Robert Sheppard

John James and Poetics: 'A Theory of Poetry'

When James Byrne and I were compiling our anthology *Atlantic Drift*, we decided upon John James as one of our contributors. We were glad we had, for all sorts of reasons, but not least of all because he agreed to read at one of our launches at the London Review of Books shop in January 2018. It was to be one of his last readings, and I allude to it in my poem 'Late Advance to Bonheur' in 'Swift Songs for John James'. During his gentle performance, he read the teasing poem 'A Theory of Poetry', which we had selected.[1] This was an inevitable choice for our anthology of poetry and *poetics*, since James was not given to *statements* of poetics, in the sense I have defined it in a number of places (Sheppard 2011 including in 'Gathering from the Past', which has been through a number of publication channels, and is currently online. (Sheppard 2022) 'Poetics is the product of the process of reflection upon writings, and upon the act of writing, gathering from the past and from others, speculatively casting into the future.' (Sheppard 2022) James, as John Hall says, 'prefers, it seems, to absorb such modes of attention' – reflections upon poetic making – 'into his poems'. (Perril 2010: 24) Here was a poet who articulated his poetics in his poetry. I've already used the word 'teasing' to describe this piece, and it seemed to us, as editors, to be a kind of anti-poetics, which messily (and amusingly) contrasted with more standard forms of poetics (if there is such a thing) by other contributors, like Zoë Skoulding's personal essay 'Underground Rivers: Notes Towards a Zoepoetics' or D. S. Marriott's pithy 'Response to Race and the Poetic Avant-Garde', although our choices from Claudia Rankine and Sean Bonney, for example, also blurred the distinctions between creative writing and its poetics. (Byrne and Sheppard 2017) I concluded: 'These examples suggest manners and forms which might be adopted or adapted to articulate' other's poetics, 'or, as was the case with some of the pieces collected here, to discover the poetics in the very act of producing it, in tentative and speculative drifting.' (Byrne and Sheppard 2017: 11) This latter formulation stands well as an introduction to 'The Theory of Poetry'. I have written about specific deviant poetics, such as in my piece on John Hall, in *When Bad Times Made for Good Poetry*, 'The Poetics of Not Writing'. (Sheppard 2011: 55-67.) Indeed, what you are about to read I wrote, then forgot about completely, and have now recovered, from a

longer piece that originally included the proto-version of the Hall essay, and an early version of the account of Ken Edwards' hybrid and performative poetics in *Bad Times*, '*The WE Expression*' (Sheppard 2011: 94-107). Why this piece was never pursued I'm not sure, but both James' appearance with this poem in *Atlantic Drift*, and sadness at our loss of this great writer, has energised me to revise it, now I've found it again.[2] I begin by noting that James Byrne and I were not the first to present this poem as poetics in anthologised form.

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In Denise Riley's *Poets on Writing: Britain 1970-1991* there are a number of contributions that are poems, seemingly at odds with the book's title. If Tom Raworth had pointedly, wittily, called his contribution in verse, 'The State of Poetry Today', the gesture was for immediate effect within this collection of poetics, to remind us – correctly – that the state of poetry today is most evident in an example of today's poetry. (I imagine this literally; receiving his request to participate in Riley's volume, Raworth sent his most recently-completed poems.) Of course, when the poems appeared subsequently, as part of *Eternal Sections*, the temporary title was removed. John James' contribution, also a poem, 'A Theory of Poetry', has a deceptively similar title, though one that offers the promise of a meta-language for poetry itself in the very language of a poem. It could be reminding us that a theory of poetry – it is never 'the' – is only manifest (finally) in poems themselves, though that does not seem to be the point here. The poem is not a specifically written piece for the volume, but a re-print, first published in 1977. Unlike Raworth's contribution, it carries its problematic title wherever it has appeared. This is not to diminish the tease of the poem, which begins with its title, for tease there is, most certainly. From the beginning, this poem seems to be the antithesis of the poem-as-poetics, like Hugh MacDiarmid's earnest and monumental 'The Kind of Poetry I Want' and is more like Charles Bernstein's ironic *Artifice of Absorption*. (Simon Perril's suggestion that a poem by Roy Fisher, his 'The Making of the Book', is 'surely an influence', on 'A Theory of Poetry' is astute, and suggests another ironic intertext.) (Perril 2010: 2)

This 'theory of poetry' begins: 'it's very important/ to make your lines…', the tone that of a 'how-to' creative writing book, too practical for the theoretical promise of the title. John Hall calls the tone, 'deliberately magisterial', but is clear about the

instructional perspective: ‘it adopts the posture of worldly advice to the young’. (Perril 2010: 24) If we bear in mind that poetics is neither theory nor practice, then perhaps the object of this study has disappeared, or blurred, in the white space between title and first line. Theories seldom offer advice.

‘It’s very important/ to make your lines’, what? Short, pithy, long, liquid, enjambed, hinged, end-stopped, decasyllabic? These are some of the possible answers, if the issue of importance is prosodic. If it is a question of content, then we might expect something like Ted Berrigan’s witty advice, quoted by Denise Riley in her introduction to *Poets on Writing*: ‘One way, for example, to write a terrific poem is to have every line be terrific.’ (Riley 1992: 2) But our Anglo-Welsh-Irish dandy John James gives us nothing approximating these possible answers; he allows the tone of confident advice to carry synaesthetic absurdity without a bat of the eyelids, classic dead pan:

> it’s very important
> to make your lines
> bands of alternating colour
> running from one side to the other (Riley 1992: 249)

Although Rimbaud had famously associated vowels and colours in a sonnet, James’ narrator’s advice defies parody, turns prosody to colour field theory, balanced on the pun between a visual line and a poetic one, although the poem continues to argue for the efficacy of an impossible – one might say pataphysical – resolution of form:

> these will bind
> your poem together
> like an egg
> & make it exist (Riley 1992: 249)

The bad rhyme of ‘egg’ with ‘exist’ emphasises the connection (binding) between poetic form and the poem’s recognition and reception as a complete work of art, but the context is too comic to allow the assertion to stand without irony. (Any non-art specialist would probably pass over a buried reference to the ovarious contents of

tempera in reading these words.) Indeed, the reader is drawn somewhat querulous into subsequent assertions of this 'theory', which include the mysterious statement that

> The positive ingredients of
> banality & repetitiveness (are) preferable
> to histrionic virtuosity on most occasions (Riley 1992: 249)

which seems to offer more at first glance than at second analysis, with its balanced oxymorons in favour of English restraint. Better to be banal than a show-off. Similarly, the apparently blunt exhortation

> it's better to be expressively dumb
> than full of mediocre elegance
> & bullshit (Riley 1992: 249)

advocates silence, though it is not clear what 'dumb' expression might mean or imply, though it does sound better than the excessive alternatives. Best not to be full of bullshit. But it is not clear why they, or the options in the previous quotation, would constitute alternatives, although it seems to favour Movement rectitude over both confessional and elegant or showy writing. More apparently down-to-earth advice follows, when the reader (who is now clearly positioned also as a neophyte writer) is told that the 'physicality of your poem' may be sustained by printing it on 'expensive paper'. This may be a gentle dig at the Cambridge school's penchant for quality productions (think of publications like Prynne's large format *Brass*), although this also 'seems to address the materiality of poetic making, of engaging with language … as a physical thing, on paper, in ink; this is something also that is about labour, about work about making not (just) thinking or ideas,' as Mark Leahy says (although his use of the word 'seems', like others', including Hall above, demonstrates how readers feel wrong-footed by this poem, as by an unreadable smile on a ambiguously friendly face). (Perril 2010: 204) The conclusion of these processes (but not the end of the poem) promises that

in this act of obliteration
performed in a fusion of
calculation cynicism and fervour
the poem will suddenly realize itself. (Riley 1992: 249)

This only serves to make the issue more opaque, although the result is a successful poem, concocted according to this strange poetics, a performance of dangerous excess and bad faith on the basis of a series of oxymoronic choices. If the 'poem' at this point has been 'realised', subsequent lines of James' text are concerned with the poem's effect on the reader, and with general aspects of writerly ethos, but presented with the same ironic distance that makes us suspect that what is said is not what is meant exactly (or even inexactly). The flat, calm, instructional tone, although reminiscent of the creative writing manual, or even the cookery book, as befits James' frequent culinary references, does nevertheless seem to be theoretically focussed after this point.

Reflection upon the poem so far will suggest that the 'poetry' of which this is 'a theory' is figured synaesthetically as analogous to visual art and its physical mark-making. Indeed, John Wilkinson gives the game – and it is a game – away, when he says, 'James recasts descriptive writing about the painting of Howard Hodgkin as the basis of "A Theory of Poetry"'. (Wilkinson 2007: 59) James is well-known for his association with artists – and his co-curated exhibition at the University of Sussex in 1979 included the work of Hodgkin, along with that of his appointed associates, Richard Long and Bruce McLean – but here the debt, or theft, is unacknowledged, because it is in the service of a systematic deflation of 'theory' itself, as one might suspect from its suggestive 'act of obliteration'. It is clear much of the power of the poem derives from its 'celebration of an essential sensory and visual connection between the practice of both poets and visual artists,' as Peter Cartwright says, but I want to concentrate first on the word 'theory'. (Perril 2010: 57)

'Theory' is a common term for the varieties of thinking about literature that are not literary criticism (and certainly not poetics, as I conceive it). Its tenets have derived in part from philosophy, and arguably they have re-located to it in recent years. The era of high theory, we are told, is over (but it still remains conventional to capitalise the word!). James' poem dates from the mid-1970s, when theory was beginning to make inroads in Great Britain at privileged sites, such as the University

of Cambridge (it was only beginning to put in intermittent appearances down the road at UEA, where I was, still cradling my Herbert Marcuse). James himself taught for many years in English and Media departments at Anglia Polytechnic (later Ruskin University) in Cambridge and, although this institution is not affiliated to the University of Cambridge, he was geographically close enough to the turbulent beginnings of theory there, as represented by the Colin McCabe 'affair'. He was also proximate to young theorist-poets like Veronica Forrest-Thomson and Peter Ackroyd, as well as close to the supposed Cambridge school of poets to which he – and Forrest-Thomson and Ackroyd – were aligned, constellated around the erudite – but non-theory – figure of J.H. Prynne. Wilkinson also states James' centrality to this poetry and beyond: 'In the fifteen years between 1968 and 1983, a period of major social and political change, James published a body of work which equals any lyric poetry of the time in Britain, and whose variety … is remarkable.' (Wilkinson 2007: 59) One example of variety is the unique 'A Theory of Poetry' itself.

When James' text continues to tell us that the now realised 'poem'

> will subvert any / deny any / positive /negative
> narrative reading
> & stress the written surface
> with all its openings windows apertures leaks
>
> & the incongruity of this literalness & frivolity
> will induce in the reader a greater objective awareness (Riley 1992: 250)

it reads like a parody of Peter Ackroyd's first book *Notes for a New Culture*, published in 1976, at a time when Ackroyd's brilliant future as a novelist and biographer of enormous imaginative power could not have been predicted.[3] For Ackroyd, in words that echo the poem exactly, Prynne's poetry 'has a completely written surface' though James' 'leaks' are alien to Ackroydian thought (as are the multiple choice-like options of the opening line above). (Ackroyd 1976: 130) We are told Denis Roche's poetry 'must be completed by our own interpretation of it – although I myself, "the reader", am the interpretation of a text which is no longer visible to me', which might very well be glossed as 'a greater objective awareness' in the reader, although James' praise of 'frivolity' is far from the austerity of the French

poet. (Ackroyd 1976: 134) Ackroyd's book is a precocious take on French post-structuralism, and it is difficult to imagine what it might have read like in the mid-1970s, or what it felt like to be told: 'It is an account of the emergence of LANGUAGE as the content of literature and as the form of knowledge; this anonymous entity is still barely within our consciousness, but its rise has already determined a greater death: the death of Man as he finds himself in humanism and in the idea of subjectivity.' (Ackroyd 1976: 9) Even in 1979 when I reviewed it, the book's antecedents and referents had become better known. In the short interval since publication, John Ashbery had published his popular volume *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror*, and Derrida was beginning to be more widely discussed, for example, but Ackroyd's was still a contentious (and to some, absurd) argument; his attention to the poetry of Prynne and Roche still does not reflect mainstream literary taste. His pessimistic right-wing take on theory – which makes it slightly chilling with its Nietzchean anti-humanism – was at odds with its later uses as an emancipatory discourse. James' use of the (now) over-worked word 'subverts', another non-Ackroydean note in the above quotation, also picks up on this discourse of liberation as later developed by Catherine Belsey, Terence Hawkes and others, as a kind of displaced *pensée suixante-huite.* Ackroyd meanwhile had become literary editor of the right-wing journal *The Spectator* just in time for the Thatcherite dismemberment of society, moves theory itself seemed to contest at the time, though largely impotently in the event. Wilkinson usefully reminds us: 'It helps to remember' when reading James' poetry of the 1970s, with its references to popular culture, 'that the heyday of punk was also the high watermark of excitement with Theory prior to its institutionalisation in degree coursework, a moment when strenuous academic endeavour and a vigorous popular culture converged in a mission to subvert' – that word again – 'dominant discourses as embodied in "classic rock" as well as canonical texts.' (Wilkinson 2007: 61) 'A Theory of Poetry' could be read as the poetic subversion of Theory, on a par with Sid Vicious' rendition of Sinatra's 'My Way'.

Veronica Forrest-Thomson, it must not be forgotten, is a tragic figure, dying at the age of 27 in 1975. However, she was conversant with the same theory and poetry as Ackroyd (she writes about Prynne and Ashbery and she translated Denis Roche, for example), although her mature critical work abandoned theorists such as Julia Kristeva in favour of the native source of William Empson. Charles Bernstein's later revisions of her critical work opposed her distinction between meaningful and non-

meaningful levels of artifice. Are not all levels meaningful? he asks, but her general insistence upon the distanciation effects of poetic artifice, both traditional and innovative, reminds us that form cannot simply be willed away in a paraphrastic reading of a poem. (See Bernstein 1992) As I put it in the opening words of *The Meaning of Form*: 'Poetry is the investigation of complex contemporary realities through the means (meanings) of form'. (Sheppard 2016: 1) Forrest-Thomson's astringent claims about the processes of naturalisation, quoted in an excerpt in Denise Riley's anthology (a few pages from James' poem) remind us:

> There would be no point in writing poetry unless poetry were different from everyday language, and any attempt to analyse poetry should cherish that difference and seek to remain within its bounds for as long as possible rather than ignore the difference in an unseemly rush from words to world. Good Naturalisation dwells on the non-meaningful levels of organisation and tries to state their relation to other levels of organisation rather than set them aside in an attempt to produce a statement about the world. (Riley 1992: 224)

That this is no stale formalism is underlined when she comments: 'It is only through artifice that poetry can challenge our ordinary linguistic orderings of the world.' (Forrest-Thomson 1978: xi) Reading (and writing) must remain within their 'levels', and naturalisation, a sort of necessary evil that should be staved off for as long as possible to allow artifice, form, to be *felt* as 'difference' and 'challenge', is the last, inevitable, resort.

However, she makes a more personal appearance in James' work, as she ironically does in some of her own late poems. Wilkinson argues, convincingly, that 'the agitated James of "War",' a slightly later poem than 'A Theory of Poetry', 'can invoke Robert Creeley alongside The Clash and Veronica Forrest-Thomson alongside Iggy Pop without strain or embarrassment.' (Wilkinson 2007: 60) More particularly for our purpose, James writes

> What's your name anyway
>
> Veronica/Veronica what/
> Veronica what's-the-difference

> inscription is its own form of condescension (James 2002: 141)

Wilkinson animates this reference; he imagines 'that the Veronica lines reproduce a snatch of dialogue' with her. (Wilkinson 2007: 288) 'In James' home town of Cambridge, younger poets were constantly repeating Forrest-Thomson's name,' Wilkinson recalls, 'the more so as few people are evoked so vividly by their writing as she by hers, and few other writers' work moves between lyric and criticism as though indivisible.' (Wilkinson 2007: 61) This 'move' of course is what 'A Theory of Poetry' is attempting, shifting between poetry and theory, however jokily. Bypassing poetics (for the time being, in this sequential close reading), it is worth recalling that the subtitle of *Poetic Artifice*, 'A Theory of Twentieth Century Poetry' could well be consciously alluded to in James' own title, 'A Theory of Poetry'. Indeed, James' poem can sound a little like Veronica Forrest-Thomson (both in her poems and criticism):

> reading is often a big help
> but wherever you turn
> you are surrounded by language
> like the air, (Riley 1992: 250)

although the 'gentle foal' that is 'linguistically wounded' in her best poem 'Pastoral', 'squeals' in a less complacent, indeed entirely anguished, world of words, as I show elsewhere in *The Meaning of Form.* (Forrest Thomson 1978: 125; Sheppard 2016: 39-44) 'No, James will not *inscribe* Veronica Forrest-Thomson,' remarks Wilkinson. (Wilkinson 2007: 62) She is newly dead and detached from her name; neither will she be memorialised, since that would be an act of condescension, Wilkinson asserts. She is somehow present and she surrounds the artifice of James' poem, much as language surrounds us all, 'like the air'.

When James comments in 'A Theory of Poetry', 'you will find the difficulty of working this way' – he may have in mind an adherence to the processes of suspended naturalisation, a difficulty which 'makes you long to be// a different kind of poet'. (Riley 1992: 250) The method implied here ('try to be stringent & lean') suggests a sterility that the neophyte poet addressee might retreat from ashen and defeated, perhaps unable to hold artifice to its promised delivery of poetic goods.

(Riley 1992: 250) While it is difficult to prove that James is reacting *directly* to Forrest-Thomson (or to Ackroyd for that matter), these were the ideas that dominated Cambridge where everybody was repeating Forrest-Thomson's name and possibly her ideas as well. Like language or air, these ideas surrounded everyone in the Cambridge school, even though, of course, such a school (according to its possible members) does not exist.

It is here, where the addressee of the poem is assured that he or she will long for a different poetics, that the poem turns, although it does not drop its ironical tone. This poem *becomes* an act of poetics at this point; the remainder of the poem describes the operations of 'another kind of poet', that of James himself, in contradistinction, or even rejection, of the poetry praised by Ackroyd, the autonomist discourse of anti-humanist intent, or the highly artificial poetry that performs itself in the formal play of non-meaningful devices, as Forrest-Thomson recommends. When Wilkinson comments, 'James has no programme; the sensualist of the poems … no more contrives an identification than the punk,' he is only partly right, because something like a programme is asserted in this poem. (Wilkinson 2007: 60) But it is only 'like' a programme since, as Wilkinson also notes: 'Certainly "A Theory of Poetry" is more about gratifying the senses than something called Theory', given that theory, in its seventies variety or not, is quite distinct from the mercurial discourse of poetics, and what the reader finds here is in many ways a poetics of sensuality, as Wilkinson points out. (Wilkinson 2007: 59)

I have deliberately left to one side the borrowings from Howard Hodgkin – James' 'interesting coming after painting', as Mark Leahy puts it (Perril 2010: 203) – but it is again Wilkinson who sees the pertinence of the strange refunctioning of art writing as the poetics of poetic writing: 'It is because the same quality of dispossessed sensation overwhelming the senses with its involuntary return, saturates Hodgkin's canvases'. (Wilkinson 2007: 59) The exhortation to 'try to be stringent & lean/ as well as luscious' comes very close to Frances Spalding's description of Hodgkin's work: 'The lusciousness of paint is allowed, yet everything extraneous to his purpose is ruthlessly excised,' with its similar coupling of exuberance and restraint. (Spalding 1986: 231). Yet it is, perhaps, lusciousness that wins out in the sheer vitality and colour of Hodgkin's work, though it runs the risk of becoming decorative. But his method – 'a kind of desperate improvisation' he calls it, of 'constantly alter(ing) his images by radical additions that nevertheless allow traces of the earlier states to show

through', as Spalding describes it, is analogous to the making of a series of poems with overlapping lines and phrases, such as those James published in the early eighties in *Berlin Return.* (Spalding 1986: 231) Trenchantly domestic, like many of Hodgkin's pieces, a poem like 'Sister Midnight', perhaps James' greatest poem to that date, shakes off the earlier influence of Frank O'Hara by submitting heightened realist discourse, often of excessive sensuous detail, to a process of cutting and recombination and differential addition, and his genius may have been Berrigan of 'The Sonnets' with its shuffling of 'terrific' lines to form 'terrific' poems. (Riley 1992: 2) 'In James' work,' writes Romana Huk, 'the continual repetition and rearrangement of materials … signal positive engagement in … "redefinition" rather than loss of voice or (impossible) authorial absence, while at the same time they allow him to "stress the written surface" of what he makes, its non-mimetic properties, as he puts it in his *Theory of Poetry* (sic)'. (Perril 2010: 62) Where the scene is perhaps quite simple in 'Cambridge',

meanwhile
my little sweetheart of the steppes your laugh
brings light to me as the otherwise silent house
occasionally sways in a gust the telephone
obdurate & yellow on the blue rug (James 2002: 237)

in 'Sister Midnight', the same phrase, slightly re-arranged, leads to two different painterly coloured objects, a different interior, though the voice is consistent:

meanwhile
your head little sweetheart of the steppes
don't hesitate grab the momentum while the going's good
sink to your knees beside the yellow sofa
take him between the folds of my bright magenta wraparound. (James 2002: 240)

But the combination here seems to emphasise a 'hanging over/ of the female in the man' in its confusion of pronouns and sexual identities (and clothing). (James 2002:

241) The sheer brio of this lyric writing is, as Wilkinson suggests, one of the best of the era. Although he is concentrating on different poems, he says James' work is

> clearing a space for the brutal, in-your-face fragments … The need to clear such space was pressing when lyric had come to be associated with a metaphysics of presence guaranteed by the markers of authenticity which James' writing had seemed to repudiate, but which lurked in the assurance of his lines – that is, until his assurance trailed off into the hopefully dangling conjunction at the end of 'A Theory of Poetry'. (Wilkinson 2007: 61)

James, as presented here, negotiates a contradiction between the poise of his lines (whether of alternating bands or not) and their disruption, not unlike the Hodgkin canvas, of course. (Both Wilkinson and Huk are correct to see James' resistance to the textual impersonality that theory might have dictated.) However, I see the poetry's power lying in precisely this tensioned montage of elements, relative to the poetics of 'A Theory of Poetry'. It is true that the poem, just as the going gets good, cuts like a tape machine unspooling:

> your formal relations
> untempered by such vulgar considerations as taste
> can adjoin
> crude broken ridges
>
> overlaid by sluggishly dragged bands of the drab & blaring
> can adjoin
> delicate smears & caresses
> that (Riley 1992: 251-2)

The quatrains with their irregular short and long lines barely hold their form intact, but the machine of the poem shuts down, not just as it abjures taste in favour of the artistic form that barely holds, but as it repeats the line 'can adjoin'. This lays bare the device of its constructedness, its rearrangements that are re-definitions, one that is utilised in the poems he would go on to write in *Berlin Return*. James' assurance

deserts him as the evidence of repeated found material and cut-up becomes too obvious. The game – for game it has been – is up, the player out.

Nevertheless, I find a core of poetics that is earnest and fits well with James' later work. The emphasis upon the body is reflected in the driving irregular rhythms of 'Sister Midnight'. The advice to be 'on the prowl', particularly 'in the city', is manifest in the domestic interiors of the poems; 'get as much as possible into/ sitting rooms bathrooms bedrooms' is exactly the perspective of the sexually-charged narrator of 'Sister Midnight'. (Riley 1992: 250-1) The exhortation to haunt 'saloon bars' seems exact for a poetry that often praises the conviviality and sexiness of the Midland bar. The contention that

> there you will discover
> particular people at a particular time
> & in a particular place
> these people are the others
> without whom you would not exist (Riley 1992: 251)

is a blandly-expressed credo for James' insistent material and his attraction to it, and of intersubjective engagement. His list of 'useful activities', though still in the master voice of the creative writing manual, includes 'eating talking & dancing' as well as the intriguing 'undressing/ dressing & undressing', which pretty well sums up the activities of 'Sister Midnight' ('alas a/ cold pallor has overcome my scrotal sac... a woman feels very cold around the buttocks'). (James 2002: 239-40) Both poems share the ironic distance afforded by a rhetoric of everydayness combined with lyric ('alas'!). The fragmented narrative of 'Sister Midnight' ends in triumphant, elaborate yet banal domestic metaphor (in what is surely one of the best poem endings of its time):

> & it's not the end but a beginning like when
> you can't turn the key any further in the sardine can
> & all along the edge of the skyline
> the last green cringe of daylight
> drops like a plate to the ground (James 2002: 241)

'A Theory of Poetry', possibly because of its relation to the rise of theory as an alternative discourse to both poetry and poetics, hides its earnestness behind a sophisticated surface and a simple, uninflected rhetoric. It feels the need to deflate the claims of theory before it can begin to assert its poetics, which it does indirectly by analogy with a painter whose techniques match James' own at this time. The poetics resides as much in what this text does as in what it says, in repeating gestures that ironise its propositions. It hangs around bars, waiting for people to love, much like James' narrator, a slave to sensuality. It issues advice, much against its own impulse, and, in John Hall's words that deliberately echo the title of the poem, it forms 'repeatable moves in a Theory of Living'. (Perril 2010: 25) These moves are enacted as memory in a late poem of 2015 that looks back to the 1960s (before all that theory) and praises 'the others/ without whom you would not exist':

> the Bohemian decades of
> Weiners Bristol Better Books Lee Harwood's smile
> & Andrew supping bitter in The Rising Sun at Eltham
> a community of intelligence shared across the mouths of rivers (James 2018: 41)

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[1] Originally published by Street Editions in 1977 as a pamphlet, we place James' poem at the end of his selection, on pages 142-44 (Byrne and Sheppard 2017). It appears in Riley 1992 at pp. 249-252. It was collected in James 2002 on pp. 133-138, and selected in James 2018:116-119. I have maintained my original references to Riley 1992.

[2] It was actually more complex than that. I only remembered this piece again, again, as it were, in 2022, when I was writing the sequence 'Swift Songs for John James', and it came springing to mind as a cast-off from Sheppard 2011. But on inspection, I found a fully formed, and re-formed, piece, from 2018, and I took the opportunity to update the piece once more. There is a little of 2009 in this re-working, not to mention 2018. (Covid has made that last date feel a long time ago.)

[3] My first approach to Ackroyd's book (in 1979) may be read in 'Reading Prynne and Others' in Sheppard 1999: 9-12. (It is also available online here: http://robertsheppard.blogspot.com/2015/10/robert-sheppard-far-language-reading.html.)
One of the 'others' is Veronica Forrest-Thomson, writing in Forrest-Thomson 1978.