The Salt Companion to Lee Harwood

Robert Sheppard is Professor of Poetry and Poetics at Edge Hill University. He has published widely on contemporary British poetry, including on Lee Harwood in both his *Far Language* (Stride 1999) and *The Poetry of Saying: British Poetry and Its Discontents* (Liverpool University Press, 2005). *Iain Sinclair* is published by Northcote House (2007). He has published a number of volumes of poetry including *Hymns to the God in which my Typewriter Believes* (Stride, 2006), and *Complete Twentieth Century Blues* (Salt, forthcoming).

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Edited by

Robert Sheppard

Cambridge

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Robert Sheppard is Professor of Poetry and Poetics at Edge Hill University. He has published widely on contemporary British poetry, including on Lee Harwood in both his *Far Language* (Stride 1999) and *The Poetry of Saying: British Poetry and Its Discontents* (Liverpool University Press, 2005). *Iain Sinclair* is published by Northcote House (2007). He has published a number of volumes of poetry including *Hymns to the God in which my Typewriter Believes* (Stride, 2006), and *Complete Twentieth Century Blues* (Salt, forthcoming).

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Introduction

Robert Sheppard

This introduction originally began as an account of its subject's life and works, as is customary, but this grew beyond its own wordage, swallowed the allotted span of my own proposed contribution, and stands now as a separate chapter, 'It's a Long Road'. It serves the function of outlining the career of Lee Harwood, but also provides snapshot accounts of some of his works, particularly recent ones, or those not treated by other contributors. The publication of *Collected Poems* in 2004 served as the occasion for this re-assessment, and, by its act of consolidation, has doubtless influenced many of the contributors here.

It has certainly had an effect on Harwood himself. His account of the creative paralysis caused by the overwhelming sense of the bulk of the work is one of the surprises of the interview in the pages that immediately follow this introduction. Although prompted by my questions and my concerns, the interview allows Harwood to speak to his own past statements of poetics in his own voice, as it were, before his commentators begin their work. He elaborates on his poetics, at times assertively, but at other times hesitantly, as when the impossibility of defining what the 'countryside' means to him is of such a magnitude that he literally does not know where to begin, unlike two of our contributors later in this volume who take this issue as axiomatic to a reading of his work.

The interview recovers a little of Harwood's astonishment at his early literary discoveries, and the debt to Dada and Surrealism and the effect of the transatlantic passage to literary New York (and North America generally) are taken up by the next four contributions. (My ordering of

the pieces reflects a compromise between chronological and thematic arrangements.)

In a wide-ranging essay, 'Lee Harwood's Guaranteed Fine Weather Suitcase', Geoff Ward takes a longer view than my chapter does and puts Harwood in a larger context than that of his own development. This involves a comparison of the two generations of English Surrealism. The first was supposedly ended by the Second World War but it continued (underground) to fructify the second, whether that was manifest in the lyrical work of John Lennon or in the 'White Room' poems of Lee Harwood himself. The shadow of militarism hung over both men; they also inhabited a world dedicated to the recovery of childhood innocence even as it embraced a druggy paranoia. Ward reminds us of the suitability of Harwood's surprising walk-on part in the novelisation of the 1960s cult classic *The Prisoner*. Ward constructs a longer and local view of English (not British) surrealism that preserves something of the radical power of English Romanticism, and he compares an elegy by the first generation Surrealist David Gascoyne with Harwood's own elegy for his friend Paul Evans, which he judges an effective release from nostalgia, an escape from the seductions of the surreal.

Both Gascoyne and Harwood have translated the work of the French poet Tristan Tzara, but Harwood was not aware of his predecessor when he first discovered this work in the early 1960s, partly due to the narrowing of culture in Britain under the shadow of that war, as Ward suggests, and partly due to the ascendant poetic orthodoxy of the early 1960s, the Movement, as Will Rowe points out in his contribution. Rowe's 'Harwood Tzara' traces Harwood's fascination with what was not available in that native tradition: an inheritance from European modernism (that Harwood theorises, as late as 1981, as a politicised energy that is capable of continual renewal in the present). Tzara's inclusion of the arbitrary in his poetry was important: the poet becomes a voice, experience becomes syntax and parataxis, and language is foregrounded, while montage is the favoured method of assemblage. Paramount is the effect this will have upon an individual reader.

What is surprising and original in Rowe's piece is the way in which his examination of Tzara's practice (through Harwood's translations) sheds light on an area of Harwood's own work not often discussed, that is, its prosody, or rather Harwood's use of non-prosodic speech elements as rhythmic entities, particularly in the interplay of visual lines and, often incomplete, verbal clusters, which involves a reader *in* the prosodic adventure. Harwood's translations—and this essay is the first

detailed assessment of them—are praised by Rowe for recognising that, for Tzara, the poem's voice and the materials of the world speak with a consonant rhythm. How this influence plays out in Harwood's own work is not straightforward, as Rowe shows. The early poems often attempt to mime the surface of Tzara's work but it is not until Harwood reaches maturity with *The White Room* that surreal juxtaposition is replaced by fragmented narrative, hinting towards the 'New York' influence that is the subject of the following essay.

Despite the title, in '*The White Room* in the New York Schoolhouse', Tony Lopez concentrates upon the 1966 pamphlet *The Man With Blue Eyes*, which indeed—with corrections—became part of *The White Room* (and is, of course, present in the *Collected Poems*, with some elisions and exclusions). This volume was published in New York and Lopez sees the book as Harwood's entrée into the vibrant scene of the New York Poets, constellated around Frank O'Hara and John Ashbery. Lopez's essay is the only one in this volume to have been previously published but it has an important presence in Harwood studies since it is the first to speak of aspects of Harwood's private life as they are made manifest in the work, thus inaugurating an openness about sexuality and persons referred to *in* the work that is taken up as a permission by several other contributors. The pamphlet, which opens with one of Harwood's finest poems, 'As Your Eyes are Blue', narrates a love affair between Harwood and the poet John Ashbery in a style sometimes still owing to Tzara's surrealism, but also owing to Ashbery's own practice, which Lopez proves, somewhat unconventionally, but no less convincingly for that, in a piece of creative-criticism, a collage of the two poets' work. More conventionally, he reads a distinct *European* longing in the work, one which reaches back to the predictable Tzara, but also to the presence of T.S. Eliot in the work. Once Harwood was freed from the 'schoolhouse' of New York, Lopez says, he took lessons from other Americans, often mediating that lesson through the tutelage of the chief poet-critic of the British Poetry Revival, Eric Mottram.

Although Nick Selby does not mention Mottram (or other British open field poets of the 1970s), in his 'Transatlantic Poetics in *H.M.S. Little Fox* and *Boston–Brighton*', he traces the influence of Charles Olson. He does not read Harwood as a slavish member of the Black Mountain school, and indeed sees Harwood's enduring fascination with America in more general cultural terms. Harwood's poetry of the 1970s often concerns itself with transatlantic exchange of various kinds, and the politics that results. Structurally this is best examined in the bi-partite

book *Boston–Brighton*, whose structure is visible in the very hyphenation of its title. Characters are lost in an estrangement with which they are also delighted, particularly in the love poems. Concepts both of 'home' and 'polis' are disrupted by an openness and mutability of perception and poetics. Ironically, when it borrows most from Olson, in writings about the English South Coast, Harwood's work is burdened with a meditative hesitancy which is entirely alien to Olson's voice. Harwood's own metaphor of 'triangulation' is used by Selby to read troubling themes of pastoral and sexual possession (and invasion) and dynamic heterosexual relationship in Harwood's longest work, the open field notebook *The Long Black Veil*.

Alice Entwistle also focuses upon *The Long Black Veil* in her ' "*and . . . /* not *or*": Gender and Relationship', whose title is partly a quotation from a passage in that poem that she takes as central to the themes she also identifies in her title. Harwood amends Jung's essay on marriage, and argues that gendered relationships should be ideally conducted between equals who operate both as the 'container' and the 'contained' (against Jung who argues for the divisive 'or' in gender roles). *The Long Black Veil* foregrounds sexual encounter as creative mutuality, with the female figure divested of her familiar role as Muse. The male lover self-effacingly loses egoic substantiality in the process of love-making; the pervasive sense of 'process' that others have seen as evidence of Olson's influence, in Entwistle's subtle readings, becomes a way of uniting this gender politics and the intertextual gestures of the poem, particularly the use of Egyptian mythology, which acknowledges female creative power. That this is no abstraction, in Entwistle's view, is emphasised in her account of poems dedicated to particular named women artist-figures, both lovers and friends. What she uncovers, across many poems addressed to different women, is a similar discourse in which the relationship between speaker and subject is figured as that of container *and* contained; the women are *realised* as creative partners. Poems addressed to fellow poets, like Anne Stevenson, speak of a modest approval of their poetics of exactitude. Crossing over as it does into autobiography—much of the detail comes from an unpublished and private interview very different to the public one published in this volume, although recorded the following lunch-time—the essay opens with an extended reading of 'African Violets', Harwood's elegy to his grandmother Pansy, which identifies her as the primary source of Harwood's identification of certain strong women as beacons of creativity and strength.

Mari Hughes-Edwards, on the other hand, finds the sexual politics of Harwood's work vexing. Many readers must have noticed what she calls the 'serial monogamy' of the texts: a procession of lovers is addressed (sometimes in quite similar terms), and Hughes-Edwards' quest is to itemise the commonalities and examine the ways in which each sexual encounter is predicated on previous encounters and presages its own demise. While theorising the bisexuality of the poetry, of more importance to her are aspects such as the fragmentary representations of the desired body, as well as the all-consuming, world-devouring nature of sexual obsession. Like Entwistle, she is interested in loss and elegy, although the former is figured as related to the inevitable grief of serial monogamy, while elegy is a mode largely reserved for commemorating friendship. While lust and love are fragile, grief provides poetic opportunity for a more resilient devotion.

In 'The Prose Narratives: "Dream Quilt" and the Short, Short Story,' Jacqueline Phillips outlines what, at first, seems an absurd notion, that Harwood is a writer, not just of prose pieces and poems with narrative elements, but of *actual* short stories, as it were. Beginning with an excursion into the recent development of the 'short, short story' and an account of theories of compression, omission, and strategies of minimum exposition in the poetics of major practitioners, Phillips turns to the role of the implicit in the short story form more generally, drawn from the work of Marcella Bertuccelli. She then examines Harwood's most consistent work of short narratives (to use V.S. Pritchett's term): *Dream Quilt: 30 Assorted Stories*. In this work Phillips taxonomises a variety of narrative modes: distanced, impersonal, fantastic, anti-realist, fable-like, fragmented and open ended; many of them display a freedom from temporal and spatial constraints that she identifies as a constituent of the short, short story (which is, of course, a term coined and popularised *since* Harwood wrote his pieces, which were published in 1985). Although Harwood expresses an admiration for many prose writers, from Carlos Fuentes to Philip Roth, the short fictions of Borges were an early and enduring interest and—as Phillips proves—influence. She finds the most pronounced Borgesian blurring of fact and fiction and a borrowing of essay-style in a prose piece by Harwood outside of *Dream Quilt*, but in that book there is a direct reference to Borges, in a story that demonstrates many of Bertuccelli's subsidiary forms of implicitness. Phillips reports that Harwood suffers from the inferiority complex that afflicts many short story writers, their mistaken envy for the pantechnicon of the novel form, but she also reminds us of the essential connection between

Harwood's prose and poetry, and points to the joint Modernist heritage that modern poetry and the modern story owes to imagist theory.

Theory of a different, and more contemporary, kind is appealed to in Andy Brown's 'Echoes of the Oikos: an Ecocritical Reading', in which externalism—an emergent philosophy that holds that mental states are hybrid ones affected by the external world and environment—is used to analyse some of the most prevalent tropes in Harwood's work, that of mountains and of the walled garden, the walked and the walled environment, as it were. Processes that ecology identifies in the environment are seen by Brown as reflected in the textual contract Harwood offers his readers in his complex collage work: of ecologically-modelled intermingledness rather than of isolate statement. His thematics of mind and body dualism are found to mirror his other themes of the lure of the countryside and the attraction to the city, a striving in the self and the world to balance the claims of the natural and the cultural. This is the significance of the recurrent sanctified garden, with its historical leanings towards the paradisal, and also a place of erotic exchange, which is never far away in these scenarios, particularly in *The Long Black Veil*. Yet the sanctified is always held at some distance in Harwood's non-Christian humanism, which remains aware of decay as a significant process in all the ecological realms, including that of the original 'oikos', the home, where belonging always relates to a longing for elsewhere and elsewhat.

The spaces of Lee Harwood's poems are worked over in a different way by Ian Davidson, in his 'Nowhere Else—The Later Poems'. Davidson turns over some of the postmodern theories of place and space which doubt whether there can be resistance to the global at the local level, that spatialisation as a correlative of commodified globalisation results in a diminution of place as a locus of value. It is exactly that kind of local value that Davidson detects a yearning for, in Harwood's verse, particularly in its sensual and bodily particularity, or 'presence' as he puts it. Harwood's exploration of place and places is in no way naïve—as Brown has proved—and Davidson pursues what he takes to be a materialist ethics that problematises subject-positions within the poems and reading strategies outside of them. In all sorts of ways, Harwood's poems will not stay still, and within their desire for place there is a restless yearning for the elsewhere as well, the equivalent of the theorist's 'spatial'. The thinking of Lefebvre acts as a corollary to Harwood's grasping rootedness with its insistence upon the connectivity between place as thing and space as abstraction. The elsewhere contained in memory, or in the act of drafting the poems itself, operates as complex indicators

of complexity. The self that appears in the text is also a desire for 'presence' in the phenomenal world, not to be confused with Lefebvre's 'present', which is a distanciating simulation of presence, although that is also the space, as it were, of the inscription of Harwood's often painfully self-consciously artificial poems. Rooted in place, he reaches out into space, which is where reading will occur. The focus on poems of the last twenty years reminds us of the continuing development of Harwood's work, and many of the poems Davidson refers to have not been the subject of critical scrutiny hitherto.

Aodhán McCardle's research question is a simple one, and like all simple questions, it exfoliates into complex arguments. Many of Harwood's poems are concerned with the most literal aspects of visuality, with seeing, whether that is in terms of landscape—in both the topological and the painterly senses—or in terms of more general reactions to space and colour, for example. But the poems are forced, nevertheless, to mediate their contents in language. While this is true of any content—any 'theme', for example—this is particularly complex and radical in the case of rendering the primarily visual through the sign system of language, in that it might seem to claim an equal primacy, particularly with respect to the language art of poetry. And when processes of memory and temporality, as well as questions of knowledge and doubt are added to the language that Harwood habitually and relentlessly interrogates, the resultant discourse is constantly gesturing beyond logic and logos, 'inlanguageable' in McCardle's neologism. Ashbery and Harwood are compared, to show how Ashbery indicates, but does not inhabit, these problems, while Harwood's poetry does, particularly in the way the reader is situated in relation to questions of seeing.

This volume ends with a brief fanfare from Alan Halsey, who expresses well the ill-ease that a contemporary ironist faces before the often bracing and brashly innocent language Harwood often employs, and which serves as one proof of his uniqueness. This piece previously appeared in the pamphlet Patricia Farrell and I edited and published in 1999 as a surprise for Lee Harwood's sixtieth birthday, *Birthday Boy* (Liverpool: Ship of Fools), which was a book of praises and celebrations. While the present volume is also a *celebration* of Harwood's forty year journey, it attenuates praise in favour of the varied, detailed and critical accounts that the celebration alone suggests is timely. I have called on a wide range of contributors, some long-known as critical commentators on Harwood's work, but others are newcomers to the task and to the debates it raises. It has been a privilege to gather everybody's fresh insights together in one volume.

So It Shifts: An Interview with Lee Harwood

This interview is a slightly emended version of a public conversation between Lee Harwood and Robert Sheppard, conducted as part of the 'Difficult Poets' reading of the Baylit Festival, on the evening of 20 April 2005, at The Wharf public house in the New Town district of Cardiff, Wales. The first half of the evening consisted of a reading by John James and Frances Presley, with introductions by Tôpher Mills. The organiser was Peter Finch for Yr Academi Gymreig.

The 'conversation' was hampered by the need for amplification; Lee Harwood was speaking softly into a microphone while Robert Sheppard was almost shouting his questions so the audience could hear. They were not initially facing one another, which frustrated spontaneous exchange. To open the second half of the evening, Lee Harwood read his poem 'One Two Three'. After enthusiastic applause the talking began.

RS: Lee, what I find impressive about 'One Two Three' is that it sums up many of your procedures until the mid-1970s, when it was written, but it also prefigures much of the work that follows, work to which insufficient critical attention has been given. It also reiterates some of your central themes. History and its collisions with individual experience. Violence and Empire. Human imposture and generosity. The nature of masculinity. The presence of Nature. The dialogue between realism and fictionality, notation and elaboration. The gift cultures of both eroticism and art. In terms of its form: we have to 'put it together', as it were, as its last words say. It invites the participation of the reader in its making. No doubt we shall return to some of these themes.

But the occasion for this celebration of your work, Lee, tonight is the publication of your *Collected Poems* by Shearsman Books last

year. It's a 500 page assemblage of work from 1964 to 2004, and it leaves very little out. Judging by the many reviews alone it has been a very successful volume.

So I'd like to start with the very fact of this monster book. Basil Bunting assembling his first *Collected Poems* commented (rather characteristically): 'A man who collects his poems screws together the boards of his coffin'! How did it feel for you, looking back over 40 years' work?

LH: I think I'm already buried six foot underground. It's daunting, all this paper. All those words. You get the feeling that when this object comes out, you give up, because everything is going to be a repeat.

Years ago Eric Mottram talked about a story by Melville called 'The Confidence Man' and he quoted it with the writer in mind. The writer is a con man, in the sense that you're making fictions. But equally you've got to know what you're doing, to have *confidence* in what you're doing. And there's that struggle and it can freeze you, once you don't have that confidence. That is *my* problem—and it's *not* to do with the work.

RS: Going right back to the beginning, the early 1960s, a very propitious time to be a writer looking for ways of operating outside of the literary mainstream. What kind of crucial influences fed into the earliest work?

LH: It's not a straightforward process. In the sixties there was an immense flourishing of poetry, a renaissance. But roots go back earlier, for me to the middle to late fifties, when I started reading Ezra Pound, reading his Chinese poems which had this wonderful natural voice that I found later in William Carlos Williams. And also a very human quality. There's no artificial poetic language. There's no posing as some sort of authority. That was important. And also that Pound thing of *The Cantos* where he collages personal statement, history and myths and all this stuff, especially in the *The Pisan Cantos*. You realise how all this exists in people's heads, and almost simultaneously. It's true to how humans register the world about them, and talk to each other.

There was Tzara, Dada, shaking language up, piling things up, which I'd never seen done before. And Borges—where he writes

stories which pull you in, and then he pulls the rug from under your feet. So you're continually not sure, and you're having to think it through yourself, so that you are always involved in these processes.

I had all that to feed into, but I couldn't use it effectively in my own writing. And then in the mid-sixties, meeting John Ashbery, suddenly it clicked into place with his approach to writing: that idea of creating a text which is meant for other people to use, and where the 'I' and 'you' and all that, were floating and shifting around. As Ashbery said in that 1972 interview in the *New York Quarterly*: 'The personal pronouns in my work very often seem to be like variables in an equation. "You" can be myself or it can be another person, someone whom I'm addressing, and so can "he" and "she" for that matter and "we", sometimes one has to deduce from the rest of the sentence what is being meant and my point is also that it doesn't really matter very much, that we are somehow all aspects of a consciousness giving rise to the poem and the fact of addressing someone, myself or someone else, is what's the important thing at that particular moment rather than the particular person involved. I guess I don't have a very strong sense of my own identity and I find it very easy to move from one person in the sense of a pronoun to another and this again helps to produce a kind of polyphony in my poetry which I again feel is means toward greater naturalism.'

RS: So it was finding something out there that fitted in with the way you thought or the way your mind worked or felt that the world worked? And here was a literature that did that?

LH: Yes.

RS: I alluded earlier to a very productive tension in your work, well at least it's very productive for me, and hopefully for other people, as readers. It's also unique. It's what you once called your 'puritan-cavalier routine'. On the one hand you can be bare and notational ('away the hills'); on the other you indulge a passion for elaborate fictions (the story behind the regimental photo in 'One Two Three', for example). On the one hand a scrupulous honesty (or, at least, its rhetoric); on the other a love of the pose, the disguise, the gilded, the baroque. And as in 'One Two Three', this can often be found in the same poem. That's probably what qual-

ifies it as 'difficult poetry'! How does this come about? Is it the result of dissatisfaction or restlessness? Or maybe it fits in with what you've just said about what you found in other writing?

LH: That's difficult. I think there are times in poetry when you want to talk as clearly as possible, because the language can so easily skitter off other ways. Yet there are other times when you're creating text to use for storytelling. And it's trying to weave the two.

RS: How do you know which is which? How do you know which moment requires which technique?

LH: (laughs). I don't know! There's a review of the *Collected* recently by John Muckle, where he gives a new version of the 'puritan-cavalier' ricochet. He said: 'These quotations . . . point to a central tension . . . between the everyday and the fabular or fabulous. An almost confessional poet tries to deal honestly with life's vicissitudes and regrets; a compulsive fabulist seeks respite from these in a storybook world . . . . (But) the personal becomes one more aesthetic element in his compositions, so that the fabular and the everyday are induced to change places and the poem is both a life-record and artificed object.' At times the personal is the fiction and the elaborate stories, 'the make it up as you go along bedtime tales', are the real thing.

RS: So the two things switch around.

LH: So it shifts.

RS: It's interesting that he uses that word 'respite'. The fictions a respite from the other. Is there a sense there that they are shielding, deflecting energies, which are in the poem?

LH: I don't know whether it's that psychological. I think there are times when you can create a fiction which is such a delight and also you can touch on areas that you didn't expect you would, and which you probably wouldn't touch on, if you are writing in a more direct personal way where you may very well censor your work. You let it flow into all sorts of dream and imaginings and things. And it may well be much closer to the truth....

RS: So there's the surprise...

LH: Yes. Yes. Yes.

RS: You can't be surprised by something if you know exactly what it's going to do.

LH: Yes.

RS: What strikes me about the new *Collected*, as somebody who discovered this body of work at about mid—point—literally, that is, the mid 1970s—is its shape. I haven't time to outline those changes, *almost* through successive stages, from fictions to fragmentation to notation, although it seems to me that there is a split mid-point, when a certain type of notation—that could be the 'puritan' side we've been talking about—is abandoned in favour of the expressive qualities of prose. This sets all sorts of things off, maybe the agendas for the work that follows. I almost sense a stylistic *cul-de-sac*, as the writing becomes more pared down. And I'm aware that that was almost a dominant style of the alternatives of the 1970s: open field poetics some people called it. Then suddenly, you switch to *prose*, with *Wine Tales*, a work you wrote collaboratively with Ric Caddel (himself an otherwise pared-down writer).

If you'll excuse the pun, did you experience *Wine Tales* as an uncorking?

LH: I think that intensity of Olson and Creeley and so on was limiting, and I think *Wine Tales* was returning to what I'd learnt in the New York scene, which was to have fun! And to be very loose and bring it all in.

RS: And also in those stories, in case people don't know them—you've got a system working there, haven't you? Where you're (both) looking at the pictures on wine labels and using them as inspiration.

LH: It's based on Raymond Rousell. One of his pieces, for example, titled *La Source*, is a poem of over a thousand lines. It explores and describes in great detail a country scene portrayed on the label of a bottle of mineral water. The narrator is in a restaurant waiting for his meal and lets his imagination go for this ramble. The poem ends when the waiter removes the bottle and serves the lunch.

RS: How does that work for you as a writer, using something exterior, picking up on something outside, rather than using your own experience? How did you feel about that?

LH: I think it's a great thing to use material outside oneself. I use postcards and paintings and overheard remarks and books as a spark. We don't just work in isolation like that. Michael Ondaatje says a great thing about that in *The English Patient*: 'We die containing a richness of lovers and tribes, tastes we have swallowed, bodies we have plunged into and swum up as if rivers of wisdom, characters we have climbed into as if trees, fears we have hidden in as if caves . . . . We are communal histories, communal books. We are not owned or monogamous in our taste or experience.'

RS: So it's almost like finding that kind of activity in Pound years before, but in a very different way? I feel also there are the beginnings of new themes in the work. What is very clear from the time of *Wine Tales* onwards—from the 1980s—is a love of the countryside, and of walking in it. It had been there in the earlier work and particularly it is worth pointing out in this context, that some of those locations are Welsh.

How does landscape work?

LH: (Long pause) I can't say.

(Laughter)

RS: Many of your poems are intensely personal; there is a range of love poetry and elegy in the *Collected*. So often in the *erotic* poems, the very eroticism is predicated on the specialness of certain moments or of perceptual intensities. Pinnacles of ecstasy seem balanced almost upon the despair that they will necessarily end. Yet (often in the same poem or within the same sequence) you offer contrasting stories you tell as self-conscious fictions, as quite obviously constructed fictions. And, as John Muckle says, some of these things reverse. It's not just narrative offsetting lyric, because you are deliberately exposing the mechanism of the stories as artifice. *As not real*. This is held in subsequent dynamic with this erotic intensity and erotic encounters. Is there something about personal disclosure and embarrassment coming into that dialectic?

LH: I just think it's a matter of putting things in context. I've always believed in that. I think of John Ashbery in his poems. If you are describing a very intense emotional experience, and if you also then mention the noises outside in the street, or even in the next room, it makes it much more real than having just a vision of this one isolated experience. One reason is that the readers can be involved as well. They're aware of all those things surrounding them too. There's a terrific Polish poet called Piotr Sommer. I saw him read a poem recently which is about walking in the suburbs of this town outside of Warsaw. There are blocks of workers' flats, and you go and look upstairs into this apartment—it's all worn and scuffed—and there are children and families moving around, and a dog running around, and you look out the window and you see bits of plastic stuck in the trees. You see all this and you suddenly realise that Piotr has gone! He had some other errand to go to, and you're left in the flat. I just love that thing happening in a poem, where the readers are pulled into this other world, and they're having to deal with it themselves. The poet has, in a way, created a toy theatre for us to play with. Experiencing it as a joy or whatever, instead of just having a monologue. Who needs it?

RS: (laughs) I'm glad you mentioned…

AUDIENCE MEMBER: Having a *what*?

LH AND RS: A monologue!

RS: I'm glad you mentioned the reader there, because that leads on nicely to questions of openness, of your leaving the text open. You use the phrase 'Keeping the doors open'. That line from 'One Two Three' you gloss elsewhere as saying: 'That's what real learning is doing: Keeping the doors open.' You speak of *openness* as an aim. It's about keeping the poem open for the reader. In some of the earlier poems (and later ones too) you literally have this idea of leaving blanks in a poem for readers to fill that in. How did you get to that? It's a novel idea, I think.

LH: I'm not sure about that. It's happened before. People like Tzara, and Pound, and Ashbery too, leave bits incomplete, sentences half finished. As Ashbery once said: 'I think we're constantly in the

middle of a conversation where we never finish our thoughts, or our sentences, and that's the way we communicate, and it's probably the best way for us, because it's the one that we have arrived at.' And you want the reader to fill in the blanks.

RS: One of the things that occurred to me, looking at a poem where you have these open textures, where you've got these similes that open. You give us a couple of your own similes, but then there are these blanks. It's called 'Linen':

> touching you   like the
> and soft as
> like the scent of flowers and
> like an approaching festival
> whose promise is failed through carelessness

I've looked at that poem for 30 years and I've never filled the blanks in!

LH: (laughs)

RS: The quest is not literally that we do that, is it? It's actually a *gesture* of openness?

LH: I used to believe it was true. That each person's idea of what touching skin is like would be individual, and so included in the poem by each reader.

Vesna Klein at Birkbeck College did a survey of a cross section of students with that poem. Most interviewees from both arts and science backgrounds did enter into becoming co-producers of 'Linen'. But also some felt: why bother?

RS: But that openness as a gesture—there quite literally—you carry through in different ways. How do you carry on that gesture in later work, without leaving blanks?

LH: You respect the reader's intelligence. The reader is as smart or as stupid as the writer. Writing stuff down doesn't give you any position or authority. It's just a discussion.

RS: So it carries over into a sense of respect, of response and responsibility.

LH: It's asking questions, as exploration. There's a division in some ways in poetry. Some people see the poet as some sort of shaman or priest or whatever or . . . (snort of derision). Then you have the idea that, no, it's a continual questioning, making people want to ask questions.

RS: The questioning, the listening quality as well.

LH: A poet like Gary Snyder is interesting in his early work, where he doesn't take himself too seriously. But later when he does, when he assumes authority, it becomes preachy and dull.

RS: That may link. I'm trying to get 'difficulty' in, so everybody here's happy! (Laughter) We're meant to be talking about 'difficult poets'. One of the things about that respect, curiously, is that certain readers find that incredibly difficult. They feel that they are being left the responsibility for their responses, if you like, because there are gaps, there are jumps, because you've got this multiplicity, this referring to different things. What's your feeling about that, when it becomes a mode of difficulty for readers?

LH: There's enough room in the world. There are enough people writing. If you don't like it, go and find something you do like. That's not being arrogant. That's the way I work. If you don't like it, fine.

RS: So, there's no compromise, but you're not going to make them . . . not going to 'open the doors' and drag them through! (Laughs)

Finally, I'm much taken by 'Take A Card: Any Card, an ikonostasis: 52 pieces to be shuffled as you will', the work from 2003–4 that 'completes' the *Collected Poems* in its strategic incompleteness; only 26 are written so far. How does this project *develop* openness for you? What new ground do you think it's opening up?

LH: It's based on the fact that we all in our homes often have a wall where we put our favourite pictures. The reasons we keep putting them there . . . it's not just because of the picture, but also because of its connections with what we value. They are like touchstones and in a way it's like the ikonostasis in the Greek Orthodox Church. All these pictures were precious and different, but I knew

that they were somehow connected. I wrote a piece for each picture and they then can be shuffled, and people can lay them out and have them in whatever sequence they want! That's the idea of the structure.

It's repeating something that happened earlier, but taking it even a step further.