

‘Nightmare’ – tracking down an omission from John James’s *Collected Poems* (Salt, 2002)

A Collected John James, someone please! – Robert Sheppard¹

NB: This article builds on a paper given at the The Cambridge Conference on the Poetry of John James, at Magdalene College, The University of Cambridge on March 11th 2017.

This article will consider a poem of John James’ that was missing from the 2002 *Collected Poems*, in the form of the four-page mimeographed poem ‘Nightmare’, and the process that led to the poem’s eventual publication. I’ll also consider the subsequent modes of publishing that James’s poetry utilised since the publication of the *Collected Poems*, chiefly that of the pamphlet. I particularly look at James’ 2012 pamphlet, *Cloud Breaking Sun*, published by Oystercatcher, and the influence it has had on my personal practice.

Writing in the *Salt Companion to John James*, editor Simon Perril points to an omission from the *Collected*. In his introduction, Perril notes the exclusion of the poem ‘En Sevrage’ and takes the opportunity to publish it in its entirety:

EN SEVRAGE:

In the barn the lambs were bleating all night long

But beloved have no fear

At least they will not do so in their poetry²

As Perril notes, the occasion of the poem was the eighth Cambridge Conference of Contemporary Poetry in 1996. The poem appeared on a small, blue card and was available to attendees free of charge. It is, as Perril observes, in James’ late style, the style readers of James’s later pamphlets would become familiar with. ‘En Sevrage’ which is French for ‘weaning’ is reminiscent in style to late Mallarme and that other French poet Raymond

¹ Robert Sheppard, ‘Positioned Responses’, *Angel Exhaust 8* (2008), pp.113-117.

² John James in Simon Perril, ed., *The Salt Companion to John James* (London: Salt Publishing, 2010), p.3.

Queneau, with their paeans to the everyday. The poem was eventually published in James' 2011 Equipage collection *In Romsey Town*.³ In the version of 'En Sevrage' published in *In Romsey Town*, James dates the poem August 1996.

Since the much-needed *Collected Poems* arrived in 2002, James has published via a variety of small presses, the aforementioned pamphlet, *In Romsey Town* in 2011 was published by Equipage, as was *Songs in Midwinter for Franco* in 2014. *Cloud Breaking Sun*, and *Sabots* were published by Oystercatcher in 2012 and 2015, respectively. Of course, James's work has appeared in major anthologies. The work has appeared in *Other: British and Irish Poetry since 1970* edited by Ric Caddel and Peter Quartermain and published by Wesleyan University Press in 1999 and *A Various Art* edited by Andrew Crozier and Tim Longville, first published in 1987 by Carcanet and later reissued by Paladin Poetry in 1990, under the series editorship of Iain Sinclair. James was also one of the poets featured in Michael Horowitz's *Children of Albion* published by Penguin in 1969.

Before I introduce the poem 'Nightmare', we perhaps need to gauge why the poem didn't appear in the 2002 *Collected*. Speaking to Robert Sheppard about the poem, I was slightly taken aback when Sheppard noted that perhaps, James didn't want the poem to appear in the *Collected*. This hadn't entered my mind. Does this mean that any attention given to the poem today, is invalid? The role of the literary critic here, needs attending to. In the case of 'Nightmare', perhaps the notion of critic as literary investigator is irrelevant. Since there is usually, arguably, some of James in the poems, (see the use of the 'I' in James' work, though of course, the 'I' can be fictitious or employed as a device) are we to investigate 'Nightmare' through a biographical lens? Reviewing the 2014 Equipage James publication, *Songs in Midwinter for Franco* on the Shearsman Books blog, Iain Brinton says this:

³ John James, *In Romsey Town*, (Cambridge: Equipage, 2011), p.11.

What moves me is contained in the absence of the self-regarding nature than can act as a shadow to poems of loss. Here there are references to 'we' but not to 'I'.⁴

The shift from the 'I' to the 'we' is noticeable in James' later work. This perhaps is part of a deliberate ambiguity, as well as a reflection on the passing of time, but as John Hall notes:

'Writers have long adopted procedures intended to outwit an autobiographical speaking self. I think these outwittings could all be said to rely on notions of a systemic medium above, below or beyond any individual utterance - Science, Objectivity, Divine Guidance, Chance, *the Unconscious*, *the Language*, *the People*, Intertextuality.'⁵

We can see this in James poems such as 'A Former Boiling' his 1979 long sequence, with its dedication to The Human League (the band who at the time of the writing of the poem were still part of the experimental independent scene and two years later, would become the biggest band in the UK with their album *Dare*.⁶) alongside the namechecking of the lead singer, Philip Oakey and a line from their 1978 single 'Being Boiled'.⁷

In October 2015, I noticed that poet, publisher and bookseller, Alan Halsey had listed a poem by John James for sale. As I didn't recognise the poem from the Salt *Collected Poems*, I bought it. It was advertised simply and in such a way that it looked like it could have been a pamphlet. I immediately cross checked the title with the useful bibliography published in Perril's *Salt Companion to John James*. Perril catalogues the poem thus: 'C.1971 *Nightmare*. N.p, poem date 'December 1970-April 1971'⁸ I also searched the South Bank Poetry Library's catalogue, where James's publications are housed, but there was no reference to a poem or publication titled 'Nightmare.'

In communication with the poet and academic Simon Smith, I discussed whether 'Nightmare' could have been a spin off from James' magazine *The Resuscitator*. However,

⁴ Since the revamp of the Shearsman website, this blog entry has been deleted. Ian Brinton has subsequently sent me a copy of the review. Ian Brinton, email to Andrew Taylor, 4th July 2022.

⁵ John Hall, 'Dress and Address: 'John James in John James' in Simon Perril, ed., *The Salt Companion to John James* (London: Salt Publishing, 2010), p.13.

⁶ The Human League, *Dare* (London: Virgin Records, V2192. Released, 16 October 1981).

⁷ The Human League, *Being Boiled/ The Circus of Death, 7"* single (Edinburgh: Fast Product, FAST 4. Released 17 June 1978).

⁸ Simon Perril, ed., *The Salt Companion to John James* (London: Salt Publishing, 2010), p.263.

the Indiana University, which holds the papers of the magazine in its archives, indicate that the magazine's final issue was published in January 1969.⁹ We do have a firm timeline of the writing of 'Nightmare'. James dates the poem December 1970 – April 1971. Using Perril's bibliography again, 'Nightmare' is sandwiched between another missing part of the *Collected*, though perhaps excusable in this case, as it is a collaborative piece with Andrew Crozier, titled *Jo and her Friends, Chapter Two*, which interestingly, seldom appears in Crozier's bibliographies.

'Nightmare' is printed on 10" x 8" paper, with an image of a diagram on the first page, what can be described, in essence, as the cover. With its deliberate design, alongside the 'rear' cover details of the dates of composition, which are housed on the fourth leaf, James was clearly treating the poem as a standalone publication.

Following on from the work of the late 1960s, James locates the speaker early in the poem. After the opening non-rhyming couplet (the poem consists of eighteen couplets) there is a clear demarcation between the active 'I' of the speaker and the essentially non-passive 'you.' The poem opens with vivid description:

blots of heat
start from the perfumed head

blots here being a spot or stain emanating from heat as opposed to ink, though of course the image is possibly two-fold; the ink from the word placed on the page. The speaker addresses the 'other' with a deliberately tender 'o my sad red shadow'. This is reminiscent of the register of earlier James poems such as 'Inventory' from the 1968 collection *Tragheit* and the 1969 poem from *The Small Henderson Room*, 'Talking in Bed'. One must remember that Andrew Duncan, writing in *Jacket Magazine* in 2002, points to the modern romanticism of James, whose work is often tender and deliberate.¹⁰ 'Nightmare' is anything but tender.

⁹ See <https://archives.iu.edu/catalog/InU-Li-VAD6953> Accessed 16th February 2017.

¹⁰ Andrew Duncan, 'Such that commonly each: A *Various Art* and the Cambridge Leisure Centre' in *Jacket Magazine*, #20, December, 2002. <http://jacketmagazine.com/20/dunc-camb.html> [accessed 11th February 2017].

Following 'o my sad red shadow' we have the speaker locating us firmly in the darkness
'under the stairs where your iron feet clatter' We can take 'iron feet' to mean somebody who
can walk on glass or over coals, somebody who is impervious to pain.

The theme of darkness continues with the following two couplets:

I watch you pass through a chequer-board of shadows
easing the hammer to go

your destiny flaps
a coat in the wind

Here, the image of the 'you' and a chequer board immediately brings to mind Ingmar
Bergman's film 1957 film, 'The Seventh Seal'¹¹. The film, which is set during the Black Death,
focuses on a Knight's game of chess with a personification of death. Perhaps more tellingly,
and pertinently, the film was a direct influence on the musician Scott Walker, who included a
song of the same name on his November 1969 album, 'Scott 4'.¹² The song with its repeated
images of death and darkness and lines such as

Anybody seen a knight pass this way
I saw him playing chess with Death yesterday
His crusade was a search for God and they say
It's been a long way to carry on¹³

The poem and its early allusions to death strangely match the tone early on in Walker's
'Seventh Seal.' This image of Death and the flapping coat, reminds the reader of the
stereotypical manifestation of death, the grim reaper.

The poem pauses after the following couplet. There is a full stop in place, the first piece of
punctuation, which consists solely of three full stops throughout the poem. The couplet
offers a reflective tone with the opposites of buzzing flies and the desire for sleep appearing:

the flies buzz & a profound somnolence overcomes me
in the heat of this cucumber frame.

¹¹ *The Seventh Seal* dir. by Ingmar Bergman (AB Svensk Filmindustri, 1957). After discussing the film with James on the day of the conference, a later email from James alerted me to the fact that upon reflection, the image could have been related to a different film, *Ashes and Diamonds* dir. by Andrzej Wajda (KADR, 1958). John James, email to Andrew Taylor, 12 March 2017.

¹² Scott Walker, 'The Seventh Seal', *Scott 4* [CD] (11th February 2017).

¹³ Ibid.

We are taken from within the domesticity of the interior (under the stairs) to the outside, either a garden or yard, with the heat and the cucumber frame and overtures to growth. Again, we can see an interesting opposition in play.

There is a return to earlier darker themes in the next four couplets. We have 'it's the bullet for you / & your superior brand of manic didacticism' with the address firmly pointed toward an individual, perhaps the death figure of earlier in the poem. There is, however, a shift in tone in the next two lines:

these hateful overtures
are less than a pleasure

Are we to infer that the speaker has some doubt toward the protestations previously made? There is a hint of regret, perhaps. We switch focus again with the following couplet where the 'egotistical assassin [is] boring away at his unhappy victims / who accept it as it were / an erotic boon.' The tone here is clearly incisive, with the emphasis shared between the 'victims' and the 'egotistical assassin.' Again, a full stop makes an appearance. The second section, if you like, is shorter than the first with its five sets of couplets and shorter than the third and final section, with its nine.

This final section ramps up the pointedness on show in the previous section. The fact that this final section is on a separate sheet cannot go unnoticed. The first couplet is telling:

People pretend to like it
& whoop it up by the churchload

as the speaker begins to rail against the target of the poem; 'he' (and it is a 'he'), is deemed a 'public spectacle of garrulous proportions' with 'his degenerate appearance.' Happily, it seems to the speaker 'his star is on the wane like the smile in a vigilant mouth.' The addressee continues to be portrayed as a Machiavellian character with his 'calcified glass of his eye' and 'the truth which breaks out from behind a grinning hand'. After the onslaught against the 'he' of the poem, the final two stanzas offer a shift in tone and a slower pace:

let's have a little resilience to all this sweat
my race-going friends

all those tongue-tied vowels
immobilised against the rails.

The softening of tone is indicated by the use of 'friends' and the slant rhyme in the final couplet. The poem, then, after the initial death-like connotations clearly becomes a more focussed piece during what I refer to as parts 2 and 3. The addressee of the poem is difficult to gauge and perhaps that's the point. Perhaps also, that is one of the reasons why it was left out of the *Collected Poems*, but that is mere conjecture.

James' oeuvre until the *Collected* and the anthology appearances, has been firmly embedded in the pamphlet category. Of course, there have been forays into differing publishing modes. The afore-mentioned 'En Sevrage' in its card form and the initial publication of *The Welsh Poems* are a few examples. Writing in *Poetry Wales* in Summer 2008, Wendy Mulford points to the kind of publication that *The Welsh Poems* (Grosseteste Press, 1967), was. Mulford describes *The Welsh Poems* as 'blue wallet containing three broadsheets.'¹⁴ She then notes that earlier versions of the three poems were published in *The English Intelligencer*. We need to consider this important and what Mulford calls this 'rare and iconic magazine.'¹⁵ Recently, critics have been reflecting on the influence of the magazine, most notably in Alex Latter's *Late Modernism and The English Intelligencer: On the Poetics of Community* published by Bloomsbury in 2015 and *Certain Prose: The English Intelligencer* edited by Neil Patterson, Reitha Patterson and Luke Roberts, published by Mountain Press in a revised edition in 2014. In an email to Mulford, James describes the *Intelligencer* thus:

It was run off on a mimeo machine by Jeremy (J.H. Prynne) in a sort of cupboard in his rooms at Gonville and (Keys) Caius. It didn't seem to me at the time to have anything of the smack of grandeur about it, rather a strong sense of the subversive and making it new with what was available and immediately to hand. The vibe was radical, not to say heady. It was news that stayed news and dropped through your letterbox out of GPO space around once a fortnight. You wrote for it.¹⁶

¹⁴ Wendy Mulford, "A City boy at heart": John James and the industrial south Welsh heartland", *Poetry Wales*, 44.1 (2008), 22, (pp.20-24).

¹⁵ *ibid*, p.22.

¹⁶ *ibid*, p.22.

Two key phrases jump out here, ‘making it new with what was available’ and ‘You wrote for it.’ Reading through *A Certain Prose* one can see *The Intelligencer’s* influence merely by noting the list of recipients of the magazine. People like Jim Burns, Andrew Crozier, Elaine Feinstein, John James, JH Prynne, Tom Raworth, and Peter Riley and added later to that list, Roy Fisher, Lee Harwood, RF Langley and Wendy Mulford. What is interesting here is the mode of production. *The Intelligencer* was essentially a worksheet to share amongst like-minded and interested poets. In the *Poetry Wales* article, James notes the help of what Mulford calls a ‘co-operative’ of poets in Cambridge at that time.¹⁷

When thinking of the poem ‘Nightmare’, may it be conceivable that James privately published the poem for distribution to such a network? *The English Intelligencer’s* final issue was published or rather, distributed in May 1968, just two years before the publication of ‘Nightmare.’ It appears that the worksheet had come to a natural end. The editor at the time, Andrew Crozier noted in his editorial that these ‘sheets no longer seem to be performing any discernible function.’¹⁸ Crozier then proceeds to name new magazines including *2R1* edited by John James and Nick Wayte, alongside a notice for *The Grosseteste Review* edited by Tim Longville. The list of contributors to those magazines are the familiar names from *The Intelligencer’s* mailing list.

The influence of publications such as *The English Intelligencer*, is wide. I’m thinking here of the process of poets working and sharing work within networks, those who avoid traditional workshop methodologies. I was a founder member, with Robert Sheppard and Cliff Yates, of the Edge Hill Poetry and Poetics Research Group in 1999. We were aware of the need to *not* be a traditional workshop, to be a supportive platform for the members of the group, share poetics and to share the pages of publications, which we did. Cliff Yates mentioned

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ *Certain Prose of The English Intelligencer*, ed. by Neil Pattison, Reitha Pattison and Luke Roberts, 2nd edn. (Cambridge: Mountain, 2014), pp.185-186.

something interesting when I was researching the history of the Poetry and Poetics Research Group for a Symposium on Sheppard's work in March 2017. Like John James and his relationship with *The English Intelligencer*, Yates had found his audience. Yates had this to say:

When I started out, I was sending a lot of stuff to magazines and when I joined the poetics group, I was writing for the poetics group. I was thinking I'd found my audience. For the first time I had an audience. Even though I was writing for left-field magazines, the poetics group was quite different from those.¹⁹

The production of such magazines as *The English Intelligencer* and James' *The Resuscitator* pre-date the D I Y (Do it Yourself) fanzines of the late 1970s and the 1980s, which were predominantly concerned with music. This links to James' late 70s work such as 'A Former Boiling' and 'War', with their close ties to the music of that era.

If I may turn to the poetry pamphlet now, that most resolute means of publication, we can see the relationship that James has had with the medium. John James has, since the 2002 *Collected*, published with Equipage and Oystercatcher. I'm going to focus on the 2012 Oystercatcher volume, *Cloud Breaking Sun*. This title has had a profound influence on my own personal poetics, allowing for what Rachel Blau DuPlessis terms 'a permission to continue.'²⁰ By being aware of the poetry and poetics of the recent past, one can build a relationship with, and take influence from, such work. Since becoming aware of James's poetry through Robert Sheppard in the early 2000s and hearing James read at Edge Hill in 2005, I have eagerly awaited each publication since the *Collected*. *Cloud Breaking Sun* influenced the writing of my own Oystercatcher pamphlet, *Air Vault* published in 2016. With DuPlessis in mind, and taking a cue from James's opening poem, 'Poem Beginning with a line of Andrew Crozier', (the line of Crozier's that James uses is from the poem 'Free Running Bitch') I wrote my 'Poem beginning with a line of John James' using the line from

¹⁹ Interview by the author with Cliff Yates, Birmingham, December 19th 2016. The interview took place at Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery.

²⁰ Rachel Blau DuPlessis in Robert Sheppard, *The Necessity of Poetics* (Liverpool: Ship of Fools, 2002), p.2

James's poem 'Recollection Ode: Les Sarments', the line runs 'as August counts itself out.' It seemed fitting, as I was writing in France in August, a place where James spent some of his time. I also took a cue from *Cloud Breaking Sun* by using for a title, 'Reading Robert Sheppard in La Chaussee.' In *Cloud Breaking Sun*, James has 'Reading Barry & Guillaume in Puisserguier' and 'Reading John Temple in the Gentle Rain' When writing the poems for *Air Vault* in the Deux Sevre region of France I was aware also of Simon Smith's Oystercatcher pamphlet, *Half a dozen, just like you*. Smith dedicates his pamphlet to James, as do I, and dedicates a poem to him. James is name-checked in the second half of Smith's poem, 'The Night Station' where the speaker describes James's poems as 'gentle & angry.'²¹ James is further referenced by the speaker mentioning James's 2011 Equipage volume, *In Romsey Town* with 'my copy all finger-marked & pristine / the descriptions drawing flesh & mortality.'²²

What are we to make of these echoes that seem, in a way to replicate the co-operative and supportive elements of the *Intelligencer* poets? It seems that the pamphlet and its form, have something to do with it. Poet and publisher Alan Baker says 'a great thing about the pamphlet is 'that you can get a buzz from the contrast between the fragile and ephemeral nature of the stapled pamphlet and the sometimes astonishing beauty of the contents.'²³ This is certainly true of James's recent publications, and true of the volumes *Mmm...Ah Yes* from 1967, 1975's *Striking the Pavilion of Zero* and 1983's *Berlin Returns*, of which I have managed to obtain copies.

Speaking to John James in Cambridge in 2017, after the conference, he asked to see a copy of the poem. After reviewing the copy of the poem that I sent, an email exchange determined that 'Nightmare' was indeed a lost poem. After originally not recognising the poem, from my reading of it at the conference, James had this to say:

²¹ Simon Smith, *Half a Dozen, Just Like You* (Hunstanton: Oystercatcher, 2015), np.

²² Ibid.

²³ Alan Baker, email to Andrew Taylor, 25 January 2017.

When you introduced it on Saturday at first I had no recollection of it being written. However, I can now confirm that I am indeed the author. I recognize the type face of my old portable Olympia. I have no other copy of it and have no idea what I did with it in '70/'71.²⁴

James was working with Shearsman Books on a new and selected collection of his poems as we were discussing the origins of 'Nightmare'. It was pleasing that there was a desire (and room) for the poem to appear. In the acknowledgements, James calls the poem a 'fugitive.'²⁵ Somehow it seemed fitting that the poem was located at the end of the 'new and uncollected' section of *Sarments: New & Selected Poems*. 'Nightmare' was indeed a new poem to most of James' readers and its rescue and reintroduction to James afforded its inclusion in the book.

As Robert Sheppard's plea came true with the 2002 publication of James's *Collected* the tracking down of hard to come across James poetry, merely serves to highlight the ephemeral nature of the publishing of this poetry. This poetry that in turns is magical, enigmatic and inspirational. John Goodby writing in *Angel Exhaust* in 2010, notes that James, like other Welsh poets, 'cannot be confined within the *avant-garde*; he straddles different British poetries and can articulate a populist radicalism.'²⁶ Perhaps this radicalism can be traced to the *Intelligencer* and its networks.

To conclude, it was pleasing to find a copy of a previously unknown, to me at least, John James poem. Similarly, it was a pleasure to share it with fellow admirers of James's work. To be reminded of the ephemeral nature of poetry publishing from the 1960s onwards and track its influence through the 90s has been enlightening and refreshing. We are lucky that poets like John James chose to publish their poetry in the manner that they did (and do). Perhaps, soon, I'll revisit Robert Sheppard's original and successful call, expand it, and ask for a *Complete John James*. Please.

²⁴ John James, email to Andrew Taylor, 16 March, 2017.

²⁵ John James, 'Author's Note' in *Sarments, New & Selected Poems*, (Bristol: Shearsman Books, 2018), n.p.

²⁶ John Goodby, "Undispellable lost dream': Welsh modernist and *avante-garde* poetry", *Angel Exhaust*, 21 (2010), 109, (pp.101-114).

