*The Necessity of Poetics*, Robert Sheppard (Shearsman)

There is a contradiction at the heart of Robert Sheppard's book: the fact that he declares poetics to be tentative, nomadic and provisional yet publishes his (tentative and provisional) poetics texts not only as he goes along, but now in an edition of critical pieces that stretch from 1988 to 2023. What was of the moment becomes fixed upon the page.

His 1988 text, which ends the book, remains for me the most straightforward and lucid, reasoned statement in the book. I have used it for decades to introduce the idea of poetics, of thinking about one's own writing, to school pupils, university students and poetry group and workshop members. Those who balk at what is said in the piece have an escape route: Sheppard quite clearly states 'It is impossible *for anybody who wants to write a poetry that is politically revolutionary* to write in the way most poems in Britain are written.' [my emphasis] Point that out, along with the plethora of 'may's scattered throughout and those resistant to Sheppard's critique of advertising slogans, dislike of active reading and engagement with how language works can metaphorically stand back and engage in discussion.

I've also used an earlier version of the much longer title piece, which expansively evidences the fact that poetics can be anything that is useful to and informs or has informed the writing under consideration. So it might be examples of other poets' work, it might be phrases or associations that inspired or initiated the work, research in its many forms, critical reading, etc. etc. But Sheppard urges us to think about what we write rather than just write. [I actually get students to write a short definition of poetics once they have read and discussed 'The Necessity of Poetics' in groups. We then compare and contrast their definitions with each other and, finally, a succinct statement by Sheppard published elsewhere. Of course, this brief definition annoys them, but the wide-ranging and seemingly endless 'Necessity' piece is important to show the endless possibilities of poetics.]

Sheppard's new book gathers up all sorts of poetics: critical essays that pay attention to other poets' work, commentaries about his own work, discussions of rhythm and pulse, ekphrasis (and anti-ekphrasis), and ideas of networked poems forming a larger whole that can be read in several different ways (cf. *Twentieth Century Blues*), along with autobiographical pieces about his time in London and teaching at Edge Hill University. Personal experience also informs an intriguing piece 'Critical Tuning' which explores the idea of 'Radio Interference and Interruption as a Poetics for Writing', an attempt to explain and/or understand fragmentation, grammatical and syntactical jumps as a product of contemporary media and how we listen (or watch or browse).

For me Sheppard's engagement with poetry once he has written it has always offered a creative freedom. Explore form and content with and through the writing, find out what you have written, edit and shape it, then work out what it is about and why you have written about it. Why have I been reading what I have? How has that work affected or influenced my writing, directly or indirectly? What do I think of my poetry today and what might I think tomorrow? And the same again the day after.

Sheppard can be reassuring but also unsettling, a provocateur and a reconciler, a (metaphorical) warmonger and a conscientious objector, a safe harbour and a wrecker attempting to draw you onto the rocks of experiment and deconstruction. *The Necessity of Poetics* is not a creative writing handbook or a book of explanatory criticism, neither it is an authorial defence of Sheppard's own poetry. It is a challenge and an incitement to make it new, to engage with the possibilities of language in all shapes and forms, to realise the linguistic, social, political and aspirational uses of poetry, to think about what we are writing, what we have written, what we could write, and how we might use creativity for utopian ends.

Rupert Loydell (675 words)