating terms and winging it. I mean, thank goodness you avoid info-dumps and explanations, but isn't it taking a huge authorial risk? Readers often reject books which don't persuade or simply get things wrong.

ES: Again, I don’t worry about the kind of reader who recoils from playful content. Many readers want escapism. They don’t want to have to think. They have no shortage of mainstream novelists to supply the candy that nourishes them.

XX: Can I ask you why you think experimental novels often find it necessary to have graphic sex scenes in? Or, if you don't want to generalise, why do some of your books include them? I'm not convinced they move the story or narrative (as such) along or give us that much information about a character.

ES: I’m startled by your question, as I can’t think offhand what you’re referring to. Much of my fiction has no sex in at all. Of course, the first and greatest experimental novel, *Tristram Shandy* (Sterne 1759-1767)*,* contains lots of innuendo and punning about sex. Sex is one of its central themes – cock and bull in lots of ways. A contemporary writer can obviously take matters much further than Sterne did. Sometimes it’s unavoidable in terms of the subject matter. *Full English* (Sharp 2022b) is a Bildungsroman, so sex is central. And *What Vronsky Did Next* (Sharp 2021b)is a sex, drugs and rock’n’roll novel – the adventures of a young man in his twenties. On the other hand in *The Riddle* (Sharp 2022c) sex is endlessly deferred and never takes place at all, even though one of the central female characters is absolutely desperate for it. It depends on the book. *Alice in Venice* (Sharp 2022a) has no sex scenes at all, whereas I do have a relatively graphic scene in one of my later books, *Pig Tale* (Sharp 2023). But this is a satire and so the sex is represented comically. And it addresses an outlandish and taboo area of sexual activity – bestiality – shunned by the realist novel. So perhaps it’s just about pushing boundaries and avoiding standard narrative conventions and values.

XX: Where do you place your work, with reference to other authors and genres? Rosko (2015) surprisingly – to me – includes Swift, Gogol and Proust in the title of his blog entry, along with Joyce, and in the same interview you mention John Updike's stories and praise Patricia Highsmith. In your emails to me you mention David Lynch alongside Nic Roeg, as well as Tom McCarthy and Steven Hall (Sharp 2023c), note that Alain Robbe-Grillet 'is probably the major influence over' *Alice in Venice* and confess to 'an early enthusiasm for William Burroughs, before adding that 'Conrad and Beckett lurk there somewhere...'. (Sharp 2023a) Meanwhile, Stephen Mitchelmore (2015), suggests that your novel *Lamees Najim* (Sharp 2015a) 'appears to a response to the public success of Karl Ove Knausgaard'. That's quite a mixture!

ES: I don’t think about situating my work in relation to any particular writer. If I feel an affiliation it’s with any writer who is outside the mainstream – Anna Kavan, Elizabeth Smart, novelists like that. The oddballs and the marginalised. That doesn’t mean I’m directly influenced by their prose or their subject matter. Ann Quin interests me more than most. But I also draw nourishment from a handful of much older writers. Joseph Conrad. Malcolm Lowry. And Kafka never loses his freshness. Others I have read but interest me far less: Joyce, Proust. As for Karl Ove Knausgaard – I’ve read articles about his writing but never in fact read any of his books.

If I have any kind of critical reputation after I’m long dead I’d hope it would be as an interesting minor oddball – a maverick who wrote against the dominant strain in British fiction of the past 30 years.

XX: If we move away from individual authors and think about how you write, or how others perceive your writing, the Jungle Key website (unknown author, 2014) describes you as 'the author of ten books of absurdist metafiction', Mitchelmore (2015) uses the term 'selective randomness', and in response to an article of mine I sent you (XXXX, 2017) you say 'the words that jump out at me from your piece are polyglossolalia, playfulness and ekphrastic'. (Sharp 2023a) Can you unpick some of that terminology in relation to your work? What Daly calls 'Sharp's idiosyncratic randomizing techniques.' (Daly 1998: 141)

ES: I think it would depend on the text. *The Dump* (Sharp 1998) is very different to *The Riddle* (Sharp 2022c). What I do try to do is make the next novel very different to the one that preceded it. I’m interested in the way Ann Quin did that. I lurch from wildly experimental texts (‘An Interview with Nietzsche’s Moustache’ (Daly & Sharp 1995: 67-97) and *Unbelievable Things* (Sharp 2000)) to relatively conventional ones (*The Orwell Girl* (Sharp 2020)). Some, like *Walthamstow Central* (Sharp 2007), seem to me to lie between the two extremes.

XX: Mark Fisher (2015) suggests that 'the techniques that Sharp employs in [his] stories – jump-cuts between ontological spaces, words becoming worlds, facts bleeding into fictions – are familiar enough from postmodernist fiction', but then adds '[w]hat makes Sharp unique is his application of these to British politics.' It's not just British politics though, is it, you have serious concerns about the State of Israel. Reviewing your book *Intolerable Tongues* (Sharp 2011), Lezard subtitled his piece 'an alternative history of the Palestinian conflict', and notes that '[t]his is not a book for those who are made uncomfortable by blasphemy against either religious or national figures of belief'. (Lezard 2012) I think I am right in saying, however that it was a quote from the book itself – 'I have always found it a bit rum that Moses parcelled out land that already belonged to others' (Sharp 2011: 42) that resulted in some internet furore from Zionist supporters of Israel, who chose to ignore the fact that the words are spoken by McCollum, a character, and not by you or Lezard. I know you are passionate about Palestinian politics and the ethics of history – in fact you rebuked me in an email (2023a) that I had missed the point of several texts in *Sharply Critical* where you are discussing the way Ian McEwan 'dances away from troublesome [political] specifics' (Sharp 2017: 99) and that your focus elsewhere 'is on Vonnegut's use of a dodgy book by the very dodgy David Irving and the moral and historical questions it raised.' (Sharp 2023a) Can you summarise why certain issues engage you and how fiction and critical writing might change things rather than reinforce lies, distortion, disinformation and conspiracies?

ES: The first piece of fiction I wrote, published by Malice Aforethought Press as a chapbook, was *General Jaruzelski’s Sunglasses* (Sharp 1988) – a satirical story about the now forgotten Polish dictator in the dying days of the Soviet Union, with embedded illustrations. So I began as a writer by producing political satire. *The Dump* (Sharp 1998) was a blistering satire on Margaret Thatcher’s Britain, written from the perspective of an angry, impoverished and alienated outsider. My first collection, *The Aleppo Button* (Sharp 1991), included satires on Margaret Thatcher and President Ronald Reagan. Later volumes of stories satirised the Labour leader John Smith and then Tony Blair. But I grew tired of writing that kind of satire. It dates very quickly. Today I’m not interested in satirising Trump or Biden or Sunak or Starmer or Putin. As targets they are too easy. Political satire is inevitably ephemeral.

My first collection included a story about a time-travelling Princess Diana on a royal tour of Hitler’s Germany. It mocked the Diana cult (I believe only J.G. Ballard and myself ever dared to mock her in fiction during her lifetime) but it was also about Jews as victims. At that time (1991) I never thought much about Israel. Somehow it was just *there* but events in the Middle East always seemed rather remote. And of course in those days there was no internet and no social media. The corporate media filtered ‘news’. Back then I got my news from the BBC and *The Guardian* and *Independent*. The internet has destroyed the hegemony of corporate information, which of course is why the major social media sites now furtively censor certain dissenting voices, and why politicians and self-appointed ‘anti-hate’ organisations are keen to shut down certain social media sites.

As for Israel. It wasn’t until 2002 and the so-called Battle of Jenin that my consciousness was engaged and galvanised. What did it for me was the single image of a Palestinian man in a wheelchair stranded alone in a devastated wasteland of dwellings pulverised by the Israeli army. I wanted to know what lay behind this photograph. I remember at the time Louis de Bernières remarked that the devastation looked like something the Nazis had done. Even though de Bernières is not remotely a political writer there was an explosion of outrage from defenders of Israel in Britain.

I duly read up on the subject, starting with Anton La Guardia’s book *Holy Land, Unholy War* (2001). He was a *Daily Telegraph* journalist. It was an eye-opening book. I learned for the first time about the connections between the Nazis and the Zionist movement. Both are blood and soil ideologies.

When I wrote about the subject nine years later in *Intolerable Tongues* (Sharp 2011) I was much better informed. I decided to write about Palestine before it was obliterated by European colonists. I chose the period 1936-39, when the British army was engaged in massive violence against the Palestinian people in order to clear the way for a European settler state. It’s an episode blanked from modern British history.

XX: B.S. Johnson said that ‘telling stories is telling lies’ (Johnson 1964: 167), which sits comfortably within the postmodern world we are suspicious of the idea of Truth and more inclined towards the possibilities of multiple versions of things, indeed truths plural. Can fiction help us understand this? Or are you more interested in how language works than any content or message?

ES: Again, it depends on the text. *Intolerable Tongues* (Sharp 2011) is about a reality rooted in history which is the opposite of the perception conveyed by the narrator. Whereas *Alice in Venice* (2022a) embraces multiplicity and jostling alternative realities. But *Alice in Venice* is not a political novel. It is not a condition-of-Venetian-society novel. It blanks the reality of climate catastrophe, which is very bad news for Venice. I am not a relativist in the sense that although historical narrative is determined by the ideology and politics of the historian, historical interpretations are not equal. Some are more valid and persuasive than others. The same applies to fiction. Henry James’s fiction is cosmopolitan in its technique but provincial and insular in its politics. But this really only shows when he is dealing with social issues. I’m interested in form and how to move on from the last novel I’ve produced. The subject matter determines the language used and the narrative techniques employed. But this is not something necessarily thought out in advance. Writing, for me, is a visceral, experimental matter. Too much self-consciousness is very bad for a writer, I believe. A writer with a highly developed awareness of theory is in danger of producing something bloodless and mechanical. I’m afraid Christine Brooke-Rose strikes me as that kind of writer, although I’m aware she has an academic fan base.

XX: We've previously discussed in emails the post-war cluster of writers that includes B.S. Johnson, Alan Burns, Eva Figes and Ann Quin. One of your books, *Quin Again and other stories* (Sharp 2015b), acknowledges and showcases her influence and you state that you 'have a very high regard for Quin, who seems to me by far the most interesting British "experimental" writer since Laurence Sterne – and also by far the most interesting of the 1960s experimentalists.' (Sharp 2023a) I share your interest in that loose group of authors, yet their work seems innovative in the quietest and most gentle ways compared to other authors from the same time. If you think about early Burroughs cut-ups (e.g. Burroughs 1965, 1969) in relation to Alan Burns' cut-up novels (1965, 1969), there are few points of similarity. One is drug-fuelled and chaotic, the other much more careful and organized. I like Burns' work a lot but why do you think this group adopted the approaches they did?

ES: There is something about English fiction that often seems cramped and timid. Whether that is because of the personalities of the authors or the pressures of commercial publishing is an open question. One of the greatest twentieth century novels produced by a British writer is Malcolm Lowry's *Under the Volcano* (1947). But that kind of modernist text required a journey out of England, literally, emotionally and intellectually. Burroughs likewise went far from his origins to create a work like *Naked Lunch* (1959). I think some kind of extreme alienation is probably required to produce interesting avant-garde work. That might be at the level of personality and involve drugs, drink or sex. It might be rooted in politics or religion. But it also requires knowledge of mind-expanding literature. It’s always fairly random how this occurs. Ann Quin seemed to travel this route. She was perhaps more of an outsider than her associates. But we still don’t have a biography, so it’s still a little obscure what her key influences were.

XX: I guess I must also ask why you think mainstream publishers continues to produce books that offer a diluted and mainstream parody of experimental writing? We get praise heaped on the likes of Ian McEwan's clunky *Atonement* (2001) whilst actual experiment and reinvention is either online or published by transitory and hard-to-find small presses. You suggest that this kind of work 'gets shunned by the corporate media' and that 'social media is full of cliques and mutual praise.' (Sharp 2023b) Is that you sulking about a lack of recognition or sales, or is it a genuine problem? Isn't cultural worth better than financial value? Why has the 'realist novel', itself an authorial and cultural invention, lasted and dominated popular fiction for so long?

ES: Publishing has changed enormously over the past decades. A figure like Tom Maschler at Jonathan Cape had enormous freedom to choose who the company should publish. Now the industry has retreated behind the gatekeepers of literary agencies, who select what should be submitted. It seems to have become like Hollywood, where accountants wield enormous power. Agencies exist to find the next bestseller and publishers exist to make a profit. Nobody wants to find the next James Joyce. They want to find the next Lee Child. All the old independent publishers have gone, mostly swallowed up by the corporate houses. Old-fashioned publishing permitted the occasional weird work to slip through. William Styron describes this process at the start of *Sophie’s Choice* (1979). But at the other end of the spectrum there are scores of little presses publishing scores of novels. But the praise heaped on safe, conservative fiction by the corporate media is matched by social media, where everybody’s new novel is saturated in the glitter of extravagant praise. It’s very hard to know what really is good and what is simply favours being returned.

XX: Whilst I share your aversion to social media, I do use the internet and am aware of different ways to publish writing, as I am sure you are. Do you remain committed to the book as codex and artefact? And to your anonymity, something you seem to share with your publishers?

ES: I have no objection to the internet or social media. The internet in its own way is as revolutionary as the invention of the printing press. It permits the flow of knowledge and information hitherto excluded. The internet is a huge threat to established orders, which is why overtly authoritarian societies seek to control or repress it, and why in 'liberal democracies' the big tech companies block certain sites and accounts. The BBC and the corporate media are understandably worried about the challenge to their hegemony. This is why they are so keen to spare us what they blandly call 'disinformation'. No one disinforms quite like BBC News.

As for publishing. I don’t myself enjoy reading novels on a screen. I don’t own a Kindle. I much prefer books in their physical form. Paperbacks are cheap and easily replaced if you lose them or spill coffee. Books also last hundreds of years. I distrust information stored on machines, because sooner or later the machine will let you down. They either malfunction or die.

I don’t regard my publishers are anonymous. They are fringe publishers but they have a tangible existence, with addresses and telephone numbers. Jetstone has a website, Zoilus Press has a Twitter account.

As for my anonymity. I have a low profile because I have a tiny readership. No one is interested in me. That suits me fine. I have no wish to take to social media and post descriptions of my daily life and opinions.

I used to blog but it was a great timewaster. It was fun but it took me away from writing fiction. I could develop a platform on social media and I might obtain an audience but I’d prefer to dedicate myself to writing.

Too much of what passes as literary comment in the media is simply lifestyle gossip. I am not a very interesting person, biographically. My life is very stable and placid. I live a bourgeois lifestyle. I haven’t flown anywhere for eight years. But I do drive a car. My carbon footprint though massive by the standards of an impoverished African is probably relatively modest by English bourgeois standards.

XX: Can you tell me anything about what you are currently working on or got planned for the future?

ES: I have a number of abandoned projects I might return to. The latest one was about a woman on an island. But now I’ve been diverted by an autofictional tale of visits to a number of English historical and literary sites. It’s currently intended to be a meditative book about connections between place and writing. But it might turn into something different during the writing.

XX: Thank you for your time and interest in answering these questions.

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